

5 Truths About the Diversity of the First Christmas

0 Christmas, do you ever remind us that people think their way of talking, writing, and celebrating is *the* way. Christmas starts quarrels over minutia more than all of the rest of the holidays combined. From what phrases to say to when to listen to music, we ironically turn this allegedly peaceful time of the year designed to put our focus on the birth of the most significant person ever into a self-aggrandizing time of opinions and disagreements. I realize many of these things are not meant to be taken too seriously (I honestly do not care if you consider *Die Hard* a Christmas movie) but if we are honest, we know that we get disproportionately passionate in defending some traditions.

If we study the first Christmas, we find that it was quite diverse. And I have no doubt an application to this is that we really need to realize that diversity matters to God. Much of (and dare I say most of) our way of “doing” Christmas are not absolute truths to be followed and argued. And it may be that these silly differences of opinion about Christmas represent bigger and more serious issues we have with a lack of diversity in things things that do matter. Like worship and community life.

With that in mind, here are five things about the first Christmas and its diversity that can teach us to embrace the differences we have with others.

The worshippers were diverse

Mary was a young virgin. Joseph was a carpenter descended from King David. The Magi were astrologers and may have been kings. The first group of people commanded to go see Jesus were laity

shepherds. Zechariah was a priest and his wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron. Anna was a very elderly prophetess. Matthew, an author, was a Jewish tax collector. Luke was a Gentile doctor. The messengers from God to man about Jesus were angels and not even human. And I'd even include the animals as well, since their feeding trough is mentioned by name in the story.

The voices of Christmas are far more diverse than we are accustomed to in our lives. Perhaps Christmas should awaken us to this fact and motivate us to long to hear from a variety of sources on how to understand and serve Jesus. And it could be very edifying to worship with a diverse community and buck against the typical cultural model of a church filled with people as similar to me as possible.

The reactions were diverse

The Angels comforted Mary and the shepherds, both of whom were terrified. The shepherds told people about Jesus and glorified God. Mary pondered the events deeply and treasured them in her heart. The magi bowed down to worship and brought gifts. Anna, Zechariah and Simeon gave prophecies. Simeon held Jesus in his arms. John the Baptist leaped in his mother's womb. Elizabeth gave a glad cry.

How we react to the Christmas season may seem so important to us that we expect others to feel similarly. When in fact there are many ways to react to Christmas and if they do not have anything to do with gift-giving or Santa or even huge family gatherings, they can still be good. As long as they are legitimate reactions to who Jesus is.

The geography was diverse

Joseph and Mary traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born. After his birth they went to Egypt for a while and then back to Nazareth where he was raised. The Magi were from "the East" and while it is impossible to say for sure where exactly that meant, it was a long distance from Galilee.

The lady who leads the prayer time at my church on Sunday mornings before Sunday school often brings requests from magazines that talk about places and people I have never heard of. I appreciate this instead of always just praying for our church, our neighborhood or our missionaries. God is indeed a God of the whole world and even Christmas reminds us of that.

The prophecies of Jesus as Savior were diverse

Jesus's name means "Jehovah is salvation" so centering the idea of Christmas around "Jesus is our Savior" is perfect. Yet even that phrase was broken down theologically that first Christmas. Consider just in Zechariah's song in Luke 1:67-80 that he teaches, among other things, that Jesus would be:

A Redeemer

This is a word that in and of itself has layers of meaning. A first century Jew who knew their Scriptures could think of Ruth, Job or even Levitical law and understand that Zechariah meant that God sent Jesus to rescue us from spiritual slavery and that in some way he was going to purchase us for God out of our pathetic circumstances. As a family-redeemer. This explains why Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6 that "you were bought at a price" and in Acts 20 he claimed the church was "purchased by the blood Christ".

A Warrior King

The literal phrase Zechariah used was "horn of salvation"

which is found in several places in his Scriptures to communicate victory over enemies and security and refuge. Combine this with the fact that Zechariah references David, the general king who led Israel to many war victories, some translations call Jesus "a mighty king" in this prophecy.

The Jesus of the Gospels did get angry and even violent (Mark 11) but he came to die and was a willing sacrifice who did not fight back against his human enemies. Yet to Zechariah's audience, they knew that God was a Mighty Warrior King, as in Isaiah 42:13:

The Lord will go forth like a warrior,
He will arouse His zeal like a man of war.
He will utter a shout, yes, He will raise a war cry.
He will prevail against His enemies.

And then Revelation describes Jesus this way:

"And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. His name is The Word of God. The armies which are in heaven were following Him on white horses. From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS."

We know from the New Testament that our enemies are not other humans. They are Satan, sin and death. And that Christ came to conquer them all. I think the resurrected Jesus is very much an image of the Old Testament Triumphant Warrior God and also of King David the War General, not victorious over the Philistines or Assyrians but over evil forces of darkness and over physical and spiritual death. And I think Zechariah prophecies this. The doctrine of the first Christmas goes much deeper than the incarnation and the image of baby Jesus.

Our covenant.

Zechariah referenced Abraham, which was the covenant he knew at the time, but we now know a covenant that is better and forever in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 9:15).

A light to all nations.

Darkness has a strong association with secrecy and wickedness and confusion. All of these things were true of most nations spiritually before Christ. But he came to bring knowledge of not mere morality but of salvation to God for everyone.

And there are more I could discuss. But what all of these phrases have in common is that they describe Jesus as Savior in terminology that demonstrates how profound, complex and marvelous that phrase is.

The object of worship was not diverse

And this is the most important thing of all. It is easy in our culture to bow down to diversity so far that we consider all beliefs and religions equal. And while I do not unnecessarily disrespect any belief or worldview, I without shame proclaim Jesus Christ as my Lord and God, the only means to get to God and the unique object of my worship. Christianity is exclusive by its nature because of Jesus, as any monolithic religion is and as all truth claims have to be in some sense. Christianity is significant not for how inclusive it is of all beliefs, but rather how distinct it is. It desires to be inclusive of all *people*, notably all types of people and the New Testament reiterates this over and over. Yet the way to Heaven is

narrow. Jesus is the only door.

No matter your traditions this Christmas, the original story is exhaustively about Jesus and his role in human history. It wasn't just a birth. It was a collision of God and humanity that changed everything that matters in eternity.

As always, we welcome feedback in the comment section below.