Judging: The Christian's Duty
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Part I: The Prevailing View of Tolerance

Tolerance is the buzzword of the day. We are told that we must tolerate the ideas, words, and actions of each and every segment of society. We may not pass judgment on the character of other people, but must accept them the way they are. What our elected officials do in their private lives must not influence our view of their qualifications for public office. We must accept the lifestyle of homosexuals as (viable!) alternatives to ours. We must cater to the whims and wishes of the feminists. We must not speak of God, lest we anger the atheists.

This attitude of tolerance is found even in the church world today. Many people, claiming to be Christian, will be quick to remind us of Jesus' words that we must not judge (Matt. 7:1) and that we may not cast a stone because we are no better than the other person (John. 8:7). This attitude has wreaked havoc in the Christian church, including churches which are Reformed in their heritage. Heresy is no longer denounced, and heretics are no longer disciplined. The foundational teaching of Christianity – that Jesus Christ, the Son of God who came in the flesh, is our only and complete Savior – is denied. We are told to tolerate the religious thinking of non-Christians, because every religion has an element of truth to it, and because salvation is not exclusively for Christians. We must also tolerate in our churches the sinful actions of others. It is not our business if an unmarried couple lives together! It is none of our business if a member of our congregation practices homosexuality! We must not judge them.

Considering this sad state of affairs in the church world today, it is not surprising to learn that the most frequently quoted text of Scripture is no longer John 3:16, but Matthew 7:1, as I recently heard from a radio speaker. In the past we were reminded: "For God so loved the world…." This verse, wrongly interpreted as teaching the lie of Arminianism that God loves every person, was meant to comfort every person who believed it. "God loves me! All is well with me." Today we are told: "Judge not!" This shift seems logical. If God loves me and every other person, then He finds no fault with us, our actions, or our ideas. And if He finds no fault with us, we should find no fault with each other. However, the logic fails. It proceeds from a wrong premise, that God loves every man, and from a wrong assumption, that a God who loves a person ignores or tolerates that person's sins. Thus the conclusion is also wrong. In actuality, the shift of most-quoted Bible text indicates the increasing godlessness of our society. In the past, God received the emphasis, even though God was wrongly understood. Now the emphasis falls on man, to the point that in certain situations we must be careful not to mention God's name! Man is god, free to construct his own ideas of morality. And man's basic foundation for morality is his thinking: "I am good. You are good. Let us agree not to find any bad in anyone."

There is one group of people, however, on whom society permits us to pass judgment, and toward whom we may be intolerant: those who judge this modern morality as wrong, and do not tolerate it! In this latter group true Christians must find themselves, and the true church of Jesus Christ must find herself. We must judge the prevailing view of tolerance as wrong, for it is not scriptural. Scripture is the only basis for our morality.

In these articles we will examine in more detail the prevailing view of tolerance in the light of Scripture. Our conclusion will be that this view is dangerous, godless, and unscriptural. We will then examine in some detail the Scripture passages which are most pertinent to the issue. From these passages, we will see that to judge is the Christian's calling from God. Although God places some restrictions on how we judge and show intolerance, He does not forbid intolerance.

This view which prevails today can be further explained both from a negative and a positive viewpoint.

Negatively, the view is that our attitude toward the ideas or actions of others must never be one of intolerance. An attitude of intolerance is wrong for several reasons, we are told. First, it manifests hatred; thus it is morally wrong. God Himself condemns intolerance by forbidding us to judge (Matt. 7:1) and by commanding us to love one another. Tolerance is one expression of love. Second, this attitude reveals arrogance on our part for thinking that we are better than the other person, that our view is the only right view, and that our way of doing things is the only right way. This arrogant thinking denies the inherent goodness of every person, each of whom is created in God's image (according to the proponents of tolerance). An attitude of intolerance is wrong, thirdly, because by it we judge a person without trying to understand him or what causes him to act or to think the way he does.

Because this attitude of intolerance is wrong, we must not demonstrate such by speaking against the ideas or practices of others. We must not condemn those who favor and practice abortion, for we do not understand the hardships which the pregnant woman endures and will endure if she has her baby. We must not condemn homosexuality, for God created homosexuals in His image, and their sexual orientation is a part of that creation. Besides, homosexuals are as capable as heterosexuals of keeping God's law of love by being faithful to their partners. We must not condemn those whose theological, social, or political views differ from ours, for God gives to each of us a mind, and each of us individually is free to use that mind as he wishes. Besides, the fact that the Bible has been interpreted many different ways by many different people, churches, and denominations indicates that there is no one correct view of the Bible and its teachings.

Stated positively, this prevailing view is that we must tolerate those who differ from us in thinking and practice. Such tolerance would indicate love, compassion, and understanding for others. In addition to tolerating these people, we ought to *approve* their views and practices as legitimate. Perhaps our views and practices will still differ from the next person's, but not because ours are inherently right and the next person's are inherently wrong, for all people, regardless of their views and practices, are good people.

This view of tolerance has specific implications for the church of Christ. First, we must not preach an exclusive gospel of salvation through Christ alone. We

must not view the teachings of other religions – Judaism, Mormonism, Buddhism, and all others – as inherently wrong. We may not tell the Jew, the Mormon, or the Buddhist that he must repent of his sins against the first four commandments of God's law, and come to the knowledge of the true God who has revealed Himself in Christ. Rather, we ought to approve the teachings of Judaism, Mormonism, Buddhism, and other religions; present them as viable alternatives to the Christian faith; and encourage members of our churches to incorporate into their lives whatever good is found in these teachings.

Second, this affects our mission work. Our mission work should consist not of calling others to faith and repentance, but of helping the poor, the sick, and others who need physical and economic help. We should also be more ambitious in developing contacts with other religions, finding the good aspects of their teachings and practices, and incorporating them into our own teachings and practices.

Third, we must not discipline those whom we believe to be living in sin or teaching that which is contrary to our understanding of the fundamental truths of Scripture. Rather, remembering that we all sin, we must allow church members who are living in sin to remain members in good standing, partaking freely of the Lord's table. We ought even to find some good in their actions, and recommend that other members follow the good example which this member has set in some way. A person who emulates Jesus most closely will view the other person as a brother, remind him that he is a good person, encourage that person in his sin, and remind him that God is pleased.

What accounts for this view?

Certainly the natural depravity of man is one explanation. Man by nature is able to do and think only that which is evil. This view is another instance of man's disregard for the Word of God, and for God Himself. God's Word tells man that he is a slave to sin by nature. Man, however, claims to be free, and insists on manifesting that freedom by doing what he wants to do. The pregnant woman insists on her freedom to choose to live her own life, by aborting her child. The man insists on his freedom by choosing to love other men.

However, this explanation does not sufficiently explain why the church world at large has adopted this view. Explaining this is the fact that the church has, as a general rule, conformed herself to the world in every area of life, failing to li.1 Underlying this failure is the fact that the church has lost her consciousness of God's holiness. Her great message has been the love of God, but she has divorced His love from His holiness. If the church can once more understand what it means that God is holy, she will understand the need to separate herself from the world's ideas and practices, to denounce sin as sin, and to preach that the loving God, Jehovah, hates sin and punishes sinners on account of their sin.

Christians must evaluate this [tolerance] view as being dangerous, godless, and unscriptural.

The view is dangerous because it leads to further accommodation of the church with the world, in violation of her calling. God calls the church to live antithetically, that is, to live in opposition to sin and the world and in devotion to Jehovah. The church lives antithetically, not by pretending that sin is good, but by declaring sin to be sin, and by disciplining those who impenitently

continue to live a sinful life. She lives antithetically also by preaching the truth of God, pointing out the lie of Satan which opposes the truth, and disciplining those in her midst who knowingly and impenitently promote the lie.

Failing to live antithetically, the church is in danger of becoming the world, and of no longer being the church of God. By living and thinking like the world, she shows that she is not fundamentally different from the world, as God calls her to be. Thus her attribute of holiness is lost. By teaching that which is contrary to Scripture, she shows that she is not grounded firmly on the doctrine of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, as God calls her to be. Thus another attribute, that of apostolicity, is lost. Failing to be holy and apostolic, she has no right to call herself church, for she is no different from the world.

The danger of this view, then, is the same as the danger of poison. Poison may look harmless, and even palatable, but it is eaten to one's own destruction. The world's ideas and practices are a poison which might appear attractive to some, but when the church tolerates and approves them, she does so to her own destruction. This destruction is not simply a matter of the church failing to be distinct from the world in this life, but is also an everlasting destruction. The God who judges righteously will judge those who impenitently teach false doctrine and who live in immorality without repenting. Taking warning from this, the church must not conform herself to the world, but be transformed (Rom. 12:2)!

Our second evaluation of this view of tolerance is that, for all its apparent godliness, it is in fact godless. The various appeals to Scripture and to the attribute of God's love in defense of this view might make it appear to be godly. There is mention of a god – one who approves of tolerance and who cares for those who are the victims of intolerance, hatred, bigotry, and mea2 There is also mention of a heaven – the place where victims of such intolerance are brought when their "persecution" has ended in death.

Despite this apparent godliness, the view is godless in that it rejects Jehovah as the God whose Word is the standard for doctrine and life. That we must tolerate, approve, and embrace the ideas and practices of others is not God's Word, but man's! Man has set himself up as the judge of right and wrong. And man says: "Tolerance is right! Intolerance is wrong!"

That this is really what man has done is evident when one considers that society itself, not the Word of God, decides in what situations tolerance is right, and in what situations some intolerance is permissible. The Word of God clearly forbids murder, in the sixth commandment: "Thou shalt not kill" (Ex. 20:13). But society, while condemning the murder of a two-year-old child or forty-year-old adult, will tolerate the killing of unborn babies and, in many instances, the killing of the terminally ill who desire a dignified death. The Word of God clearly forbids adultery and all sexual perversions, declaring that sex is permissible only between a husband and a wife. This it does in the seventh commandment, "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (Ex. 20:14), as well as in other passages (cf. I Cor. 5:1-5 and Heb. 13:4). But society, while intolerant of child pornography and molestation, nevertheless permits adultery and fornication of all sorts, and cries out for tolerance on the issue of homosexuality. When it comes to the question "What is truth?" society

attempts to give its own definition, ignoring Jesus Christ and the Scriptures as the Truth.

These inconsistencies reveal that man has dismissed Jehovah God and His Word as the standard of right and wrong. Men do not want God telling them what to do! Man will be the judge of right and wrong. Any appeal to Scripture to support the prevailing view of tolerance does not proceed from a view of Scripture as God's Word, but from a view of Scripture being the record of the thinking of society in the past. In the Bible, a text can be found here and there to show that society in the past has also apparently condemned intolerance.

This leads us to our third and fundamental evaluation of this view: it is unscriptural. Perhaps you can hear some asking: "What do you mean, unscriptural? Haven't you looked at Matthew 7:1, John 8:11, and John 13:34? " The fact is, however, that many people interpret these passages wrongly. The passages do not teach what those who use them to promote this view of tolerance say they teach!

We must examine these and other pertinent passages of Scripture to show that, rather than commanding tolerance of the ideas and practices of all others, Scripture forbids such and requires us to judge. This we will do in our next article.

1. Francis A. Schaeffer's book *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1984) develops the thesis that the church in the twentieth century has conformed herself to the world. This thesis is stated on page 37: "Here is the great evangelical disaster – the failure of the evangelical world to stand for truth as truth. There is only one word for this – namely *accommodation*: the evangelical church has accommodated to the world spirit of the age." Return2. This was also the theme of a number of letters in the "Public Pulse" section of the *Grand Rapids Press.* God loved the homosexual teacher, and by death (the teacher died in December of '96 or January of '97) brought him to a better place where he was free from persecution, one writer said. Another writer applied Romans 8:18 to the teacher, and prayed that he might rest in peace. Return

Part II: An Examination of Pertinent Scripture Passages

In the Above article we examined the prevalent view that we are not to pass judgment on the ideas and practices of others but are to tolerate and approve their ideas and practices. That this view is present even in the church is due to the fact that the church has lost her consciousness of God's holiness. We evaluated this view as dangerous, godless, and unscriptural.

In this article we will examine the Scripture passages which are pertinent to the issue, in order to understand that God requires judgment of us, and to see from God's Word *how* we must, and must not, judge.

It will be helpful at the outset to set forth a few principles which must guide us in our interpretation of Scripture. Knowing and applying these principles should prevent us from coming to a wrong understanding of Scripture's teachings on this issue.

That the Bible is the Word of God is the most fundamental principle. *All* Scripture is the Word of God, according to II Timothy 3:16. This means that we will find in the Bible no contradictions, but only the truth, for Jehovah is the God of truth, and His Word is truth (John 17:17). Therefore, we may be

sure that we will not find in Scripture some texts which, properly understood, condone intolerance and others which condemn intolerance; rather, we will find the one, consistent truth regarding this matter. Furthermore, because God makes His truth *clearly* known, we expect that Scripture will state that truth clearly.

A second fundamental principle is that Scripture interprets Scripture. This means that when we examine Scripture to see what it teaches about an issue, we must examine *all* pertinent passages. If in doing so we find some verses which *appear* to contradict others, we must first come to an understanding of the easier verse, and then we will be able to explain the more difficult verse in its light.

Third, we must remember that, in order to understand a text of Scripture correctly, we must consider it in the light of its context. A part of Scripture-whether a whole verse, several verses, or part of a verse-cannot legitimately be used to support one's ideas or actions if the text is not explained in light of its context. The context will often qualify the teaching of the text, by indicating more specifically *in what situations* a command applies, or *how* a command is to be carried out.

Our examination of the various Scripture passages which relate to the topic of judging and tolerance will proceed on the basis of these principles. Because the word "judge" and its related noun and verb forms are used many times in Scripture, we will not attempt to examine every text in which they are found. Rather, we will focus on the main passages which are used to support the idea of tolerance, and we will briefly explain a few passages which clearly require that the child of God discern between right and wrong.

Of those passages which are used to support the idea of tolerance, Matthew 7:1 is perhaps the most often quoted. The text reads: "Judge not, that ye be not judged." It is clear that Jesus here forbids judging. The question, however, is whether Jesus forbids *all* judging, or only a *certain kind* of judging. Verse one by itself does not give us an answer to this question. Those who quote only verse one to condemn intolerance ignore the context, verses 2-5, and thus assume that the verse forbids all judging and intolerance. However, one who reads verses 2-5 sees that Jesus does not forbid all judging, but only *hypocritical* judging. The text in its context (Matthew 7:1-5) reads as follows:

> "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye."

Jesus tells the Jews in verse one not to judge. In verse 2 He gives the reason why they must not judge: the standard which they use to judge others will be the very same standard which others use to judge them. They must not ignore their own sins while condemning the same sins in others. To do this is to judge with a double standard, to judge hypocritically. "Is it not hypocritical to

condemn the brother for a little fault, or even to try to help him overcome this fault, when you yourself are guilty of a great fault?" This is the question Jesus was putting before the people.

Notice that the sin of the two sinners (the person and his brother) is the same in two respects. First, it is the same in nature: in both instances a piece of wood was in a person's eye. Second, it is the same in that both were currently sinning: the piece of wood was in their eye at the moment. The difference between the two faults is only one of size: one is small, the other great. For one whose sin is great to condemn one whose sin is small, yet being the same sin, is hypocritical (cf. v. 5). In other words, a woman who is aborting an eight-month fetus is in no position to rebuke a man who kills a bank teller, and the homosexual is in no position to criticize unfaithfulness in a heterosexual marriage!

Matthew 7:1, taken in its context, does not forbid all judging and intolerance, but only hypocritical judging and intolerance. In fact, it does requires of us that, after repenting of our own sins, we condemn the brother's sin as sin, and help him turn from it. "First cast out the beam out of thine own eye," Jesus says, "then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye" (vs. 5). Jesus commands *genuine,* not *hypocritical,* intolerance of sin which the brother commits.

John 8:7 and 11 are also important. The context is the story of the woman who was caught in the very act of adultery and was brought to Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees. In verse 7, Jesus says to the scribes and Pharisees: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." In verse 11 He speaks to the woman: "Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more." The advocates of tolerance use these words to argue that one should not condemn others, because he is no better than they.

Although we will explain what it means to judge in more detail later, understand for now that when one judges, he gives a verdict: guilty or innocent. After one is judged, he is sentenced: the guilty person is condemned (sentenced to punishment) and the innocent is set free. The point is that judging and condemning are two distinct actions, related but not identical.

Bearing this in mind, notice that Jesus did in fact judge this woman, but He did not condemn her. By telling her, "Go, and sin no more," Jesus indicates that she *did* sin. In itself, the Pharisees' accusation was correct, and Jesus judged sin to be sin. This shows *intolerance* of the sinful action! Following Jesus' example, we must tell sinners to show evidence of genuine repentance by no longer committing sin.

While Jesus did judge the woman, He did not condemn her. She could go free; she would not be put to death. The gospel for penitent sinners is: "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Rom. 8:1). This message Jesus gives the woman: Jesus would Himself be condemned for her! He would bear her punishment, that she might go free!

Jesus' answer to the Pharisees exposes their hypocritical judgment in the matter. (Their primary purpose, of course, had nothing to do with the woman; it was to trap Jesus in His own words. Yet Jesus knew that the Pharisees prided themselves in their self-righteousness, and responded in light of this fact.) The Pharisees, Jesus reminds them, were also guilty of sin, and

specifically of adultery, whether in the act or in the heart. Because they also were not free from sin, they were as worthy of death as she was. So, by wondering what judgment she ought to have received, they revealed their own hypocrisy and wrong motivation.

John 8:7 and 11 teach us how to deal with others who sin. Verse 11 teaches us that we must desire the sinner's repentance; verse 7 teaches us that we must not do so hypocritically, with wrong motives, or in an improper manner. The passage does not mean, however, that we must never hold each other accountable for our sins (that is, judge sin to be sin).

One more passage which is frequently quoted is the one in which we are commanded to love one another. Actually, many passages in Scripture give this command. John 13:34 is one of them. There we read: "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another."

What is love, and what does love involve? Love is a bond of friendship, which manifests itself in seeking the good of the other person. This might mean seeking the other person's bodily good: if he is hungry, thirsty, cold, or naked, we must take care of that person's physical needs. It could also involve seeking the person's spiritual good. If he or she is walking in a way that is contrary to God's law and thus displeasing to the Lord, we must seek to turn that person from his or her sinful way, in love for that person.

In John 13:34, Jesus does not command everyone to love. The command comes to His disciples-the twelve men whom Jesus specially chose to follow Him during His earthly ministry. The command did not even come to *all* of the twelve, but only to eleven of them. One of them, Judas Iscariot, who would later betray Jesus in his hatred for Jesus, was not present. That the eleven disciples were the ones to whom Jesus spoke is significant. As Jesus loved these eleven, they must love each other! The command does not mean that all men must love all men; rather, it means that in the church (represented by the eleven disciples), the saints must love each other as Jesus loved the church, giving Himself for it.

Such love does not rule out intolerance of wrong ideas or actions on the part of fellow saints. True love seeks the salvation of the fellow saint. Thus true love seeks to turn the saint from his or her sins (James 5:20).

Another passage which, although apparently not used by advocates of tolerance, might seem to support their position is Romans 2:1-3, which reads:

> "Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things. But we are sure that the judgment of God is according to truth against them which commit such things. And thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God?"

The "man" whom Paul addresses must be understood to be every man and any man. Paul, having explained in the last part of chapter 1 the sins to which the world gives itself over (note the context!), now says that each and every man who condemns these sins, while doing the same things himself, is inexcusable. We can expect God's judgment upon us, if we live in the same sins which we

condemn in others! Paul's point is also to warn against hypocritical judging-a warning which we all need. However, the text does not forbid us to judge *rightly*!

Other passages of Scripture positively command us to judge. One passage which clearly does so is John 7:24. This is set in the context of Jesus' discussion with the Jews who question His doctrine, and have accused Him of having a devil (John 7:20) and of breaking the Sabbath day by healing a man on the Sabbath (John 5:1-16). To them He says: "Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment." By saying "Judge not," Jesus does not mean to forbid judging as such, but to forbid a certain manner of judging, as the positive part of this verse makes clear. We may judge, but when we do so we must judge righteously.

Outward, superficial judgment-that is, judging simply on the basis of what *appears* to be the case, without knowing all the facts-is rash, unfair, undiscerning judgment which is contrary to the ninth commandment of God's law. God hates such judging. Righteous judgment is carried out using the law of God as the standard by which to discern whether what appears to be the case actually is the case.

I Corinthians 5 is an important chapter as regards the positive duty of judging. First, in verse 3, Paul states under the inspiration of the Spirit that he has passed judgment on a member of the church in Corinth who was living in the sin of fornication. His judgment was "to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." This is a bold judgment on his part.

Second, in verses 9-13, Paul reminds the saints of their duty to judge people that are within the church, as to whether or not they are obeying the law of God. Those who claim to be Christians and are members of the church, but who are also judged to be impenitently disobedient to any commandment of God's law (cf. vv. 9-10, which is not an exhaustive list) must be excluded from the church's fellowship. Paul, under the inspiration of the Spirit, tells the church not to tolerate impenitent sinners.

Other passages also indicate that it is our responsibility to judge. Jesus asks the people in Luke 12:57, "Yea, and why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right?" Jesus rebukes the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:23 and Luke 11:23, saying: "ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith; these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone." It was their duty, according to the law, to judge-but they had failed in this duty. Paul prayed that the love of the Philippians would "abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment" (Phil. 1:9). He tells the Corinthians, "I speak as to wise men; judge ye what I say" (I Cor. 10:15).

Some passages of Scripture seem to forbid judging, while others clearly require it. Studying the contexts of those which seem to forbid judging, we find that judging itself is not actually forbidden, but a wrong kind of judging. God hates hypocritical judging! But God loves righteous judgment on the part of His children. That He loves it is clear from the fact that He commands it, and has given His law as a standard by which to do it.

It is, therefore, the Christian's duty to judge. This duty will be set forth

positively in the next article.

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