

ADVENT CONSPIRACY #1: "EVALUATING THE PARTY"

Christians in America at Christmas

- Our goal is simply this: To celebrate Jesus and to do it in a way that would honor him. But two huge pulls that can often work against keeping the focus on Jesus at Christmas – commercialism and family traditions.
- We're going to ask you to consider "conspiring" against things that dishonor Jesus on his birthday.
- Being a Christian at Christmas in America can be somewhat confusing. On the one hand you have the basic message of Jesus coming to earth to have a love-relationship with us, to save us from our sins, and to establish his kingdom through us. On the other hand you have the cultural celebration that is filled with gifts, childhood wonder, music and beauty. *How much does our cultural celebration help Christians celebrate Jesus?* The answers will be individual.

Three Questions to Ask

1. Has the party become more important than the person?

- ◆ Most office Christmas parties don't need Jesus; most family gift exchanges don't need Jesus; most children are focused more on gifts than Jesus. The party has actually grown to take on a life of its own.
- ◆ Santa Claus first appeared in America in 1773; 1822 Clement Clarke Moore wrote "A Visit from Saint Nicholas" ("Twas the Night Before Christmas") which popularized the tradition of exchanging gifts.
- ◆ In England in 1843 Charles Dickens wrote "A Christmas Carol" (Scrooge, Tiny Tim) that helped reinvent Christmas as a holiday emphasizing family, goodwill, and compassion. Since most people can be kind and giving for at least one or two weeks a year, Jesus has increasingly become irrelevant to Christmas.
- ◆ We can't just accept the secularization of Christmas: (1) Jesus' name is attached to it; (2) Christians support a legitimate party; (3) We have a responsibility to help people hear the message of Jesus.

2. Do the party values honor Jesus?

- ◆ Jesus' goal for coming to earth is not merely to help people be a little more loving to each other and feel a little more peaceful once a year. It's deeper and bigger than that:
 - *Matthew 6:15 "But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."*
 - *Matthew 10:37 "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves a son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."*
 - *Luke 5:32 "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."*
 - *Luke 6:27-28 "But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."*
 - *Luke 12:15 "Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."*

- *Luke 12:51 "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division."*
- *John 6:53 Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."*
- *John 15:5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."*
- *Matthew 28:19-20 "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

- ◆ Does the party help us believe and live these – or is it a distraction, a hindrance, even a dishonor to these things? We must recognize that the picture of Jesus these verses paint is not what happens around us at Christmas – unless we work hard to make it happen.

- ➔ *For too many, the amount of money spent on the party dishonors Jesus, and the focus on "us" over the needy dishonors Jesus, and the seeking after peace and goodwill and love apart from Jesus as our source dishonors Jesus, and the lack of bowing at his feet in humble obedient worship dishonors Jesus.*

3. Does the party help nonChristians want to know and love Jesus?

- ◆ Or does it make Jesus irrelevant to life, and a mere cultural symbol good for warm feelings and a healthy American economy?
- ◆ And what might we, as followers of Jesus, do differently that could show our friends that we value the person over the party – and that could actually attract them to the person?

The Advent Conspiracy.

- *"Christmas Can [Still] Change the World."*
- Jesus warned the religious people of his day about "setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions" (Mark 7:9). To what extent have we done this with Christmas?
- What is the party's effect on those who go into debt; those who have painful family relationships; those who are stressed about gift giving and gift receiving; those who have no money to enter the party – and resent those who are in it?
- We must not just read and believe the story of Christmas – we must enter it and live it, by loving how he loved, and valuing what he valued.
 - ➔ **Worship Fully** – Put Jesus at the center and celebrate to honor him.
 - ➔ **Spend Less** – Use gifts, but limit them so we can . . .
 - ➔ **Give More** – Give relationally with our "Presence" – as God did.
 - ➔ **Love All** – Not primarily family and friends but those in need.
- In Jeremiah 10:2 God warns his people: *"Do not learn the ways of the nations."* The nations will gradually remake God into a being that is vanilla, nonoffending, safe – a mixture of truth and falsehoods that weakens the glory of his true name.
 - ➔ **So we invite you to believe that Christmas can STILL change the world. . . . We invite you into his story. . . . We invite you to worship the baby and King of Christmas.**