

IT'S ABOUT JESUS

DECEMBER 24, 1987 6:00 P.M.

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Two women stood looking into a department store window at a large display of the manger scene with clay figures of the baby Jesus, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the wise men, and animals. Disgustedly, one woman said, "Look at that, the church trying to horn in on Christmas!" Sometimes we forget that Christmas is about Jesus. Christmas is the celebration of God's coming into our earthly existence in the person of Jesus.

Yes, the shopping centers, the stores are filled with Christmas decorations and music, but there is little about Jesus in the stores or in the music. There's a lot about Santa and Rudolph, but little about Jesus. There's a lot about Christmas on television at this time of year. There are Christmas specials, and many of the sit-coms have a Christmas story that touches your heart and makes your eyes water. But these programs usually have very little to do with Jesus. They suggest Christmas is a time to love one another, and share, which are good themes, but they are themes because of who Jesus was and what he came to do.

Christmas is becoming increasingly secularized so that the church celebration is one last place where we can remember that Christmas is about Jesus. I do not say this sadly, because we live in a pluralistic society. People of many different religions now live in America. We no longer can expect to have Christmas celebrated in the schools. It is not right to celebrate religious festivals in school. Our children and youth need to learn about the customs of the different religions, but they should not be forced to celebrate, and when an attempt is made to celebrate, the celebration is so watered-down it becomes offensive, not to the person of another religion, but to the believer. When you think about it, isn't it offensive to us when an unbeliever takes Christmas and turns it into some inoffensive bowl of pabulum?

When I was in public school in rural Minnesota, my school was essentially the parochial school for the Baptist and Methodist Churches. The Lutherans and Catholics had their own parochial schools and didn't join us until high school. We Protestants have had the luxury of using the public school as our parochial school. This is no longer the case, and I fully believe in the separation of church and state. There should be no religious celebrations in school, and there should be no prayers in school. If so, to which God shall we pray? Or, does the prayer become so inoffensive it is offensive to believers of all religions? Our society is secularized and Christmas has become a secular celebration, offending no one except Christians!

No longer can we rely on the public school to teach the children about religion, morality and ethics. The Sunday School, and Bible reading and teaching in the home, are of critical importance today; only the Sunday School and home teach morality and ethics. It is in the church and the Christian home where we remember that Christmas is about Jesus. We can enjoy the television shows and the shopping mall decorations. We can sing about Rudolph. But, we must tell the story of Jesus to one another in our homes and in our church, lest we forget that Christmas is about Jesus.

We are happy tonight. We rejoice tonight because God so loved the world, God so loved you and me, God came into the world to save us. There is still much to do to make everyone loving and joyful, much yet to do to rid the world of hate and selfishness, war and cruelty. But God is with us. God came in the baby, Jesus. We look at the baby and call him our Messiah, our Savior, the Hope of the World. A Christmas card that came to our house this year had this verse, The season of all seasons...

The birth of all births...
The wonder of all wonders...
God has come to earth.

We do not say that our religion is better than any other. There have been times when Christians have been quite arrogant and intolerant, as have some other religions. But, that is not necessary. We do not celebrate Christmas because we think we are better than anyone else.

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Why do we celebrate Christmas? What do we say about our religion? We celebrate the birth of Jesus and call Jesus the revelation of God and our Saviour, because through Jesus Christ and his church, we have found God. We witness to the world that in our experience, we have found love, meaning, purpose, direction, salvation through Jesus Christ, his teachings, his suffering, compassionate love, his death and his resurrection.

The coming of Jesus into this world is a beautiful story. We heard it told again this evening. Now let's re-enact it. Joseph and Mary who lived in Nazareth which is in northern Israel had to go to Bethlehem to participate in the Roman census so they could be properly taxed. Mary was pregnant and after the long hard trip riding on a donkey, she was ready to give birth. There was no room in the inn in Bethlehem, but the innkeeper took pity on Mary, and let them stay in the manger, which was probably a cave behind the inn. And there Mary gave birth to a boy whom she named Jesus, which means "to save his people." shepherds....wise men ...offering