



Christianity is receiving more and more heat in the popular culture regarding some of the things it teaches, some of the things its followers believe, and things some of its followers do. I thought it important to begin our series on [criticisms we hear about Christianity](#) with the issue of tolerance. Many of the criticisms that come up will revolve around the issue of tolerance, so it is important that we address it up front.

## Defining Tolerance

One of the things you will quickly realize after having discussions on important issues is this; many times we are not working with the same definitions. That’s why it is important to begin your conversations with questions. When someone makes an assertion like “Christians are intolerant”, the first thing you should do is ask “what do you mean by that (intolerant)?”. You will start to realize that what *you* thought they meant by that isn’t necessarily what *they* meant by that. So, establishing definitions is key.

This previous statement becomes obvious when we start talking about tolerance. The classic definition of tolerance is the act of respecting and recognizing the value of someone even though you may disagree with them. My wife doesn’t like sports. She won’t watch with me. But, she tolerates my love of Ohio State football because she knows how much I love it. She doesn’t think it’s important, but I do. She loves me so she tolerates my love for Ohio State football.

On the other side of the coin, I don’t force her to sit with me and watch football. I tolerate her dislike of it. I value other things about her. And I don’t think she loves me any less because she doesn’t love college football as much as I do.

Notice something inherent in the definition of tolerance; we have to disagree on something. In this case, it’s the importance of Ohio State football. See, tolerance is reserved for people you disagree with. I can’t be tolerant of someone who I already agree with. That’s not being tolerant, that’s being in agreement. We are on the same side already.

The opposite of tolerance is, of course, intolerance. Being intolerant would be forcing someone to act in an opposing way to what they want, stopping them from doing a certain thing or stopping them from saying a certain thing. If my wife wouldn’t let me watch football, that would be intolerant. If I forced her to stop watching *her* favorite shows that I don’t like, *that* would be intolerant.

## Christian Teachings On Tolerance



Our definition above had nothing to do with religious doctrine or perspective. Now that we have established a definition of tolerance, the next thing that we need to do is see what Christianity teaches about it. Is Christianity tolerant or intolerant?

Let's first look at one of the verses most people will attempt to use against Christians in regards to them being intolerant. In all for gospels, Jesus says we need to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27, John 13:34). What Jesus means by “neighbor” here is people who are *different* than you. As in you don't have to agree with everything they do or say and you can still love them. If we agreed on everything, loving them would be easy! The hard thing to do - and the kind of love Jesus is talking about - is loving people who are *different* than you. I don't have to agree with my neighbor's choice of music. But, I still have to love him. *And*, I don't have to *like* the same kind of music to still love him. I don't have to *approve* of his musical selection. But, I still have to show that he has value.

What else does the Bible have to say about tolerance? Well, we are told to live at peace with one another (Hebrews 12:14), to show love and compassion for one another (1 Peter 3:8), and to forgive as Christ forgave us (Ephesians 4:32). In fact, there is no other worldview which places as much value on a human person, because only in the Judeo-Christian worldview do we believe every person is made in the very image of God Himself (Gen. 1:27)!

### **Is It Ever OK To Be Intolerant?**

According to our definition of tolerance, and the teachings of Scripture we see that it's OK to disagree on some stuff and still get along. But, is the opposite true? Is being intolerant ever OK? Well, the answer is it depends. Are you in a position of authority over this person? Bosses certainly do not tolerate certain behavior in the workplace. Also, does this activity in question affect anyone else other than the person doing it? The law portrays this difference in many points. It is not illegal for you to get drunk in your house. As long as you are in your house, you are not affecting anyone else. The act of getting drunk is tolerated. Now, as soon as you get behind the wheel, your actions will now jeopardize the property and possibly the lives of others. The law is intolerant of your drunkenness in this situation.

Let's use my sleepy son as another example. It is OK for me - as a parent - to be intolerant of my son wanting to sleep in on a school day. In fact, every morning I have to wake him up so he won't be late. I am intolerant of this act because I love him and do not want his grades to suffer. It is OK for me to be intolerant of his oversleeping because I love him and want the best for him. Even though the only person affected here is him, it is still OK for me to be intolerant of this activity as an authority figure in his life.



On the other hand, it is not OK for his sister to be intolerant of his sleeping in. She is his peer. Right now, his sleeping in has no effect on her. Because my son has both of his parents, she has no room to get involved. In fact, it just creates hostility between them when she acts like his mom and tells him what to do.

Now, soon my son will have his license. He will be expected to drive his sister to school on occasion. In this case, she does have the right to be intolerant of his sleeping in because his actions are affecting her. In this case, she has every right to do what she can to get him to wake up or else she is going to be late.

### **The Modern Definition of Tolerance**

It doesn't take long to see how the classic definition of tolerance has shifted. In modern times, if you simply say you disagree with something someone is doing, or that something someone said is wrong, you will quickly be labeled as intolerant. Ask someone today what they mean by tolerance, and somewhere in their definition will likely be the words “agree” or “approve”. See the difference? According to the new definition, we can't disagree or one of us is being intolerant. In fact, the only “tolerant” people are people who are just like you; people who think the same thing *you* think. If they don't think like you think then they are intolerant!

### **An Example Of How The Definition Has Changed**

Let's use the example of my love for college football to show how our interactions have changed with the movement of the definition of tolerance.

Me: “Hey, hun. You wanna watch football with me?”

My Wife: “No. I don't like football. I don't see the point. And besides, people get hurt a lot and I don't like to see that.”

Me: “OK. I'm just gonna watch for a while and then we can go run our errands”

My Wife: “OK, no problem.”

In this regard, my wife showed the classic definition of tolerance towards me watching football. She didn't *like* it, but she let me live my life the way I wanted to. Now, if she were to walk over and turn the TV off, *that* would be an act of intolerance.

Now, let's look at our interaction according to the modern definition:



Me: "Hey, hun. You wanna watch football with me?"

My Wife: "No. I don't like football. I don't see the point. And besides, people get hurt a lot and I don't like to see that."

Me: "What?!? You don't approve of college football?? You know, if you loved me, you would come and sit with me and watch. You're so intolerant! I'm just going to keep watching by myself then!"

Yes, I'm being a bit silly here. But, this humorous example demonstrates the shift in interactions people have nowadays on things they disagree over. In the first example, my wife and I disagreed over something, but I still got to do what I wanted to do and she didn't stop me. In the second example, we disagreed over something, but I labeled her as intolerant because she didn't approve of something I liked - *even though* I still got to do what I wanted to do and she didn't stop me.

So, why has the definition of tolerance changed? And does it really matter? In my next article, we try to answer these questions as well as why it has consequences and how the change is playing out in the cultural and political arena today.

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