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How intolerant is that?

Purpose

This session has two purposes. In the light of what the Bible says, to think through:

- Our attitude to people of other faiths, and
- How we respond to the accusation that we are intolerant

Getting started

For many people today, the most important attitude in our dealings with those of different faiths is tolerance – we should not say or do anything that will offend someone else.

This can be a problem for followers of Christ, because, as we've seen, the Bible teaches that there is only one God, and that we can only come to this God through Jesus Christ. But to the people around us, this belief sounds arrogant and intolerant.

1. What does tolerance mean?

'Tolerance' is changing its meaning. It used to mean that I respect your right to your own beliefs and way of life, even when I think you are wrong. This meant that everyone had freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, and freedom of speech.

So if my neighbours are Muslims, they have as much right to their beliefs and their way of life as I have to mine. It doesn't mean I think they are right, but that I respect their freedom to disagree with me - and I can expect the same freedom from them.

But today, tolerance means thinking that all faiths and ways of life really are equally valid. Your beliefs are right for you, and mine are right for me. Each person's beliefs, values, and way of life are equal.

However, this means that I must not even have an opinion about whether what you believe is right or wrong. So in the name of 'tolerance,' we are now seeing more and more suppression of long-held freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, and freedom of speech.

2. Where have you seen or experienced people regarding it as offensive to disagree with someone else?

3. What is wrong with the new understanding of tolerance?

Nobody really thinks that all beliefs are equally valid. Do we really think that it was right for the Nazis to slaughter six million Jews? Or that it was right for people in India to burn widows on their husband's funeral pyres? Or that paedophilia is an acceptable 'lifestyle choice'? Or that the 9/11 killers were justified because of their worldview?

The Bible

Our attitude

4. Read Romans 12:17-18. What should be our attitude to people of other faiths? (Verse 18)

We are meant to live at peace with everyone, including people of other faiths, as far as it depends on us.

5. Read Matthew 5:43-48. Are we supposed to be tolerant?

The Bible doesn't talk about being tolerant. It says that we should love people – even our enemies. This is a higher standard, and thus more difficult than just being tolerant.

Our response

6. Read 1 Peter 2:11-12. How should we respond to the accusation that we are intolerant?

We are to live down the accusation (verse 12). We are not to become defensive, nor to argue against it. Instead, we are to show by how we live that we are not intolerant.

The first followers of Christ did not expect special treatment – they did not look for a privileged place in society. Instead, they got on with living for God, even when they were being persecuted, imprisoned, and put to death.

Real life

7. How does the way we relate to people of other faiths need to change in practice, in the light of what the Bible says in these passages?

Because we are accused of being intolerant and bigoted, it is very important that there is not even the slightest whiff of intolerance in the way we talk about, and act towards, followers of other faiths.

A news story recently described plans to build a £100 million, 40,000 seat 'super-mosque' next to London's Olympic Games Complex for the 2012 Olympics.

Christians in the UK circulated emails encouraging each other to sign an e-petition to the Prime Minister to stop this mosque being built.

8. What do you think: should Muslims be allowed to build mosques freely in the UK? Should followers of Christ campaign or petition against the proposed 'super-mosque'?

We live in a pluralist society, which accepts people of many faiths (and of no faith at all). As followers of Christ, we should look for freedom and justice – that everyone has equal rights to pursue their own faith freely.

If we campaign against the building of a mosque, what does this say to our neighbours about our attitude to the followers of Islam?

To do

Talk to a non-Christian friend or colleague about whether they see followers of Christ as intolerant. OR: Ask what they think about the 'super-mosque' (or another recent news story about tolerance/intolerance).

Going deeper

Read 'The New Tolerance: how a cultural movement threatens to destroy you, your faith, and your children,' by Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler. (Tyndale House, 1998).

For more about the 'super-mosque,' visit any of the following articles:

<http://www.religionnewsblog.com/12924/giant-mosque-for-40000-may-be-built-at-london-olympics>

<http://www.cbn.com/CBNnews/83805.aspx>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/02/18/nmosque18.xml>

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