

life group study guide

December 6, 2015

Nativity Displays

“God showed how much He loved us by sending His one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through Him. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.” 1 John 4:9-10 (NLT)

Christmas is a very visual holiday! Most people find meaning in Christmas by what they see; lights, gifts, food, parties and shopping. Of course, that is not at all the significance of Christmas! Christmas is all about God’s plan for the salvation of His creation, by sending His Son to earth, born to humble parents, to live, witness, love and comfort us and ultimately to die a sacrificial death to satisfy God’s wrath toward our sins.

It is our desire to refocus our vision from the externals of the holiday, to the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who came to bring us salvation and the best image we can visualize of God Himself, the Lover of our Souls.

Christ's first advent (His birth) was not to pronounce and execute judgment upon the nations abiding in God's wrath; but rather, His was a saving mission, commensurate with God's love of the whole human creation. It was that saving mission which formed the burden of the Lord's mission in that first advent. Christmas provides a great opportunity for us to witness of God’s love for all mankind.

- 1) Let’s look at God’s Word to see our Savior, discuss what you learn from each scripture:
 - a. Matthew 1:18-23
 - b. John 3:16-17
 - c. Colossians 2:9
 - d. Isaiah 59:1-2
 - e. Romans 5:10-11
 - f. Romans 6:23
 - g. Colossians 1:19-22
 - h. Ephesians 1:13-14

St. Francis of Assisi is credited with staging the first nativity scene in 1223. The only historical account we have of Francis’ nativity scene comes from [The Life of St. Francis of Assisi](#) by St. Bonaventure, a Franciscan monk who was born five years before Francis’ death. According to Bonaventure’s biography, St. Francis got permission from Pope Honorious III to set up a manger with hay and two live animals—an ox and an ass—in a cave in the Italian village of Greccio. He then invited the villagers to come gaze upon the scene while he preached about “the babe of Bethlehem.” (Francis was supposedly so overcome by emotion that he couldn’t say “Jesus.”)

Nativity scenes had enormous popular appeal. Francis’ display came in the middle of a period when mystery or miracle plays were a popular form of entertainment and education for European laypeople. These plays, originally performed in churches and later performed in town squares, re-enacted Bible stories in vernacular languages. Since church services at the time were performed only in Latin, which virtually no one understood, miracle plays were the only way for laypeople to learn scripture.

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Francis' nativity scene used the same method of visual display to help locals understand and emotionally engage with Christianity.

December 25—Christmas Day—has been a federal holiday in the United States since 1870.

- 2) Do the various Christmas traditions of today lead your thoughts and activities to focus on Christ, or do they detract from your focus on Christ? Which are predominately positive and which if any are negative?
 - a. Parties
 - b. Nativity displays
 - c. Christmas Eve Candle Light Service
 - d. Christmas tree
 - e. Gift giving
 - f. All the mail appeals at Christmas time
 - g. Neighborhood homes all lights
 - h. Commercialism
 - i. December date
- 3) Can you develop a brief defense of celebrating Christmas as a Christian celebration, or vice versa, could you develop a defense of the position that Christians should NOT celebrate Christmas at all, except perhaps exclusively as a secular holiday.
- 4) Since we seem to be viewing two aspects of Christmas, the traditions that have developed, over many centuries and from many sources, contrasted with the sacred celebration of God's love for us. Based upon your personal and family activities and preoccupations, which of these two has the precedent in your life?
- 5) Are there specific changes you could make in your preparations and activities at Christmas time that would encourage a better focus on Christ?

It is obvious that this becomes a public issue when some citizens object to the nativity set placed on the courtyard square downtown. Public displays of faith (Tim Tebow, large silver cross on fashion plate necklace, a WWJD bracelet, High School band playing 'How Great Thou Art at half-time of football game, etc.), in general are heralded by the church and viewed with disdain by others in a world that openly struggles with the proper role of faith in the contemporary public square. Many believe that the purpose of public displays of faith is not merely to draw attention but to affirm our faith in our own minds, and testify of our faith to those we judge as un-evangelized.

For some, to display your faith in public requires absolute belief and commitment. Pushing back against intimidation and standing tall for Christian faith may be the antidote to the malaise that is eroding the integrity, observance and faith of American Christianity.

Many are willing to take public stands on issues, tweet daily scriptures, call for posting statements of faith on Facebook, chime in on wide church arguments and so forth. Of course, there is the problem of judging others whose display is different (more or less enthusiastic) from our own. The truth is, a public display of faith is fine and honors God unless that public display is really about generating a certain reputation in a religious community.

Many of us who grew up in the church understand how this works. People who are the most

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zealous often rise to the top in the small sub-culture of evangelicalism, especially in the microcosm of a given church.

But scripture itself should govern such outward displays. Here's some of what Jesus says of the issue in the book of Matthew:

"Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

He also warns, "Be especially careful when you are trying to do good so that you don't make a performance out of it."

"When you do something good for someone else, don't call attention to yourself. You've seen them in action, I'm sure – playactors I call them – treating prayer meeting and street corner alike as a stage, acting compassionate as long as someone is watching, playing to the crowds."

"When you come before God, don't turn that into a theatrical production either. All these people making a regular show out of their prayers, hoping for stardom."

"Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 6 & 10)

The Apostle Paul states in the letter to the church at Rome, "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, it is the power of salvation."

God gave the Apostle Paul exciting prophetic insight into our chaotic world. "But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people," he wrote to his beloved son in the faith, Timothy (2 Timothy 3:1-5; English Standard Version). These few verses are a perfectly accurate picture of American society today. We may claim to be a Christian nation, but we are not living up to Christ's high standards.

The reality is, Jesus doesn't need us to put on a Nativity display in our front yard. He doesn't need us to kneel in the end zone, engage in argumentative defenses of our faith, or argue theology on twitter. On the other hand, public witness and testimony are important tools in evangelism.

The Bible gives adequate admonition to live our faith out loud. Motives are what matter. Clearly, the heart of the matter is what is appropriate for each of us individually. We need to be expressing our faith in a way appropriate for our area of comfort. It is the same with the blogger who acknowledges Jesus on his homepage. Each of these visible expressions of faith will always cause someone to notice and think. God wants some of us to be matches, making Jesus attractive. He calls others to be floodlights that expose 'the Faith' to the world.

There is another issue here between publicly demonstrating your faith and being quiet out of fear. Social media has allowed a false and distorted public display as people sit behind their computers making bold proclamations of faith. Kingdom living is about Jesus and His mission. Our walk of faith must be public and not as a motive for show or attention but as a light and testimony of Christ in us to a world that needs to hear of Him and His love for them. Our walk proclaims God's love in word and deed!

Paul addressed the Thessalonians specifically, "Aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs." Every act of love doesn't have to come with a Facebook post. What none of us desire is to lose the wrestling match between faith externalized for public view and that which supports and sustains us through the midnight despair.

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- 6) Are you comfortable with your present method of expression of your faith?
- 7) Do you see ways/methods/times you could be more/less public in your expression?
- 8) Are you uncomfortable with more visible, louder, intrusive demonstrations of faith?
- 9) Do you wish Kingsway Christian Church could be more visible in our public witness of faith?