

Opinion



Tolerance: vice, virtue, or joke



Dr. Otto Selles

During the week of February 23rd, Dr. Otto Selles, professor of French at Calvin College, toured through several southern Ontario universities as part of the annual Calvin Lectureship speaking tour. His topic was the much-lauded Canadian virtue of tolerance.

At the University of Guelph, Dr. Selles tackled the place of humour in tolerant society. Selles observed that everyone seems to start with a joke these days, from preachers to politicians. Yet, how far should joking go? For example, does one have the right to poke fun at others' beliefs in a free (ie. tolerant) society? While getting stern believers to "lighten up" may be a virtue, religious joking can often be perceived as an insult. What is the place of humour within Christian faith, specifically, as well as our broader contemporary society?

At the University of Western Ontario, Selles wondered if tolerance was a vice or a virtue. After exploring the four different ways in which tolerance has been historically understood (as enduring hardship, as granting permission, as putting up with something objectionable, and as recognizing differences), Selles challenged us to be more clear and precise in the language we use. For example, if we mean to say that there are differences between people, we should acknowledge them rather than standing behind the screen of tolerance. In the end, Selles wondered if tolerance really brought us very far down the path to love of the other, a core Christian calling in a diverse society.

This year's theme is significant. As immigration and cultural trends shift, many changes have taken place throughout Western society. Christians are finding themselves as individuals and as a politi-

effort to exert unified Christian influence at many levels of society. Recent research has shown, though, that this sort of tactic usually results in widespread negative responses from non-Christians. Which raises the question: how do Christians actually live as a distinct but engaged people within a diverse community?

Asking questions like this provides the opportunity for Christians to live their faith in a way that blesses the larger community. Growing out of passages such as Genesis 12 and Jeremiah 29, Christians can be cultural leaders by not resorting to methods like humour which carry the potential for misunderstanding or a bland tolerance which leaves society just as fractured as before. Instead, Christians can live lives of love – love of others who are different, even love of one's enemies. Self-sacrificial love knits people and communities together far better than mere tolerance. This is the challenging but contemporary growing edge of authentic Christian faith that this year's Calvin Lectureship addressed.

The Calvin Lectureship is a jointly-sponsored ministry of Calvin College and the Campus Ministry arm of Christian Reformed Home Missions. The purpose of this lectureship is "to develop and communicate a Reformed Christian perspective on some crucial academic discipline or culture at large" on public university campuses. For more information, please visit the Christian Reformed Campus Ministry Association website at www.crcma.com.

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