

***Question: The song of the angels at the birth of Jesus announced, “On earth peace, good will to men.” Why did the birth of Jesus not bring world peace?***

There is a sense in which the birth of Jesus Christ has made world peace possible, but it is not in the sense often understood. The traditional Christmas story is based on the King James Version of the Bible that quotes the angels as saying: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Luke 2:14). Every other version I have been able to check has some form of the following as exemplified by the New American Standard Bible, “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.” The difference in these two translations can be explained by the absence of a single letter in many 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts.

As a result of this manuscript difference, the traditional quotation of this verse seems to imply a kind of unconditional world peace with an end to wars. History clearly demonstrates that this is not what has happened in the centuries since Jesus Christ was born. To read into the text that the song of the angels predicted this type of world peace would contradict what Jesus later said: “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom” (Matthew 24:6-7).

Instead of declaring automatic world peace beginning with the birth of Jesus, the song of the angels says that peace comes to those who are pleasing to God. Apart from reconciliation with God by removing the guilt and power of sin, there can be no real peace. Romans 8:6-8 says: “The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.”

However, peace with God does open the door to peace with others. Peace with God brings a personal sense of peaceful serenity to hearts. This peace with self makes us more amenable to peaceful relationships with others. But it all begins with our relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Even if we had the idealized world peace, it would be meaningless apart from a right relationship with God. At the end of the first century, the Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus said: “While the emperor may give peace from war on land and sea, he is unable to give peace from passion, grief, and envy. He cannot give peace of heart for which man yearns more than even for outward peace.” This means that world peace will not come just because of a strong military. We cannot make peace by making war and forcing our will upon others, even if we are in the right. At best, such action brings only a surface peace. True peace can only come when hearts are cleansed of hatred, envy, greed, anger, grudges and the need to get even. These things must be replaced by forgiveness, love for enemies, giving and sharing.

Just as the angels announced in song to the shepherds in the field, the birth of Jesus, our Savior, did bring peace. But it was for those who please God by surrendering their wills to the kingship of Christ, his son. This means that world peace must begin with repentance, faith and obedience to God in the heart of each of us. It begins with you and me. Then we can all join together in the eternal kingdom of God, a kingdom of peace where we will reign with Him. The night before Jesus was crucified for the sins of the world, he said to his disciples: “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

[Send questions or comments to University Church of Christ, 801 N. 12<sup>th</sup>, Murray, KY 42071 or phone 270-753-1881.]      2011/12/09