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Defining and Teaching Tolerance

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Our diverse world is becoming increasingly interconnected through travel, technology, commerce, and the exchange of information. At the same time The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, with about thirteen million members worldwide and adding around a million members every three years, is embracing a wide range of cultures and experiences.¹ Yet despite the world's increasing interconnectedness, divisions based on culture, ethnicity, politics, race, and economic status remain. Sadly, these divisions—to which the Church is not immune—often erode and destroy relationships within the universal family of God. In response to these divisions, President Gordon B. Hinckley and many other world and religious leaders have repeatedly appealed for greater tolerance.

However, within this chorus of appeals for greater tolerance, a wide spectrum of meaning and intent has emerged. On the minimal side, tolerance may be defined as grudgingly “putting up” with someone we do not like. Such tolerance may avoid overt discrimination and persecution, but offers little else. On the other end of the spectrum, some promote tolerance as implicit acceptance of another's differing ideas, opinions, and practices; anything less than full acceptance is viewed as prejudice and even bigotry. Of course, neither of these two extremes is in harmony with the gospel of Jesus Christ. How, then, has tolerance been defined and clarified by the Brethren in latter days?

Basis for Tolerance

To begin, it may be helpful to understand something of the roots, the purpose, and the command underlying tolerance. Tolerance is rooted in the reality that all are the offspring of God (see Acts 17:29). President Howard W. Hunter explained that understanding the universal fatherhood of God, His concern for each of us, and our relationship to each other “is a message of life and love that strikes squarely against all stifling traditions based on race, language, economic or political standing, educational rank, or cultural background.”² Elder Russell M. Nelson adds that comprehension of our divine relation to God and man “inspires desire to build bridges of cooperation instead of walls of segregation.”³

Tolerance fulfills a vital role in the plan of happiness. Elder John A. Widtsoe explains, “Among the principles of beauty and power which make up the Gospel, none is more conducive to peace than the Mormon doctrine of tolerance. We are taught to give due respect to the opinions and mode of life of our fellow beings.”⁴ In a world of diversity and individual agency, the practical intent of tolerance is to avoid conflict and promote peace. Where deep differences remain, tolerance provides a meaningful degree of societal harmony.

Tolerance is an integral part of the second great commandment. Perhaps nowhere in scripture is tolerance better illustrated than in the Savior’s command to “love thy neighbor” (Luke 10:25–37). Elder M. Russell Ballard explains, “His deliberate use of Jews and Samaritans clearly teaches that we are all neighbors and that we should love, esteem, respect, and serve one another despite our deepest differences—including religious, political, and cultural differences.” He adds, “Of all people on this earth, we should be the most loving, the kindest, and the most tolerant because of that doctrine.”⁵ Indeed, the principle of tolerance highlights characteristics of love because love is kind, long-suffering, not easily provoked, and it bears all things (see 1 Corinthians 13:4–8; Moroni 7:45–48). As Elder Dallin H. Oaks taught, “Love is an ultimate quality, and tolerance is its handmaiden.”⁶

In the restored gospel, we have been blessed with a clear decree of religious tolerance in the eleventh article of faith. By itself this declaration is powerful, but it is within a study of the Savior’s mortal ministry—His teachings and example—that the principle of tolerance is given broader understanding and deeper application.

The Virtue of Tolerance

Although not an ancient term, the principle of tolerance is readily expressed and exemplified throughout the Savior's earthly ministry. Tolerance is found in His commands to be meek and merciful, to be peacemakers, and to rejoice when "persecuted for righteousness' sake" (Matthew 5:5–12). He teaches that we should turn the other cheek and "love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you" (Matthew 5:38–45). Tolerance is manifest in the Savior's command to forgive (see Matthew 7) and the frequency with which we are to do so (see Matthew 18:21–22). It appears in the Savior's association with publicans and sinners (see Mark 2:15–17). And it is visible when the Savior raises a damsel from death despite those in the house having "laughed him to scorn" (Mark 5:38–42).

Tolerance is further manifest when the Savior's disciples forbid a man to cast out devils because he did not follow them and He replies, "Forbid him not: for he that is not against us is for us" (see Luke 9:49–50). When James and John request fire from heaven in response to a Samaritan village's refusal to accommodate, the Savior advocates tolerance by saying He "is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them" (Luke 9:51–56).

But perhaps some of the most powerful examples of tolerance are found in what the Savior *does not do*. We read of His disciples' failure to fully utilize the priesthood, their repeated inability to understand parables, their prideful desire to know who was greatest among them, and their failure to comprehend His mission. Yet the Savior, although reproving at time, does not condemn them nor treat them cruelly. While passionate crowds on occasion follow the Savior, He does not seek to incite them against His accusers. The Savior explains to Peter that He can call down legions of angels, but He does not (see Matthew 26:51–54).

Ultimately, as Elder John K. Carmack explains, "The Atonement was the greatest act of tolerance in the history of the world."⁷ While final judgment and justice will have their day, the act of the Atonement tolerantly delays their effects, thus providing a probationary state and offering the means by which we can work out our salvation (see Alma 12:24).

In context of the Savior's teachings and example, tolerance goes beyond allowing others to "worship how, where, or what they may" (Articles of Faith 1:11). Through the lens of the Savior's earthly

ministry, tolerance may aptly be defined as a compassionate attitude and behavior toward all persons whose opinions and practices differ from our own. With this view, Elder Hugh B. Brown characterized the application of tolerance as “pure respect for man, . . . spiritual sympathy, . . . [and] an enlarged view of truth.”⁸ And President Spencer W. Kimball said, “The most lovable quality any human being can possess is tolerance. It is the vision that enables one to see things from another’s viewpoint. It is the generosity that concedes to others the right to their own opinions and peculiarities. It is the bigness that enables us to let people be happy in their own way instead of our way.”⁹

Tolerance Has Limits

While the Savior taught and exemplified the principle of tolerance, He also made clear that tolerance has limits. Twice He cleanses the temple (see John 2:14–16; Mark 11:15–17); He teaches that evil influences may need to be “cut off” (Mark 9:43–45); He publicly rebukes the Pharisees, scribes, and Sadducees (see Matthew 23:13–33; 16:1–12); and at times He rebukes even His most devout followers (see Mark 8:31–33).

Regarding limits to tolerance, Elder Nelson explained, “An erroneous assumption could be made that if a little of something is good, a lot must be better. Not so! Overdoses of needed medication can be toxic. . . . So tolerance, without limit, could lead to spineless permissiveness.”¹⁰ Tolerance does not require us to accept sin, nor does tolerance justify sin. It does not exceed individual rights or the law, nor is it relativism. And though we apply tolerance, others may still feel offended and judged.

Tolerance for sinner, not sin. There is danger when tolerance extends beyond the person to the sin itself. President Stephen L. Richards explained: “There has been a great build-up . . . for what is termed broad-mindedness and tolerance. . . . It is a commendable interpretation of Christ’s teachings to solicit compassionate consideration for those who are weak and who have made mistakes, but it is a tragic error to fail to distinguish between tolerance for the sin and sympathy for the sinner. Truth is not tolerant of error. Standards of truth are exacting, and the blessings Christ promised are obtainable in their fulness only upon strict observance.”¹¹

We maintain a compassionate attitude toward a neighbor whose practices equate to sin, but we avoid acceptance of the sin itself. An example of this appears in the Savior’s treatment of the woman taken in adultery. With regard the Savior does not condemn her, nor insolently

chide her for her transgression, yet He certainly does not condone her sin nor suggest absence of consequence. He simply says “go, and sin no more” (John 8:3–11). As President Hinckley said, “We cannot condone the sin, but we love the sinner.”¹²

Tolerance does not justify or adopt sin. Elder Joseph Fielding Smith said, “I believe in being tolerant, but I believe that that tolerance will teach me . . . not to make excuses for my wrong doing.”¹³ Of those who might use tolerance to justify sin, Elder Neal A. Maxwell warned, “Be wary, therefore, when some demand public tolerance for whatever their private indulgences are!”¹⁴

Furthermore, tolerance does not suggest that we conform to or adopt sin to achieve acceptance or maintain peace. Elder Widtsoe explains that “tolerance . . . does not mean that to keep peace we must live as they do. Tolerance is not conformity to the world’s view and practices.”¹⁵ Elder James E. Talmage adds, “Toleration is a specified characteristic of the gospel of Jesus Christ. . . . [But] we do not carry it to the absurd extreme of saying that therefore we are under obligation to adopt what others believe.”¹⁶

Tolerance does not exceed our individual rights or the law. Doctrine and Covenants 134 states:

We believe that religion is instituted of God; and that men are amenable to him, and to him only, for the exercise of it, unless their religious opinions prompt them to infringe upon the rights and liberties of others. . . .

We believe that the commission of crime should be punished according to the nature of the offense . . . and for the public peace and tranquility all men should step forward and use their ability in bringing offenders against good laws to punishment. (D&C 134:4, 8)

When our basic rights and liberties under the law are breached, tolerance does not prohibit us from expressing objection, utilizing legal systems, or appealing to government for redress. Tolerance does, however, compel us in such circumstances to uphold the dignity of others.

Tolerance is not relativism. As mentioned, some advocate tolerance as implicit acceptance of another’s differing ideas, opinions, and practices. Most of us recognize that if we support everything we tolerate, then we will eventually tolerate everything and endorse nothing—except tolerance.¹⁷ Elder Sterling W. Sill said, “With too much tolerance for evil, . . . we can easily expand the road to such width that nothing is excluded. We can get ourselves into a situation where everything goes.”¹⁸ This distorted view of tolerance leads to flawed relativism.

The irony that occasions this type of tolerance is that those who promote it often have little tolerance for others who maintain the existence of absolute truth. As Elder Maxwell observed, “An otherwise permissive society, which tolerates almost everything, usually will not tolerate speech that challenges its iniquity. Evil is always intolerantly preoccupied with its own perpetuation.”¹⁹ In response to those who may label us intolerant due to our convictions to truth, President Boyd K. Packer suggested, “If they throw the word [*tolerance*] at you, grab hold of it and say . . . , ‘I expect you to be tolerant of my lifestyle—obedience, integrity, abstinence, repentance.’”²⁰

Others may still feel offended and judged. Although the gospel principle of tolerance generally lowers the risk of offending others, it does not guarantee it (see Matthew 15:12). Others may still use the stinging label “intolerant” when describing those who hold fast to the iron rod. To some, our standing with truth and our limited definition of tolerance is full of condescension, where we put up with them instead of respect them, where we judge them instead of accept them. However, in our application of tolerance, any judgment made is of truth and error, not judgment of another person’s worth or an assumption of our own superiority. A tolerant person feels neither superior nor inferior to those of other religions, races, cultures, and nationalities.

In our efforts to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ plainly, we run the risk, like Jacob, of enlarging “the wounds of those who are already wounded” (Jacob 2:9). President Packer explains:

Some ask if we know how many we hurt when we speak plainly. Do we know of marriages in trouble, of the many who remain single, of single-parent families, of couples unable to have children, of parents with wayward children . . . ? Do we know? Do we care?

Those who ask have no idea how much we care; you know little of the sleepless nights, of the endless hours of work, of prayer, . . . all for the happiness and redemption of mankind.

Because we *do* know and because we *do* care, we must teach the rules of happiness without dilution, apology, or avoidance. That is our calling.²¹

Determining the Limits of Tolerance

Because tolerance has limits, defining its proper application within individual situations can be problematic. Responding to the question, “At what point does showing love cross the line into inadvertently endorsing [wrong] behavior?” Elder Oaks replied, “That’s a decision that needs to be made individually by the person responsible, calling

upon the Lord for inspiration. . . . There are so many different circumstances, it's impossible to give one answer that fits all."²² In regard to tolerance, Elder Carmack said, "The Spirit will often whisper to us that we should intervene when that is the right course of action to follow."²³

While tolerance has limits, our love from which it emanates should never fail (see 1 Corinthians 13:8). The Lord is clear that in times of disagreement the foremost principles to be employed in our relationships are tolerance related. Long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, love unfeigned, and kindness (see D&C 121:41–42) should permeate our associations. We do "[reprove] betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost" (D&C 121:41–45), but like the Savior's rebuke of Peter (see Mark 8:31–33), it is the exception, not the rule.

Furthermore, because a gospel principle such as tolerance can be misunderstood and misapplied by others does not deny the power and benefit that can be derived from its proper understanding and application. Elder Widtsoe stated, "We know that tolerance is of God; intolerance of the devil. We are and must remain a tolerant people."²⁴

Tolerance and Defense of Truth

To some, tolerance and defense of truth may seem opposing. However, Elder Hugh B. Brown stated their agreeable nature this way: "The Christlike life is always a combination of earnest, personal conviction and generous regard for the other man's opinion. Dedication to and defense of truth never require or justify breaking the second commandment to love our fellow men."²⁵ Elder Ballard further explains the fitting relationship between tolerance and dedication to truth:

In the Church, we often state the couplet: "Be in the world but not of the world."

Perhaps we should state the couplet . . . as two separate admonitions. First, "*Be in the world.*" Be involved; be informed. Try to be understanding and tolerant and to appreciate diversity. Make meaningful contributions to society through service and involvement. Second, "*Be not of the world.*" Do not follow wrong paths or bend to accommodate or accept what is not right.

We should strive to change the corrupt and immoral tendencies . . . in society by keeping things that offend and debase *out* of our homes. [Yet] . . . in spite of all the opposition to good that we find on every hand, we should *not* try to take ourselves or our children *out* of the world. . . . We are to lift the world and help all to rise above the wickedness that surrounds us. The Savior prayed to the Father: "I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil." (John 17:15)²⁶

Ann N. Madsen adds, “Truth demands our allegiance, but it should not be a barrier to tolerance and compassion and love. To accept and love others, we do not have to adopt their ideas or be condescending. When others differ from us in these essential matters, we must learn to see with eyes that separate people from their traditions and sins. Good people can have mistaken beliefs.”²⁷ While we are the salt of the earth and need to be with people who need its savor, care must be taken to ensure that we do not lose our savor through compromising the truth (see Matthew 5:13). As the Savior explains, “Have salt in yourselves, and have peace one with another” (Mark 9:50).

Capturing this balance between tolerance and defense of truth, President Hinckley said, “We are taught as members of this Church to be tolerant, to bring about good results, not to give in on our doctrine, not to give in on our standards, but to be tolerant in a way that will move forward the cause of peace and righteousness and goodness in the earth.”²⁸

Benefits Derived from Tolerance

As noted, the chief benefit derived from tolerance is peace. On its grandest scale, tolerance can avert war, genocide, and other horrendous conflicts. Yet perhaps the greatest cumulative effects of tolerance are felt in its silent application within families and other close associations. In our state of imperfection, tolerance helps preserve and nurture our most meaningful relationships. In this sense, tolerance not only emanates from our love for others but can be the basis from which our love can grow. A few more benefits follow.

Increased understanding and unity. Tolerance restrains prejudice, stereotyping, and ignorance, all key ingredients of intolerance, thus allowing greater understanding and unity to emerge over time as we continue to live together. Despite differences, tolerance enables us to join our neighbors in the common good. Elder Alexander B. Morrison explained, “As community members work together unselfishly in a common cause, for the common good, they find that whatever their backgrounds, convictions, or experience, there is much more which unites them than which draws them apart.”²⁹

Increased circle of influence. Intolerant people inevitably limit their associations, while tolerant people often find their circle of friends widening. Elder Carmack explains that “tolerant people are versatile. They move easily from one situation to another, adapting quickly to the needs of others.”³⁰ Such ability derived from a tolerant attitude allows us to interact with ease among people of different nations, races,

and religions, thus increasing our capacity to influence other lives for good.

Reciprocal respect and less worry. Respectful tolerance of another's beliefs and practices often earns reciprocal respect for our own beliefs and practices. This mutual respect, established through tolerance, then makes it easier to address disagreements in the right spirit, should they arise. Furthermore, President Kimball explained, "When you do not worry or concern yourself too much with what other people do and believe and say, there will come to you a new freedom."³¹ A tolerant attitude provides escape from the presumed need to critique the beliefs and practices of others.

Enriched lives. Tolerance also allows us to learn from different backgrounds, perspectives, and life experiences. Regarding acceptance of others, President Hinckley encouraged, "Be friendly. Be understanding. Be tolerant." He then added, "Look for their strengths and virtues, and you will find strength and virtues which will be helpful in your own life."³²

How Can We Promote Tolerance?

In this light, we can teach, encourage, and exemplify several ideals that will help our students be more tolerant. Here are just a few:

Teach the attributes of the Savior. Teaching Christlike attributes taught and exemplified in the New Testament will naturally promote tolerance. In aggregate, the teachings and example of the Savior instruct us to be generous with those who oppose us, to respect those who mistreat us, and to love those who dislike us. The Lord has shown us the way of tolerance and expects no less.

Treat beliefs and practices that are sacred to others with respect. We can disagree with the beliefs and practices held sacred by another without making light of those beliefs or criticizing the person who holds them. Elder N. Eldon Tanner said, "Let us always remember that men of great character do not belittle others nor magnify their weaknesses."³³ It is an ill-advised teaching method to criticize another person's manner of worship in an effort to build up our own. As President Hinckley stated, "[We are] not argumentative. We do not debate. We, in effect, simply say to others, 'Bring all the good that you have and let us see if we can add to it.'"³⁴ Furthermore, we should be kind to representatives of other religions. Even if we refuse to listen to their message, we can do so in a courteous manner. The Golden Rule might ask, "If this were a Latter-day Saint missionary, how would I want him or her to be treated?"

Learn about others and avoid stereotyping. Too often in gospel discussions with those of other faiths, we listen only with the intent to refute what they say. Yet Elder Nelson made clear that “opportunities to listen to those of diverse religious or political persuasion can promote tolerance and learning.”³⁵ Understanding what another person thinks and believes is often essential in helping them understand something differently. What is more, if we expect others to listen respectfully to our beliefs, we should expect to do the same. Elder Ballard counseled, “Get to know your neighbors. Learn about their families, their work, their views. . . . Let us cultivate meaningful relationships of mutual trust and understanding with people from different backgrounds and beliefs.”³⁶ As we learn about others, we are less likely to stereotype and misjudge and are more likely to see the person as he or she really is. As we come to understand others, we dispel ignorance, which is often the soil in which intolerance grows.

Join others in common causes. In a gathering of numerous religious delegations, Elder Nelson explained, “Members of our church often join with other like-minded citizens, regardless of religious persuasion, in support of worthy causes and humanitarian projects. This can be done without losing independent identity and strength.”³⁷ President Hinckley also explained, “We can and do work with those of other religions in various undertakings in the everlasting fight against social evils which threaten the treasured values which are so important to all of us. These people are not of our faith, but they are our friends, neighbors, and coworkers in a variety of causes. We are pleased to lend our strength to their efforts.”³⁸

Recognize that despite differences, we are all children of our Father in Heaven. As President Hinckley said, “Respect and tolerance go hand-in-hand with reverence for life itself. We should honor and respect all God’s children, as well as his creations.”³⁹ The Prophet Joseph Smith eloquently stated, “While one portion of the human race is judging and condemning the other without mercy, the Great Parent of the universe looks upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care and paternal regard; He views them as His offspring, and without any of those contracted feelings that influence the children of men.”⁴⁰ We should do likewise.

Final Thoughts

The principle of tolerance evokes self-control. Ultimately, those who righteously apply tolerance are known as peacemakers and are called the children of God (see Matthew 5:9). We refrain out of love

and respect, not out of cowardice and shame. Tolerance recognizes sin, yet our limited knowledge of another's circumstances, combined with a reluctance to judge, leads us to withhold a conspicuous response. Tolerance avoids retribution based on recognition of our own imperfections and an acute desire to treat others how we would like to be treated (see Matthew 7:12). Tolerance refrains out of understanding that we are all brothers and sisters and inherent in each of us is divine worth. It is awareness, not naïveté, that leads us to be tolerant.

I strongly agree with Elder Carmack that “tolerance is the right way to posture ourselves and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in a richly diverse world.”⁴¹ There are a myriad of definitions associated with tolerance, yet it is tolerance as defined in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ that possesses the utmost utility in promoting peace. Why? Because most other definitions are to some extent hostile, either in the harsh feelings that remain, or in the demand that one give up beliefs held sacred. By contrast, the gospel understanding of tolerance maintains deep respect and attributes inherent worth to all people while maintaining no demand that anyone give up their most cherished beliefs so long as they do not infringe upon the rights of another. If tolerance is properly employed, our neighbors should be able to sense our love and genuine regard for them, our respect for their right to worship, and our conviction to the truths we hold sacred. **RE**

Notes

1. “Membership, Retention on the Rise,” *Ensign*, June 2007, 75–76.
2. Howard W. Hunter, in Conference Report, October 1991, 22.
3. Russell M. Nelson, in Conference Report, April 1994, 92.
4. John A. Widtsoe, in Conference Report, April 1941, 115.
5. M. Russell Ballard, in Conference Report, October 2001, 43, 45.
6. Dallin H. Oaks, “Our Strengths Can Become Our Downfall,” *Ensign*, October 1994, 19.
7. John K. Carmack, *Tolerance: Principles, Practices, Obstacles, Limits* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1993), 51.
8. Hugh B. Brown, in Conference Report, October 1959, 107.
9. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 235.
10. Nelson, in Conference Report, April 1994, 93.
11. Stephen L. Richards, in Conference Report, October 1953, 99.
12. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, October 1995, 120.
13. Joseph Fielding Smith, in Conference Report, October 1936, 61.
14. Neal A. Maxwell, in Conference Report, October 2000, 46.
15. John A. Widtsoe, in Conference Report, April 1941, 115–16.
16. James E. Talmage, in Conference Report, April 1920, 101.

17. Bruce C. Hafen, "Church Delegates Attend World Congress of Families," *Ensign*, June 1997, 75. This concept is taught in context of society's tolerance of homosexual behavior, and yet the majority is opposed to same-sex marriage.
18. Sterling W. Sill, "The Strait Gate," *Ensign*, July 1980, 76.
19. Neal A. Maxwell, *That Ye May Believe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), 74.
20. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, October 2003, 27.
21. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, April 1994, 25.
22. Dallin H. Oaks, www.lds.org under Newsroom: Same-Gender Attraction.
23. Carmack, *Tolerance*, 11–12.
24. John A. Widtsoe, in Conference Report, April 1941, 115.
25. Hugh B. Brown, in Conference Report, October 1959, 108.
26. M. Russell Ballard, in Conference Report, April 1989, 100–101.
27. Ann N. Madsen, "Tolerance, the Beginning of Christlike Love," *Ensign*, October 1983, 29.
28. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Words of the Living Prophet," *Liahona*, June 2001, 34.
29. Alexander B. Morrison, "'No More Strangers,'" *Ensign*, September 2000, 20.
30. Carmack, *Tolerance*, 20.
31. Kimball, *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 236.
32. Gordon B. Hinckley, TV interview, May 12, 1995, as quoted in Sam Giles and Christie Giles, "We Don't Want You Here," *New Era*, August 1998, 10.
33. N. Eldon Tanner, "The Great Commandments," *Ensign*, July 1980, 4.
34. Gordon B. Hinckley, "The BYU Experience," in *Brigham Young University 1997–98 Speeches* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1997), 64.
35. Russell M. Nelson, in Conference Report, April 1991, 28–29.
36. Ballard, in Conference Report, October 2001, 45.
37. Russell M. Nelson, *Ensign*, November 1993, 108. This address was originally given at the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions, September 2, 1993.
38. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, April 1998, 3.
39. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Charity Doth Not Behave Itself Unseemly," *Ensign*, April 1988, 71.
40. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 218.
41. Carmack, *Tolerance*, 7.