

## Tolerance on Trial: A Conversation With D. A. Carson

### *Thinking in Public*

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Mohler: This is *Thinking in Public*, a program dedicated to intelligent conversation about front-line theological and cultural issues with the people who are shaping them. I'm Albert Mohler, your host, and President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

One of the best titles I've seen in a long time is this: *The Intolerance of Tolerance*. The title itself makes you want to read the book and, of course, to have a conversation with the author, which is what we're just now about to do.

D.A. Carson is Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in the area of Chicago. He is also one of the most important intellectuals among American evangelicals. D.A. Carson, welcome to *Thinking in Public*.

Carson: It's nice to be with you.

Mohler: Don, I want to talk to you about your new book, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*. Now the title itself tells a story, but every idea has a genealogy. Why don't you kind of walk us through why you wrote this book, and then we're going to talk about what tolerance means and what it has meant. Why did you write it?

Carson: It came about partly out of my university missions, that sort of thing. And then what has sometimes happened is that universities often offer public lectures that any student group on the campus can apply for funds for, and so several times in the last few years, some Christian group or other on a secular campus has applied for these funds and then asked me to go and talk. And the conditions, of course, are pretty obvious; you can talk on anything you like, but it's not straight evangelism or anything like that. You're supposed to be making some public statement, and it can be anything from a nuclear physics expert talking about quarks or the like to almost any public topic. And when I've been asked to do this in recent years, I've often chosen the topic, "The Intolerance of Tolerance," and in every case the place has been packed out, often with a lot of academics as well as the students themselves and generated a lot of conversations. So, the genesis of the book was there and then gradually I filled it out and been reading more in the area. Partly also, it comes out of my earlier book, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, where I painted with a broad brush and tried to talk about a lot of cultural phenomena from the point of view of a Christian. And one of the ones that I briefly touched on was tolerance and its changing face, and I realized, when I was working on that book, that it really needed another book. It needed to be expanded a bit. And the result, of course, is this book.

Mohler: I think one of the key insights of your book is that there are really two rival understandings of tolerance, and they're historically sequential. Tell us the story of how tolerance as an idea came to be embraced in Western culture and then came to be transformed.

Carson: Every culture, without exception, has tolerance worked in somewhere, even in the most dictatorial regime. There is always the question of what can people be allowed to get away with? How much deviation can you allow? And, whatever the deviation that is allowed without physical coercion is tolerance. And every culture has intolerant somewhere, even in our culture. For example, we don't allow, let's say, pedophilia. We're intolerant of that and there are

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sanctions, court sanctions, because of it. But, on the other hand, how much tolerance is allowed, how much deviation is allowed has varied enormously from culture to culture, and one of the tracts that is fed into contemporary understandings of culture, up until about fifty years ago, has been Christian understanding. That's not been the only stream, but one of the streams that is fed into the notion of culture that was offered up until about fifty years ago was Christian understanding that views of God should not be coerced. The state should not be appealed to, to back up Christian understandings of theology and that presupposes some sort of difference between church and state, a refusal to identify the two parties. But in all of that sort of discussion of tolerance, that kind of tolerance presupposed that I could really dislike the ideas I was hearing, but I would defend to the death the right of the opponents to articulate them. That was still tolerance and that left me the freedom to say, "I think you're ideas are ridiculous for the following fourteen reasons." And they could say the same to me. So, tolerance did not mean that everybody was pretending to say the same thing; it meant that there were no public coercive powers that were exerted to force people to be in line as to what they thought and what they taught in public. But for all kinds of complex reasons, increasingly tolerance means that in a variety of domains you mustn't say that somebody else is wrong. You might even go so far as to say that they're all equally right, and if you criticize anybody for anything, then you are intrinsically intolerant.

Now that's a massive change and it becomes actually publicly dishonest. It induces an inability to talk about ideas openly because if you say that somebody is wrong on another religion or homosexuality or whatever, then you're a bigot. You're right-wing. You're narrow-minded. You're intolerant. Which means it's really difficult to engage with ideas. In the area of evangelism, which is where I first started facing it because I still do university missions, if you try to give all of the best reasons why you really ought to see that Christ did historically rise from the dead, the first question that would come back under the new tolerance would be: "Yeah, but what about all the Hindus?" And so, instead of engaging with the ideas, what is presented is intolerance as a kind of defeater belief. A defeater belief is a belief which, if you hold to it, defeats other beliefs. So if in our culture we have a whole lot of people who think that it is wrong to say that there is only one way to God, if you hold that very strongly then that defeats all sort of Christian witness that you present because it's already ruled out of court. It's automatically inadmissible because it's too narrow. It's an intolerant frame of mind and intolerance is intrinsically bad.

Mohler: Well, when you start thinking about this, these two rival understandings of tolerance are really very much at odds because in the beginning, at least in terms of what you might consider the modern age, the use of the word had to do with allowing for public space for arguments that you found wrong-handed or distasteful.

Carson: Correct! That's exactly right.

Mohler: And now it's turned around to a matter of attitude where you basically, supposedly, tolerate by insinuating that there is no disagreement to be had.

Carson: Either no disagreement to be had or if there's disagreement to be had, there is no reprehensibility to the other point of view. They're all equally acceptable.

Mohler: Well, Hebert Marcuse, as you know, the philosopher of the hippies back in the sixties, whose main point was free love, talked about the idea of tolerance. And I can remember reading his little essay on tolerance years ago in which he basically makes the point that the tolerant are those who are intolerant only of those who will not tolerate everything. And it's one

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of the circular arguments that you can just see the hippies nodding their heads to, but an entire generation of academics actually drinks this Kool-Aid.

Carson: That's exactly right. And when I've tried to lecture on this on public campuses and give lots and lots of examples, actually an awful lot of people begin nodding and saying, "Yes, that does make sense." I mean, I have not found a lot of push back when it's actually spelled out. There'll be a few hotheads that do, but people begin to see it and they say, "Then what is the way forward?" And what I always say in public contexts like that is civil discourse where we are allowed to disagree strongly without being disagreeable. That is what is mandated. We really do need to fight for the old kind of tolerance because the new one is not only morally bankrupt, it's intellectually perverse.

Mohler: Let's talk about some of the arenas of thought and life into which these issues become very acute. I am thinking, for instance, of someone like Salman Rushdie and the fatwa that was issued against him, and then the sheer confusion of Western liberal academic to figure out what to do with this.

Carson: Yes. Now that brings up an interesting one because it contrasts Christian heritage with respect to tolerance and Muslim heritage. The Muslims have nothing in their heritage quite like Christ's "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." Now when Jesus says that, He's not saying that there are two mutually exclusive domains and God is only sovereign over one of them. He's not saying anything like that, but he is according a certain kind of responsibility in the domain of government and public order and law and devices to restrain anarchy, and this sort of thing, that don't belong to the church. The church of Christ, under the new covenant, is not a state. Under the old covenant, the locus of the people of God was a state; it was the state of the Israelites. But under the new covenant there is a distinction to be made. Now they're all kinds of overlaps but there is a distinction to be made and it has always been made in Western history to some degree or another for good or ill, sometimes well executed and sometimes badly executed. But under Muslim thought, the people, the *Ummah*, they are the people of Islam; the people of Allah. They are the people of the state. The state exists to defend Muslim law. It exists to defend Islam. And the notion of distinct freedoms of religion is just about impossible to understand under serious Muslim thought.

I read recently a book by Shabir Akhtar, that's well worth reading, called, *Islam as Political Religion*. He's a devout Muslim who teaches in a university in Virginia and a public intellectual, but if you want to understand why toleration in the Christian sense is simply incomprehensible, that's a book to read and to devour. So when the fatwa was issued against Salman Rushdie, it made sense from within the framework of Islam. It just sounds narrow-minded and bigoted from the framework of Western thought. They're really two entirely separate cultures. In our culture, one of the plausibility structures is that all religions are equally right and no religion is wrong. In the Middle East, that's not anybody's plausibility structure. There everybody thinks that only one religion is right. The issue is which one?

Mohler: You know, the Akhtar book, by the way, is brilliant, and I'll tell you something that shocked me, and yet I found fascinating, in the introductory chapter of that book is where he says that Muslims who are in the West quickly learn to listen to Christians and to determine that we really don't mean what we say. In other words, when a Muslim says something, he inserts it into public discourse in such a way that's supposed to make a public difference. And he said, listening to liberal Christians, it's clear they're not really intending for anyone to take this seriously. And I think that's a very, by the way, accurate indictment of liberal Protestantism and

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another indication of why, when we talk about Muslims as they listen to liberal Christians, they quickly understand there's not much theology there. There's not much of a claim to be made there.

Carson: Well that's right. Most devout, pious, informed Muslims are not upset primarily with Christianity; they're upset with the secularism of the Western world, which they see as morally degrading and undermining and taking away from authority and revelation and that sort of thing. There's a sense in which devout Christians can have a serious argument with devout Muslims that liberal Protestantism really can't have.

Mohler: Now in your book, you deal with a lot of illustrations that kind of point to the problem. You mention a bank in Great Britain that cancelled the accounts of a Christian ministry because it would not endorse homosexuality and then counts that decision, of all things, in the language of tolerance, which is just sheer nonsense.

Carson: That's right. In other words, in defense of tolerance those who actually think that homosexuality is wrong are labeled intolerant and the bank cannot see that by labeling such people intolerant they have become intolerant with such people. The viciousness of this circle goes on and on and on in fields of education and banking and politics and morality and so on, so on, so on, and sometimes when you stop and actually point it out, people can actually begin to see it and sort of grin sheepishly and say, "Oh yea, we got that one wrong." But, in point of fact, it is almost everywhere in our culture.

Mohler: Well, the one place, it's on the website of the Harvard Chaplains that you document in your book. Where the chaplains are open to anybody who believes anything except "certain destructive religious groups" who just won't go along with this absolute new idea of tolerance, who claim a special relationship to God, and then they suggested these people are about ego destruction, mind control, manipulation of a member's relationship with family and friends—wow. At least the Harvard Chaplains are open-minded.

Carson: (*Laugh*). Yes, they're open-minded to everybody who has their view of tolerance. They are not open-minded to anybody who has an historic view of tolerance. Those people are by definition bigoted, right-wing, narrow-minded and manipulative. And what's stunning is that they cannot even see it in their own website.

Mohler: Well, I wonder if they see it in terms of the history of ideas because we're talking about intelligent people here, but, as you well know, intelligent people can miss very big, obvious things and truths. But when you start thinking about this, when you think about the elite academy, the intellectual elites on both sides of the Atlantic, do you think they are so consciously aware of the fact that they have transformed the notion of tolerance?

Carson: No. I don't think so. A few are who are interested in the history of the debate, but there is instead a tendency on the part of Western intellectuals to read contemporary notions of tolerance back into Leichnitz or back into Rutherford debates and people like that in the past. And so, even if they see that there is a difference about what Leichnitz was talking about and what we're talking about, they see him as on the trajectory towards the contemporary notion, and it's the contemporary notion that is right, without seeing that the contemporary notion is an overthrow of the old notion of tolerance.

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Mohler: The distinction between those two different views of tolerance—the old view and the new view—is absolutely crucial to our understanding of our current intellectual condition. We’re living in a time in which that old notion of tolerance, the idea that it was an intellectual virtue, a political virtue, to put up with ideas that tolerate worldviews that were not your own, that you found even to be not only wrong but sometimes even repulsive. That old view has been replaced with the idea that truth really doesn’t matter or, at least, that claims of exclusivity are entirely out of bounds. It’s a new view of tolerance that is actually intolerant, but that’s the way often the intellectual ideas get turned around, transformed and, for that matter, deformed. They’re turned around to mean the opposite of what they once meant. In this case, it has been done classically with the notion of tolerance. Don Carson has helped us to understand that with his book, but, of course, the argument goes on from there, and to a further conversation we now turn.

While we’re talking about tolerance, let me just ask you a straight-forward question. How tolerant should a Christian be? I mean, just given the usage of the world in today’s discourse, to what kind of tolerance should be aim?

Carson: It depends a little bit on the locus of whatever group you’re talking about. In the context of the Christian church, then church discipline, mandated by Scripture, is to be exercised. That does not just mean automatic excommunication—that’s the last step—but there’s gentle admonition and confrontation and teaching and so on and, ultimately, where somebody is really, really persistent in three areas that could be defined, then the final sanction is excommunication, which is very serious. In that sense, we are, let’s face it, intolerant, and this for the good of the church and for the good of the person who is being disciplined.

Mohler: And clearly modeled and mandated in the New Testament itself.

Carson: And taught by Jesus, taught by the Apostle Paul, and when Christian churches exercise that kind of discipline today, if it’s in public at all, then immediately the secular media brand this an intolerance, whereas, in fact, it’s gentle, loving, careful, prayerful, thoughtful discipline that has been accepted by all the members of the church to begin with as a matter of principle and for the public good, but that is considered intolerance. But I would say that the locus of the church demands a great deal of flexibility, people make mistakes, they sometimes fall into sin and then can be brought back with loving care and admonition, with public repentance, private repentance, depending on what the situation is. All that’s part of a fairly tolerant and loving, gentle community, but if you go far enough in the area of major doctrine or major moral defection or major schismatic attitude—those are the three in the New Testament—then there is supposed to be a kind of discipline that’s imposed. And if the imposition of any sort of church discipline is going to be labeled intolerant by the secular world, then we’re intolerant. Let’s be quite frank.

Then when you start talking about tolerance in the broader world, I want to argue that people have the right to believe or not to believe, to believe what they want, and yet the secular wants our beliefs to be so privatized that they have nothing to say to the public arena. And so the secular world doesn’t mind if we have private beliefs as long as it doesn’t make any difference. It doesn’t matter at all about public policy or economics or integrity or morality or education or anything like that; it’s purely privatized. But Christians can’t live that way. It still remains the case that Jesus puts His authoritative stamp on everything and that means there will be tensions in a democratic society. There will be tensions as various voices compete in the public arena. What Christians cannot allow is to keep their voices silent just because they’re Christians. Because, in fact, Christians are operating out of a faith model and secularists are operating out of a faith

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model. They're taking their views on a certain kind of faith as well. It's just that the secularists think that theirs is intrinsically superior, and they're the only ones that are genuinely neutral. So I tried to show in the book that's really ridiculous.

Mohler: Yeah, you answer very well, but I want to go back to the question because I ask it for a very specific reason. There's so much confusion in the Christian church and even amongst some evangelicals as to the kind of tolerance that we would see as a virtue. And you spoke so carefully and well about the two different contexts. First of all, in local church where we must not allow the subversion of the faith, we should not tolerate subversion of the faith either by moral failure or by the teaching of heresy, and then in the public square. But looking at the public square, let's think about one particular context there and that would be, for instance, on the American college and university campus. A young evangelical shows up. We should not expect not to be offended, but we should expect to be able to show up as authentically Christian.

Carson: Yes, we ought to and sometimes that is allowed on the secular campus, provided the Christian does not go to the extra step of saying, "And I think you guys are wrong." In other words, the Christian's views can often be tolerated on the campus provided their privatized, but if the Christian starts saying, "One of the entailments of my understanding of the Bible and Christ's authority is that sleeping together before marriage is morally wrong. It is to be condemned. It should not happen." Or if a Christian says something about "There really is only one way to God. Now if you want to hold another view, I think you have the right to articulate those views on this university campus. That's the nature of a university in the Western world nowadays, but I have to say that I think that you're wrong for the following reasons." Then that view is often not discussable. It is, instead, viewed as intrinsically evil and the student might be disciplined, sometimes thrown out of a program or dismissed, depending on just what the program was. There can be a lot of really negative sanctions because the Christian is articulating his or her view on the campus.

Mohler: And so on campuses such as the University of California Hasting's College of Law or, a much more urgent case right now, on the campus of Vanderbilt University, you have Christian groups that are being told, "You can be present or you can be Christian. You can't be both. You can be a part of the university culture or you can be Christian, in terms of significant truth claims, or you can't be both."

Don, I have to tell you. I was talking to an undergraduate, who was at one of the Ivy League universities, living in one of the residential colleges, and he simply showed to me the ethos, the printed, published ethos of the house, and he said, "You know, according to these rules, I can't even live in this college because it says that we must never articulate an argument that might hurt the feelings of someone else."

Carson: That's exactly right. It's not got down to truth claims anymore, Harvard's Veritas, it's not that anymore. It's not a question of what the truth is, but who might be offended, and if anybody might be offended, you can't even talk that way. And that's called tolerance, but, at the end of the day, what that does is stifle debate. It stifles notions of truth. It turns people into namby-pamby marshmallows. Now one still wants to encourage people—in fact, sometimes discipline people—not to say nasty things, not to say belittling things, not to say demeaning things. The one good side out of some of the new tolerance has been getting rid of trashy expressions that are just cruel and aren't advancing debate. I don't like demeaning things. People calling people rag-heads or whatever. I mean, that's shouldn't be on the tongue of any Christian or of any civilized person even. But then to go to the next step and say that you can't say where

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somebody else's wrong is, at the end of the day, the end of all intellectual discourse and it's not producing a higher intellectual claim or a higher moral claim. It's introducing fuzzy thinking and judgmentalism that is so intrinsically and massively intolerant that the self-contradiction is astonishingly obvious even though not very often seen.

Mohler: You know, I was on the campus of Princeton University of late and they have a very interesting group known as the Anscombe Society, which is a group of young people who are committed to chastity and, you know, the university culture just rebels against that. And there have been some outright slanderous things said and all the rest, but, eventually, at least some of the people who are very much a part of the university culture have settled on the fact that evidently chastity might be a sexual orientation as well. (*Laugh*). In other words, they lack all category to deal with this except the categories of personal preference.

Carson: Yes, exactly. That's exactly right; that's exactly right. And the manipulation that is involved in this claim of tolerance is so ugly that it is astonishing that more people don't see it for what it is. I do think this is one we have to fight publicly.

Mohler: Absolutely. Otherwise there will be no Christian truth-telling; no evangelism actually. Now you're a very careful historian of ideas and, in your book, you root the confusion over intolerance in, at least in part, in the confusions of post-modernism, to which you've given a great deal of attention. Just kind of lay that out a bit for us.

Carson: Well post-modernism, in its more virulent sense, is dying. Intellectually, it's dying. It's died in Europe and it's dying here. But the gist of it, the outflow of it, is still absolutely everywhere. And this really, in its strongest forms, which is now dying, it used to say things like, "Truth is not in the text; it's in your reading of the text. It's how you interpret it. It's how you understand it, you or you and your community. And so, everything depends not in objective truth or the author's intent or whatever, but it's in how it bounces off you and how you come to recast it and reshape it and absorb it and take it in your particular world. And that strong, strong sense of post-modernism is dying, but, on the other hand, the ...of it, the flavor of subjectivism in interpretation—subjectivism in feeling, subjectivism in reading, subjectivism in belonging to a certain interpretative community—all those things are still with us even though the rigorous way in which strong post-modernism tried to defend its position is largely dying out. It's really funny, if it weren't so sad. You can't even find contemporary university students adept anymore at defending post-modernism and yet they've absorbed its values and its frames of reference and its love for feeling and subjectivism and so on, on many, many, many fronts. It's intellectually bankrupt while still being pervade as a value system.

Mohler: Even someone like Stanley Fish, who is no friend to Christianity, who I think is a very honest man in this respect.

Carson: He's an honest man, yes.

Mohler: As I said, the problem with the post-modernists is that their very conception of truth is being unilaterally, solely, exclusively socially constructed and, therefore, not tied to anything real, undercut their even greater ambition to make moral judgments. That's exactly right.

Carson: That's exactly right. As long as truth is a social construct, then the truth is a social construct that is socially constructed. And, at the end of the day, that means that those who are

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using that particular social construct to develop contemporary notions of tolerance and intolerance, don't have any leg to stand on because that too is a social construct.

Mohler: That's right. Their determination to make moral judgments actually turned out to be greater than their philosophical argument, so that such arguments could not be made.

Carson: Yes, that's exactly right. It's funny if it's not so sad.

Mohler: They can sometimes be both, can't it? Simultaneously. And, then again, the book of Ecclesiastes makes that very clear for us, as if we needed a reminder. There are two particular areas which you honestly address in your book as being, probably, the most abrasive, in terms of our engagement with the contemporary on the question of tolerance. And that has to do first with human sexuality and second with exclusivist theological claims, so, in order, let's kind of look at that. Where do you see the conversation about sexuality headed?

Carson: Oh, for the next little while, I think there's going to be more confrontation. One forgets that thirty-five, forty years ago, most homosexual defenses appeal to the right to choose one's own sexuality, but today almost nobody argues for that. Today it's presupposed that one is born with a certain kind of sexuality, but even though the actual hard science is not very supportive of that view, it has to be conditioned by all kinds of other things. And so, therefore, you are, if you criticize homosexuality at all, then you are simply intolerant. The actual arguments, the very careful laying out of evidence, even statistical evidence of how most homosexuals live, can't be brought up in public because there will always be an antidotal evidence introduced about two men who have lived together, faithful homosexual relationship, for the last forty years and, therefore, why you criticizing them? Without being allowed to bring up any sort of argument about society or God or revelation or morality or statistics or anything, it's just all dismissed. And the media are strong in this way. I saw the interview on television the other night between Pierce and Mark Driscoll and, on that particular aspect, Pierce couldn't engage in actual thoughtful conversation. He's a good interviewer in many, many fronts, but the categories are all predetermined and I think that one is going to go on with a lot more heat for quite a long time.

Mohler: Well, I've been noticing something interesting happening there, and I'm getting ready to write about this myself. For a long time now, at least in terms of our experience, there's been a great deal of energy coming from the culture to push back on deontological kinds of ethical arguments—that is that there is a categorical right or wrong—but what I've noticed of late is that the teleological arguments are being now dismissed. That is, the end to which things are pointed, such that you can't now even have a discussion about how human sexuality fits within a vision of human flourishing. Now you simply have to take it as simply a given that this is now a sequestered, absolutely untouchable area. You cannot morally interrogate human sexuality now.

Carson: And the reason for that is because, well at least one of the reasons for that, is because this new tolerance has become its own teleology. That is the supreme good. It used to be that the old tolerance was always parasitic on a bigger frame of reference. The society had a whole system of rights and wrongs and where the truth was and what's good for society and what human flourishing was, and then the question raised in the old tolerance was how far you could deviate from that without pushing back, without exercising coercive force. But once you don't have a vision that is largely accepted in the society of what is right and wrong and tolerance itself becomes the only absolute right or wrong, then the teleology is bound up with the notion of the new tolerance itself. It is its own end and, as a result, it's very difficult to talk about human

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flourishing in a broader matrix because there is no broader matrix. There is no consensus in the society broader than tolerance in the new sense is good.

Mohler: Moving to the issue of making exclusivist truth claims. You know, the interesting thing is that the average American college and university student, when it comes to matters you might define as religious or philosophical or ethical, never feels compelled to make such a judgment, but they make them quite naturally when it comes to physics or mathematics or accounting or something else, but when one actually enters this intellectual environment and speaks of the Christian gospel, it's not a problem that Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." It's only problematic that He said, "No man comes to the Father but by Me."

Carson: Yes.

Mohler: How would you speak to a young evangelical entering that intellectual environment?

Carson: Well, I still do university missions as often as I can and, in that framework, what I regularly start off doing is to say something like this: "Whether you like it or not, Christianity is very heavily bound up with the history of the Western world and the way to begin to understand what Christianity is, is to look at Christianity's foundation documents. There are sixty-six of them. We bind them all together into one fat book that we call The Book. That's what Bible means." And then I start laying out the storyline and so, at this point, I'm not making truth claims on their lives yet. I am laying it out so they can begin to see what it is and, within that framework, it's not long before they start saying, "Yea, but if that's the case, then what about this?" And so after the sessions then you start getting the give-and-take and so on, but you have to start laying out what the Bible actually says, what the storyline is of the Bible, what this God is like, what are His characteristics, how human beings are related to Him and what an exclusive truth-claim looks like. You cannot make sense, any sense, of what idolatry is, how offensive it is to God, unless you have Him there in the first place making us so that we owe Him and making sin in the first place ugly precisely because it is an offense against the one who has made us. It is betrayal. And so I try to paint a big picture first so that the crucial claims that hold it all together of exclusivity make sense. If you try to justify exclusivity without painting the big picture of who God is and what the cross is about and what sin is and who human beings are, it's just about impossible to get things like that across. So, in my view, what is really being called for, not only to help the young Christians going off to college, but in evangelism and that sort of thing, you have to paint with a big brush to see what the massive structures are. Now you may reject them at the end of it, but to talk about the exclusive claims of Christ without knowing who Christ is, what the issues are, what the sweep of God's authority is, is just about incomprehensible.

Mohler: Well, it's incomprehensible. And yet, when they do finally comprehend it, there is outright intellectual hatred, if not personal hatred, that often then flows. And I've seen this happen from time to time, it's sometimes more politely disguised than in other contexts, but at least we have to understand that we're going into an arena of thought in which we, as believing Christians, biblically-committed Christians, gospel-centered Christians, have to know that we are going in as those who represent a worldview that actually many people on the college and university campus have never, ever encountered by any other means.

Carson: That's exactly right. But, on the other hand, you also see some who get converted and then there is a sense of relief, of coherence, of, "Oh, does this make sense and is this ever freeing". That's wonderful to see. What I sometimes point out to Christians too—there's no point

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in pointing it out to non-Christians—well, what I sometimes points out to Christians is that until the rise of Constantine at the beginning of the fourth century, the most constant attack on Christians in the first three centuries from the pagan side was that they're too narrow-minded, right-wing and exclusivistic—they didn't use the category right-wing—but too exclusivistic. There were many, many pagan religions, but no pagan religion claimed that it was the only way to God. So, when you're reading the debates between Christians and pagans in the second century, for example, the constant charge made against Christians is that they are too exclusivistic and that is narrow-minded and hateful. That's remarkably contemporary. And so, suddenly, you hold up people like Tertullian and Ignatius and people of that character and their willingness to be martyred, to suffer, precisely because of the exclusive claims of Jesus and fidelity to Him, and then you can understand what Paul means when He says in Philippians chapter one, "For God has granted you not only to believe, but also to suffer for His sake." So we've got to start painting the picture of the grace of God in giving us the privilege not only of believing, but also of suffering for Jesus' sake as part of the whole package of the gospel. If they despised Christ, well then, of course they're going to despise us. And then the apostles rejoiced because they were counted worthy to suffer for the Name, so that instead of fostering a kind of hang in there, brother, cling to the truth by your fingernails, there needs to be a kind of rejoicing gratitude to God for the privilege of aligning ourselves with Christ in the midst of this confrontation. It seems to be that's much more first century, second century; it's much more New Testament orientated than a kind of pity party because times are hard.

Mohler: Absolutely. And I love the way you transformed that, and that leads to my final question to you in which I'm going to stretch you just a little bit because the many things you have listed on your impressive resume does not include the title of prophet, but I'm going to ask you to play that role anyway. As you look at intellectual trends and trajectories, after this experiment and flirtation with modern views of tolerance comes to an end, what do you think comes next?

Carson: That's a really tough question. I sometimes say that I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet and a friend of mine would say I work for a non-profit organization too. But I think there are two or three different possibilities, and I think, humanly speaking, the jury is out. God knows the end. It's possible that this could degenerate into more and more and more governmental control and actual persecution of Christians, who would never be put in jail just because they're Christians as far as what the law says, but their views would be viewed as so hateful, therefore, they have to be jailed because of their views on homosexuality, which is sometimes taking place in Western countries today, in Sweden and elsewhere, and that could be excluded from society more and more and more. That's possible. Things could get tighter and you could find Christians in jail for refusing to keep somebody on the payroll because they don't hold views that are in line with historic Christian orthodoxy or orthopraxy. That's all possible.

On the other hand, there's a part of me that is more encouraged today than ten years ago. I too can see the external decline and all of that, but God is raising up quite a substantial number of young men who want to be mentored, who want to get the gospel straight, who want to plant churches. It's only a day of small things compared with the need, but it is wonderful to see.

Mohler: Yes.

Carson: John Piper and I sometimes make jokes—this is a strange generation in which a whole lot of thirty-year-olds want to listen to a whole lot of sixty-year-olds. It's a great time to be a sixty-year-old. That wasn't the case fifteen years ago. God is doing something. It's only a cloud

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the size of a man's hand on the horizon and who knows where it will end up, but, in God's mercy, there could even yet be a hurricane of genuine reformation and revival that will turn a tide around. And even while we want to be faithful in small things in relatively small and difficult times, we still want to say, "O Lord God, do it again. Do it again. Do it again."

Mohler: Absolutely. Don Carson, it's always a privilege to have a conversation with you, whether in person or in public, and I want to thank you for joining me today, for thinking in public.

Carson: My privilege. Yeah, bless you.

Mohler: That insight is absolutely crucial that we should be thankful for this set of intellectual conditions because, in God's sovereignty, He has chosen this generation of Christians to confront this unique sense and set of issues. It is we who get to confront the question of the new notion of tolerance. It is we who, in the aftermath of post-modernism, are those who have to enter the conversation academically, publicly, privately and every way possible, including evangelistically, with a clear understanding that we have a notion of truth that we did not construct, but was rather constructed for us by the Creator, through His gracious gift of revelation.

So we entered the conversation at a very different point. We need to know that. We need to know that we're going to face active and volatile opposition to much of what we have to say. But, at the same time, Don Carson reminds us we need to be very clear that we can remove, we must remove, everything that would be unnecessarily offensive, including the fact that we must watch our discourse and language very carefully, in order to make certain that whatever offense remains is the offense of the gospel itself.

The timeliness of a book has everything to do with whether or not the issues it addresses are really current. Sometimes books look merely backwards at the intellectual conditions that have been left behind and sometimes you need that kind of archaeology. You need that kind of investigation of a worldview left behind, of an intellectual epic that we have since seen succeeded by yet another. When you see with a book with the title, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, you realize, well, there could be a sense in which this book is already post-dated. You could look at the book and say, "Well the issue of tolerance has been debated for the last, say, fifteen or twenty years, certainly in terms of political debate, academic debate and in the context of what was known as post-modernism. But this is not just an issue of the past; it's very much an issue of the future. Because even as post-modernism itself has largely melted away, in terms of intellectual conditions, in the debris left behind of post-modernism, it's the issue of tolerance that has remained—this very false understanding of tolerance, what Don Carson calls this new view of tolerance. Even when after all, as Richard Dawkins said, there are no post-modernists at 33,000 feet, after all we all want a polite that believes in object truth when it comes to gravity. There actually are very few post-modernists left in the classroom 101 either, but they've moved on to something else. They've moved on to a set of intellectual claims that are the successor to post-modernism. Frankly, we don't even have a good nomenclature for this yet, but there're still carrying around some of those ideas. And one of the ideas that is most solidly entrenched in America's academic culture and, furthermore, on the other side of the Atlantic as well, one of the ideas that is most cherished by the intellectual elites and by those who are described as the cultural creatives is the idea that exclusive truth claims simply are a matter of oppression, of active intolerance, breaking the rules of a tolerance conversation in a tolerant culture. That, indeed, when you come along and you refuse to go along with the currents of the contemporary

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worldview, what Charles Taylor, the Canadian Philosopher, would call the “current intellectual conditions,” well you find yourself something of an intellectual outlaw. You find yourself not only facing opposition and anger, but the very real possibility that we may not even be understood by people who no longer have the intellectual categories to think in terms of absolute truth, to think in terms of exclusivist truth claims and of that fact that, again, when we’re talking about the Christian gospel, when we’re talking about biblical truth, we’re not talking about something that is just an idea submitted for our consideration, but a claim that is being made upon us. One of the most crucial intellectual issues of the Christian faith is the understanding that God’s revelation is not submitted to us merely for belief or disbelief, but, quite literally, for obedience or disobedience. Those categories don’t even fit the modern worldview, but, then again, we shouldn’t issue that as a complaint or of a diagnosis. Don Carson’s exactly right. If we are gospel-centered, we don’t sit back and look at these intellectual conditions and simply bemoan them and dismiss them and, for that matter, much more just run from them in fright; instead, we understand it’s to this day we have been called. It is to this set of intellectual conditions that we’ve been called to preach and teach the gospel, to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ individually and, of course, broad scale in the culture; to stand for certain things not because they’re matters of our personal preference or even our own intellectual allegiance, but because we believe them to be absolutely true, eternally true, true by revelation and true as a matter of our intellectual obligation. Of course, that’s not all there is to it, is there? No, we hold these truths believing that the truth will, literally, set us free because we believe these things on the basis of the fact that we’ve been redeemed by the one who is the way, the truth and the life. And yes, we do really believe that no one can come to the Father but by Him.

The greatest intolerance we need to fear is the intolerance of the one who believes that we have this best of imaginable news and it is not our obligation to share it with everyone. Our intolerance is the fact that we have a global mission to share this gospel with everyone, understanding that it will not always be received, but, when it is, as the Bible makes clear, it saves. Thus, when we talk about these kinds of intellectual issues, we talk about the intellectual conditions, the philosophical movements and structures that are shaping the world around us, we don’t do so merely because we’re interested in intellectual observation or interested merely in ideas. It’s far more than that. We are the people of truth and for that we have to give our lives and, of course, our most crucial thinking.

Before signing off, I want to invite you to attend a very special event. It’s known as “Together for the Gospel.” It’s going to bring together thousands of evangelical pastors and others because we are united in the gospel, quite literally, together for the gospel. Join me along with Mark Dever, Ligon Duncan, CJ Mahaney, Matt Chandler, David Platt, Kevin DeYong and John Piper. Together for the Gospel: the theme of this year’s meeting will be “Together for the Underestimated Gospel.” We’re going to look at the ways that the gospel itself is often underestimated, even by its friends. To attend, go to the website at [t4g.org](http://t4g.org). That’s [t4g.org](http://t4g.org). The deadline for registration is March 31<sup>st</sup>. The event is April 10-12 in Louisville, Kentucky. I hope to see you there.

Thank you for joining me for *Thinking in Public*. Until next time, keep thinking. I’m Albert Mohler.

<http://www.albertmohler.com/2012/03/19/tip-temp-title-3/>

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