

Emmanuel: The Glory of Christmas John 1:1-14

Christmas has stirred more controversy this year than I can recall in recent memory. All across the country debates over the word Christmas have occupied our attention:

- Christians refusing to patron stores if the merchant refuses to say “Merry Christmas”
- Auburn University changed the words “Christmas Tree” to “Holiday Tree” and then back again (If I have my facts straight)
- President Bush has been attacked for not including the words Christmas in his 1.4 million “Christmas” cards
- Not failing to get in on the fun, the Atheist Club at UTSA decided to trade bibles for pornography in what they called a “smut for smut” campaign

What is a Christian to make of all this hoopla?

Tragically, I feel like we are missing an incredible opportunity. Like countless other minority groups, these Christians are preoccupied with their “rights” or worse a perceived sense of entitlement that Christianity is the dominant religion of the United States. A pastor friend of mine recently wrote to some fellow pastors:

I’m concerned to see so many Christian people thoughtlessly joining this band-wagon. I think we’re being incited to act politically rather than respond Christianly. I think we’re in danger of missing a massive opportunity to actually open doors to share the gospel and [share] how Christ has changed our hearts. (Pastor Ewan Kennedy)

The amazing opportunity for our culture and us is this: People have discovered that Christmas may really have something to do with Jesus and not American sentimentalism, crass materialism or just ambiguous spirituality. Christmas is particular and cannot be made to stand for just anything, whether that is the “holidays,” a winter festival or a winter break. Christmas means something.

Tragically, this debate has been driven by those who I think aren’t really interested in a serious discussion about Christmas. For those on the news shows it is about ratings, ratings, ratings! For others, it is about the perseverance of a certain kind of a religious culture that may or may not be rooted deeply in the soil of a thorough-going Christianity. The evidence for that concern is found in the tone and methods of their rhetoric. Their confidence is in the wrong place.

As Christians we should not be upset that the culture doesn’t want to share anymore in what we think is most significant. In fact, we should expect it in a culture that is the most religiously and ethnically diverse in the world. Furthermore, why do we think success is linked to being the dominant religious expression in our nation? No one thought much of Jesus when he first came to this earth. Yet as we saw last week, his coming has meant light to the world. His “minority status” did not affect his impact. Perhaps being a minority has an upside.

Our calling is not to join some political band-wagon seeking the demise of those who are hostile to Christmas. Rather, it is to winsomely and wisely help people in our daily relationships understand why we cannot take Christ out of Christmas. We don’t need to run out of an establishment because they didn’t say “Merry Christmas.” Rather, we need to talk to our neighbors and friends about why Christ is so important. Christmas does mean something and for this we, as Christians, cannot leave it behind. Instead of starting a political fight with those who disagree, let us enter into a dialogue about why our convictions mean so much.

That’s really what I want to do this morning.

If we take Christ out of Christmas not only do we lose Christ, we end up losing ourselves. Jesus Christ, as our Immanuel, is the glory of Christmas.

The word Immanuel is a Hebrew word from Isaiah, chapter 7, meaning “God with us.” Here in his prologue John is clearly teaching us that Jesus is our Immanuel. Jesus is the Word made flesh. This is the fundamental thrust of verse 14. The eternal and divine Living Word has taken up his abode with men by donning our flesh. Literally, in becoming flesh Jesus “tabernacles” with us even as the God’s glory dwelled in the tabernacle in the wilderness wanderings. Jesus is the living embodiment of the divine. As the first verse of Hebrews tell us, Jesus is the “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.” (1:3) John tells us that this is the glory of God, that the one and only Son of the Father has donned human flesh.

Two very important truths flow from this, which make the Jesus Christ of Christmas absolutely unique and glorious:

1) Humanity Restored

Francis Schaeffer wrote, "Man's problem is not getting to the stars, it is the loss of humanity."

At the end of verse fourteen John teaches that the incarnation is glorious because, he says, "full of...truth." Jesus is glorious because in taking on our flesh he fulfills the "truth" regarding our humanity. Jesus is not just a man; he is truly man. **He is the True Man who restores us to our true humanity.**

Several years ago we were captured at the theaters by Jim Carrey's role in the movie *The Truman Show*. Our fascination in that movie reflected our desire for a picture for a "true" man. Could someone live with purity, without pretense, with joy and with honesty? Of course it was impossible in the movie because the TV show was built on greed, deception and exploitation. It revealed that humanity is incapable of creating humanity, even under the best conditions.

The truth is we are a people that have been afforded every privilege—wealth, education, family and future—yet we still seem unable to rise to the truth of our humanity. It is so hard for us to get comfortable in our own skin? How hard it is to:

- Love our spouses
- Rejoice in our blessings
- Smell the roses
- Quiet our hearts
- Celebrate our families
- Build relationships
- Sleep
- Stop
- Be

Oh, we have lots of accomplishments that seem utterly meaningless the longer we live. Consider the famous Beatles' song, *Nowhere Man*:

"Nowhere Man is a song by British 1960s rock group the Beatles, on their album *Rubber Soul*. Though the songwriting credit is Lennon-McCartney, it was penned by John Lennon and recorded on October 21 and 22, 1965. It is the first Beatles song not about love and marks the beginning of Lennon's philosophical oriented music. The song is either about an actual person or a member of a rigid, straight-laced society whose life in reality had no purpose. ...In the animated movie *Yellow Submarine* (1968) the Beatles, on their way to save Pepperland from the Blue Meanies, encounter Jeremy Hillary Boob, PhD, a strange little brown-furred man . . . who lives in an empty Nowhere, speaks in rhyme and describes himself as an "eminent physicist, polyglot classicist, prize-winning botanist, hard-biting satirist, talented pianist, good dentist too". The Beatles sing the song *Nowhere Man* about him, then decide to take him Somewhere." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nowhere_Man)

John teaches us an amazing thing here. **He teaches us that Jesus became human to lead us into the truth of our humanity.** My friends, without Christ in Christmas we not only lose him, but we lose ourselves too. The whole point of Christmas is to celebrate a God-originated restoration project of our humanity.

Some of us this morning need to hear that God's goal for me is simple—becoming more human. I don't need to climb into heaven; I just need to get comfortable in my own skin. Jesus got comfortable in our skin so we could too!

2) Divinity Displayed

However, we cannot forget that though Christ has put on humanity he remains divine. While John wants us to completely grasp that Jesus is fully human he does not want us to forget that Jesus remains fully divine. Jesus is the Living and Divine Word. John describes the glory of the divinity displayed in Jesus in the word, which complements truth. That word is grace. **The glory of Jesus' divinity is displayed in the fullness of his grace!**

This is so contrary to our desire for divinity which is expressed in super-hero categories. Like ancient mythologies, we imagine the divine expressed in super "human" capacities. But Jesus displays divinity in a way that supersedes every category with which we are familiar. Only God can come up with grace—giving us the blessing of favor when we deserved his condemnation.

Immanuel is the display of grace.

Another movie that explores the theme of incarnation is *Dead Man Walking* from 1995. Ironically the story is set in New Orleans. Sister Helen Prejean was a nun living and working the housing projects when she received an invitation to become a pen pal with someone on death row. Matthew Poncelet has been convicted of brutal crimes against a man and a woman leaving them shot in a field.

Sister Helen begins to explore his claims of innocence and only discovers a hardened and hating criminal mind. Matthew is familiar with every form of inhumanity and hatred. Nonetheless, Sister Helen resists hatred and begins to invite him to responsibility. She repeatedly asks him to confess his sins and own up to his crimes.

At the same time she begins a relationship with the victims' families. They are outraged at her involvement and cannot comprehend her compassion. Their only plea is for justice. "If you really care about this family, you'll want to see justice done." When the papers pick up the story the accusations against sister Helen fly. Even her fellow colleagues begin to reject her.

She does not give up, even until the final hour. Over time his defenses begin to be broken. At 11:38 p.m., only minutes before his execution at midnight, she asks him again, "Do you take responsibility for both of their deaths?"

Crying, he admits his guilt for the first time. A few minutes later he says, "Thank you for loving me. I never had anybody really love me before."

Sister Helen recalls their walk together toward his execution. "That was the first time I had ever touched him. I looked down and saw his chains dragging across the gleaming tile floor. His head was shaved, and he was dressed in a clean, white T-shirt. When they took him into the execution chamber, I leaned over and kissed his back...."

Her last words to him instructed him to watch her face. "That way the last thing you will see before you die will be the face of someone who loves you."

My friends, there is a reason why Jesus is not wanted in our culture. It is because when people look into the eyes of Christian they do not see the eyes of grace. They do not see the divinity of Christ displayed.

Ironically, there is only one cure for this—not less of Christmas, but more of Christmas. Rather than fighting for the right to say Christmas at the grocery store, we should be striving to embody Christmas to one another. And the only way for us to display such divine grace is for us to drink deeply at its fountain.

My friends, have you seen the eyes of Jesus looking into yours saying, "I love you?" Have you heard him say, "I know you? I know what you have done and how you have failed, but I still love you."

Only the goodness of divine grace can melt the hatred and indifference of our hearts. The reason why God had to become human is because only grace could rescue humanity. We don't just need truth we need grace.

Drive it Home:

"What are you getting for Christmas?" we ask each other. What prize will you secure for yourself? What toy? What stupendous experience?

Parents joke about the toys of Christmas that are used for only a few hours. Our loss of humanity has made even the most amazing delights unsatisfying. We are constantly in search of a new thrill or a better prize.

As we mature our pain with the familiar doesn't diminish. In fact, you might say it intensifies. We are constantly trying to escape the ordinariness of our humanity and the pain of our fallenness: a faster car, newer home, prettier clothes, a more agreeable spouse, etc. Maybe just one more gift will do the trick. Probably not!

My friends, Christmas is the recognition that the only gift that truly matters has already been given...to us! It is Jesus Christ—he who restores our humanity and displays divinity giving us both truth and grace.

Have you seen not what's under the tree, but who's in the manger?