

## **Is Christianity Narrow and Intolerant?**

One of the more common objections to Christianity is that it is narrow and intolerant. This theme has even worked its way into children's animated movies. In the film *Happy Feet*, the grumpy penguin elders are intolerant religious enforcers of the true faith, intent on putting the kibosh on the fun when one little penguin just wants to dance. The dance is called a "pagan aberration" that "offends" their deity.

The image of religion and religious people as intolerant and narrow-minded is very common in our culture.

Tim Keller, speaking of this issue from a different angle, writes:

Many non-believers in Christianity have friends or relatives that have become "born again" and seem to have gone off the deep end. They soon begin to loudly express disapproval of various groups and sectors of our society . . . . When arguing for the truth of their faith they often appear intolerant and self-righteous (Online book excerpt) .

There seems to be something to this, and it has become a significant issue for people. Does it kill the credibility of Christianity? No. Is there anything we can understand about this issue that might help us with it? Yes. It's interesting that several thoughts are suggested by the Scripture here in John 10. What are they?

First, we must understand that . . .

### **We Can't Judge Christian Faith by the Tolerance of Some of Its Representatives**

Look again John 10:11-13. As Jesus talks, He pictures at least four different characters. See if you can identify them. He says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away.

Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.”

Four characters appear in Jesus’ story: The good shepherd, the sheep, the hired hand, and the wolf. And here's the issue. People look over this field that they call “Christianity,” and a lot of characters can be found out there moving around on the landscape. Sometimes people who recoil from Christianity are not really seeing and responding to Christ, the Good Shepherd, at all but to the wolves, the hired hands, and the sheep!

Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd, but the sheep are another story. If you look at the sheep, the believers, you are going to get a mixed message. Why? Because sometimes sheep are stupid, and sometimes they go astray. Not only that, but sometimes you may think you are looking at Christians when you aren't even seeing true believers. Some of those people and even pastors are really hired hands with selfish motives. Some are malicious wolves in sheep's clothing. That's not a lame excuse; that's just sad reality.

*What do we see when we look at Jesus?* One of the themes of the story of Jesus is that He was very different from the narrow-minded and intolerant religious people of His day. The very people who were often ostracized and not tolerated by the religious people in Jesus' time were attracted to Him and welcomed by Him.

Luke 15 begins like this: “Now the tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were all gathering around to hear him [Jesus]. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law [religious people] muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

In the days of Jesus, to eat with someone indicated more than just association with him or her. It suggested acceptance and recognition. Other verses in the Bible tell us this unusual tolerance of seemingly ungodly people was part of the reputation of Jesus.

*What do we see when we look at the apostles who followed Jesus?* When the Christian church began to grow after the resurrection of Jesus, one of its most appealing characteristics was its incredible diversity. Christianity has always attracted people from different races, religious backgrounds, social classes, and lifestyles. In the New Testament letters written to the churches, you find the apostles carrying on the teachings and traditions of Jesus by calling on

believers to demonstrate Christlike love and tolerance for people who are different.

For instance, when Paul writes to the Romans in Romans 14, he speaks of people who judge each other over what kinds of food they should eat and what days they should or should not celebrate. He tells them to stop it. In Romans 14:1-3 he says, "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him."

Paul talks about passing judgment regarding "disputable matters." In other words, some things aren't clear in the Scriptures, they are debatable, but some people will dogmatically pass judgment on others even on issues that are unclear. One cannot judge Christ and Christian faith fairly by looking at people like that.

A pastor in Colorado named Ed Rowell tells of growing up in a church where it would seem they thought Jesus wore a military haircut and had no facial hair. When He turned the water into wine, they were sure it was really Welch's grape juice if you understood the Greek. When he was in seventh grade, he was at a youth group outing, drinking Coke and playing Monopoly with some of the kids when the pastor came in. He began to roar at them about rolling dice in the house of the Lord. He kicked over the table, sending board, drinks, and snacks flying. The pastor says he had no clue that Monopoly could lead to debauchery.

He also said it took him a decade, from age 13 to 23, before he was desperate enough to try church again. But he did come back. He found Christ. And what he learned is that you can't judge Christ by some of His so-called representatives. There are wolves and hired hands and stray sheep and sick sheep, and one can't judge the Good Shepherd by looking at them.

When people tell me the Christians they know are negative, narrow-minded, and intolerant, it is heartbreaking. At times I wonder if their judgments are fair, but there are other times when I fear that they are. When that's the case, I want to show them in the Bible itself that there has always been the problem of intolerant and judgmental people

in the church. Jesus Himself confronted that, and so did the apostles. You can't judge the tolerance of the Christian faith by some of its so-called representatives.

Now, having said that, there is another side to be considered. Some people have indeed been turned off to Christian faith because of very intolerant believers. But others have called Christian faith intolerant simply because it challenges their choices and lifestyles, and *they* won't tolerate that.

### **We Can't Expect Absolute Tolerance If We Want a True Relationship with God**

In John 10:11 Jesus says He is the Good Shepherd. In verse 16 He says His sheep listen to His voice. The Good Shepherd cannot be the Good Shepherd unless He speaks with the guidance and authority that sometimes confronts our culture and our choices. Some reject what they call the intolerance of the Christian faith when really what they are rejecting is the guidance of the Good Shepherd.

Sometime ago I was in a funky, little used bookstore and ended up talking to a young woman about life, faith, God, and religion. She told me that she wasn't religious, but if she were to be religious she would not be a Christian. She would be a Buddhist.

When I asked why, she said it was because of her lifestyle. Now a lot of people misunderstand the Christian faith, and I was afraid she thought Christianity was a religious lifestyle in which you do good and religious things to earn God's love and forgiveness. I explained that it was really a love relationship with God. I talked about Christ dying and rising again to redeem us and offering us redemption, new life, and a relationship with Him through faith and not by our works.

She listened and seemed to understand but said there were certain things she was into that she didn't want to change, and those things just didn't fit into the Christian life and faith.

I said, "It seems to me what you would want in a religion and a relationship with God would be a source of guidance to help you find your way in life, not a rubber stamp for what you have already chosen." I said her approach reminded me of the old story of the little boy who would shoot an arrow into the side of the barn and then go over and draw the bull's eye around it.

She chuckled and said she saw the point but it didn't change how she felt or what she wanted. She didn't want anyone or anything in any way telling her how to live her life. I don't think she is alone in feeling that way. Sometimes when people say Christianity is intolerant, what they are really saying is, "I don't like the fact that it challenges my choices and my conduct."

Nothing is surprising about that. The Bible itself says there is a part of us that doesn't want anyone telling us how to live or what to do. That's the original sin. Left to ourselves we do not want to acknowledge the authority of God or our accountability to Him. We want to rule our own lives.

But if Jesus is who He says He is, if He is the Good Shepherd, then He has to be the one who leads and guides us. That means we cannot have a relationship with Him unless we acknowledge His authority over our choices.

To some degree this is true in any relationship. Imagine that a single man thirty years old meets a wonderful woman. He finds her intriguing and appealing, and in time she offers to share her life with him. His friends think it's wonderful. They all can see how good she would be for him.

But he balks at commitment. He says he doesn't want to compromise his freedom for a relationship. If he marries her, he won't be able to do whatever he wants, whenever he wants, with whomever he wants. He'll get to sleep with her, but he will have to talk with her. Does that make her narrow and intolerant? I guess you could say she won't tolerate being treated like an object. She won't tolerate being used but not valued, and she's so narrow-minded she won't tolerate infidelity. But a commitment to absolute tolerance can rob you of a very important relationship.

I love the analogy from the movie *The Stepford Wives*. In the film, strong women who want good relationships with their husbands are mentally altered so that they become pliant, submissive spouses with no purpose other than to please. Some people seem to want a sort of Stepford God who tolerates everything and is open to anything but is always there to serve you when you want Him, without demands or directions that might get in the way of your freedom. You can't have a positive relationship with either a Stepford wife or a Stepford God.

According to Jesus and the Scriptures, such a God exists only in human imagination. The God revealed in Scripture and in Jesus will contradict your expectations and cross your will, but that is the cost of having a relationship with a real God! You can't have a real relationship with Him without expecting Him to direct you.

So, yes, some people are turned away from Christianity because they have encountered truly narrow and intolerant individuals who did not represent Jesus Christ well. They need to realize that those kinds of people have always been around. Jesus and the apostles spoke against them. One must look past them to see Christ.

Others who talk about the narrowness and intolerance of the Christian faith really have a different problem. They are so committed to controlling their own lives, seeing things their way, and doing what they think best that they are unwilling to submit to the spiritual authority of anyone, even Jesus, the Good Shepherd. When that's where you're really at, the Bible says to repent. There is an experience of God's grace that is offered to you, but it requires an act of repentance, an acknowledging the authority of the God who made you and loves you. You must come to the Good Shepherd and be willing to listen to him.

The third thing the Scripture here tells us is that . . .

### **We Can't Demand Unquestioning Tolerance If We Want to Find True Freedom and Fulfillment**

Think again about the analogy Jesus uses in John 10:10-11. "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." As the Good Shepherd, He will lead us to good places.

I did a search on the Internet for the topic "sheep" and found one site by a youngster who had created a web page as a 4H club project. He said, "We like sheep, but would never bet money on a lamb trying to find its way out of a maze." What we want in a good shepherd is not a careless indifference that is willing to leave the sheep to themselves but a faithful love that is committed to guiding them into good places.

People often say, "I want the freedom to follow my own heart and be my own spiritual authority." But the Bible says that is a very naive way of looking at the issue of freedom. The truth is that your heart is

subject to all kinds of pressures and powers that tend to dominate your life unless you have a higher power and perspective that can set you free. One person is not able to say no to anyone. Another can't get along with people. One individual is a slave to work and the ambition for money or success that crowds out God and family and fills life with unhealthy levels of stress. Another is a slave to sex or some other pleasure. If we don't have the Good Shepherd to guide us, we end up dominated by our own misguided ideas, unbalanced desires, prejudices, and weaknesses. It is faith in and submission to the loving guidance of the Good Shepherd that actually sets us free.

There was a true story in *The Reader's Digest* a few years ago about a five-year-old boy whose playmate had pet kittens. So He started begging his mother for a pet because he loved the way these kittens would frolic all over the rug. But the little boy had allergies. That's why he didn't have pets. Then the mother came up with an idea. She bought him an aquarium with a couple of goldfish and put it in his room.

Later that day she asked him how he liked his pets. He said, "Well, at first they played with each other great when I put them on the rug, but now they just lay there." Why didn't those fish experience freedom when they were let loose from the narrow confines of their aquarium? Surely they wanted to get out of the aquarium and play on the rug in freedom. No, the little boy put them in an environment for which they were not made, and they lost their freedom. The human heart was made by God for relationship with Him. When we try to cut lose from His direction, what we find is not freedom but a loss of freedom.

God does not say, "I'm the Lord so there must be rules. Let Me just make up some." No, God says, "I built the human heart. I created your physiology and your psychology, and I made the world of human relationships. If you do not live according to the directions I have revealed, you are violating not only My laws of life but the very nature of your own spiritual psychology."

Jesus says, "Trust in Me. I'm the Good Shepherd. I have come that you may have life and have it to the full." Look again at how He puts it in verse 9. "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved." There is narrowness here in that there is but one gate and we have to go through it. But there is also great breadth and depth of love that offers us that gate and invites us to step in. What He offers is not a

steep path that we have to climb a certain distance so that then we will be loved and saved. It's a gate we just have to step through, and we're in. We step through by turning to Christ and trusting in Him.

And this door doesn't lead to a narrow place! At the end of verse 9 Jesus talks about coming in and going out and finding pasture. He is using a Hebrew expression for living a life in which there is freedom, security, and satisfaction. In verse 10 He explains what He means: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

In verse 11 He says, "I am the good shepherd." The Greeks had a word for goodness (*agathos*) that meant morally good, correct, righteous. But this word (*kalos*) included that moral goodness while also adding to it an element of beauty and excellence and nobility. The goodness of Christ is not just good in the sense of correct, it is also beautiful. It includes the absolute perfection of His truth and holiness and at the same time the depth of His loving-kindness and the intimacy of His nearness. The Good Shepherd's goodness includes the majesty of His holiness and the generosity of His daily helpfulness.

"The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (verse 11). Jesus is not a cold, distant, and intolerant God. That is what cuts so hard into the heart of human pride, that attitude that doesn't want even God to tell us what to do. Sin is so ugly to God, so deserving of His condemnation, that it is only through the sacrifice of Christ that any of us could be saved. Only through Christ paying the penalty for our sins, dying on the cross and rising again, can we be forgiven and redeemed and restored to a right relationship with God. He doesn't require us to earn His love. He lays down His life for us. What He requires is that we turn and trust in Him. That's not intolerant. But it is incredible. It's incredible grace that leads to real spiritual life.

Years ago I read the story of a woman who was driving home when she noticed the truck following her was uncomfortably close. She tried to get away, but no matter what she did the truck stayed right on her bumper. She was frightened, so she got off the freeway and into the city traffic. But the truck stayed with her. The truck actually ran a red light to stay right on her tail.

Starting to panic, the woman whipped her car into a service station and bolted out the door, screaming for help. The truck driver

jumped out of his truck too and ran for her car. Yanking the back door open, he pulled out a man who had been hidden in the back seat.

The woman had been running from the wrong person. From his vantage point high in the truck, the truck driver had spotted a would-be assailant hiding in the back seat of the woman's car. He wasn't chasing her to harm her but to save her. She was running from the wrong enemy.

Christ is not out to get you. He is not the thief who wants to steal away what's yours. He wants you to have life, and He wants you to have the richest, fullest life possible. He is the Good Shepherd. Come to Him, listen to Him, follow Him.