

## ***The Controversy of the Crèche***

Mary and Joseph traveled some 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, in compliance with the edict of Caesar Augustus, that all should return to their hometown, or place of family lineage, to register for tax purposes. Joseph perhaps brought Mary along in order to protect her from the shame of and potential danger from those in Nazareth who would accuse Mary of immorality, being pregnant before the consummation of her marriage to Joseph. (The fact of her pregnancy was true; but her conception was as a virgin and by the Holy Spirit, which none would have understood). And also, Joseph would no doubt have wanted to be with Mary for her time for delivery of her special baby.

The familiar story in **Luke 2:1-7**:

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup> Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup> He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

For the past 25 years or so, there have been every Christmas Season numerous controversies over the displays of crèches, i.e. Nativity scenes in public places. Usually the watchdog organization, The American Civil Liberties Union, cries “foul” when there is a perception that the wall separating church and state has been breached. The ACLU and those this organization represents claim that displays of Christian symbols foist religion upon the unwilling, and to place such symbols on public property at public expense is to give preference or support to one religion over another.

In today’s Wisconsin State Journal there’s a small piece about a lady in Tallahassee, Florida who was so incensed that an anti-Christian message from the Satanic Temple had replaced the Christmas Nativity scene in Florida’s Capitol that she was arrested while trying to tear the replacement display apart. “It’s just wrong, when you remove the baby Jesus two days before Christmas and put Satan in his place—that just can’t happen. I couldn’t allow it to happen,” she explained to police.

We can understand this woman’s feelings about a Christmas symbol that means a lot to us. But if we’re historically honest, we’ll admit that a lot of our Christmas symbols, such as the greenery we use for decorations, are adaptations from pagan Roman festivals having to do with Winter Solstice at the end of December.

Christianity basically co-opted this pagan event and, appropriately so, “converted” these symbols and gave them Christian meaning.

The question we face today is, should we as Christians and as the church be offended when our symbols and our gospel are not accepted by the world? Should we be offended when commercial enterprises don’t promote our symbols? And should we be surprised when the crèche is for many people controversial?

In this lowly cattle stall in Bethlehem, the power was unleashed that was to reverse the course of history and bring the arrival of the transforming power of God. This power to reverse history is not apparent to the unbelieving world. Were you to ask anyone on this night when the baby Jesus was born, who’s the most powerful man on earth, no doubt the answer would have been Caesar Augustus, ruler of the great Roman Empire. Augustus was referred to as “The Son of God,” the adopted son of Julius Caesar, who was worshipped as a god, and who conferred deity upon his son, Augustus. Little did the world know that in that most humble, obscure environment, with those peasant teenagers, was born the eternal Son of God, the co-Creator of the Universe, the God-Man who would bring salvation to the world.

Imagine how controversial would be the crèche if it were placed where it appropriately belongs in God’s order of things—not below the courthouse on the lawn beneath the halls of government and commercial power, but lifted high above all earthly symbols of power. The danger of gaining too much government compliance with our Christian faith and symbols is that people begin to place the Gospel and the government alongside of one another and confer to them equal authority. But the Kingdom of God demands priority over all earthly powers.

Do you think city hall would allow us to place the crèche on top of our state Capitol, looking down upon all other symbols of power? And yet the truth of the matter is that some day, when Jesus returns in triumph, this great reversal will be manifest to unbelievers and believers alike. We read from Paul, “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”(Philippians 2:10-11).

The crèche was the place of the birth of the God-Man. The Incarnation is, in the words of CS Lewis, the central miracle on which all other miracles depend and from which all others spring. If Augustus Caesar and his uncle, Julius Caesar, were men who became “gods,” then Jesus was the true God who for our sakes became a man, which shows us his grace and love as well as his divine power. If the truth of the crèche were known, then we’d realize that God came to earth to be the Savior of all mankind.

The crèche in Bethlehem, on that night of desperation, when Mary and Joseph could find no other place for her delivery of the child, was the epitome of abject lowliness. This young couple was utterly alone, without any assistance in the delivery of this divine but also very human and fragile child. Imagine if you will, the risks and dangers involved. Sense the scene, which would have been accompanied by the odor of animals, mingled with the smells of bloody placenta. A birth couldn't have been lowlier, showing us that God stooped to the lowest level of human kind, saying that no one lies beneath his love, grace and concern.

Years ago we visited the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and were appalled by the tackiness of the church and the crude nature of the putative place of Jesus' birth. A star is placed on a shelf in a cave beneath the church, marking where Jesus might have been cradled when he was born. Much later images of a wooden animal stall have been the "stock-in-trade" image for the setting of the crèche of Jesus. But it's likely that the place was the lower level of a two-tiered dwelling, with the people living above, and the animals kept below, even possibly in a cave. There was no place for them in the public guest quarters. Every Christmas, sermons abound that villain-ize the poor innkeeper. The truth of the matter is, there was probably nothing in Bethlehem to resemble what we think of as a commercial or public inn for traveling guests. Thus, as he was born in a cave, so would he some day, after his mission of dying for sinners was complete, rise again from a cave.

Note how Mary, in the typical custom of the day, wrapped the Baby Jesus in bands of cloths. These tightly wound strips of linen were to protect the infants flailing arms. It was believed they would allow his limbs to begin growing straight and strong. And these tightly wound strips of linen are an umbrage of the way the body of Jesus, after his crucifixion and death for us sinners, was wrapped in strips of linen (Matthew 27:59).

The crèche is controversial when we see how it speaks of our desperate need for God, that he should stoop to such condescension, becoming a vulnerable baby in the care of two teenagers, alone in a stable. It shows the depth of our sinfulness, that God should stoop to the dirt of the stable floor. The crèche portends a cross, which would be the only means for the forgiveness of our sins and being made right with Holy God. Our salvation would not come by means of human power and deliverance, but by the weakness of a Savior who would die for us a shameful death.

The crèches that are displayed at Christmastime are seasonal things entirely. We expect them to be removed by the first week of the New Year, boxed up and stored away. In fact, should a crèche be allowed to remain on display much after the first week in January, there would probably be a public outcry that the crèche has overstayed its welcome.

The eternal Son of God came to a world that basically was unwelcoming to him. In John's gospel we read: "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." And even during his public ministry Jesus expressed this rejection and his being alone in the world: "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58). Simply put, the world basically ignores Jesus, being oblivious to the honor due to him and our absolute dependence on him for meaning in life and readiness to face eternity.

When people speak of the Christmas spirit they are referring to a seasonal mood that makes some people feel a bit more sentimental than at other times of the year. It's almost a cultural thing to be more generous at Christmastime, so we're more likely to contribute to local charities, which is a good thing. And because the culture and commercial world tell us this is the season to be merry and generous, the lonely are most likely to fall into depression. The Christmas holidays can be the worst time of the year for depression and even suicide attempts. Christmastime is also the season of the highest consumption and abuse of alcohol, perhaps in an attempt to produce merriment or to alleviate the pain of disappointment. Obviously, the difference Christ makes in our lives is far different from a seasonal spirit. Christmas crèches can be controversial, and in fact, so should they be. We face a controversial decision.

Years ago In Longview, Texas, the First Baptist Church had a living crèche, a live Nativity scene. Each evening during the Christmas Season the church had volunteers to stand in the crèche as Mary and Joseph, holding probably a life-like baby doll, representing the Baby Jesus. It was on December 3<sup>rd</sup> that the pastor of the church, Charles Holland, while walking toward the church building in 32 degree (make that zero Celsius) weather, heard a cry from the manger in the church yard. At first he thought someone had added a sound recording to the crèche. To his utter amazement, he discovered that someone, probably a desperate young woman, had abandoned her child, and left him in a cardboard box under the Nativity crèche, wrapped in a crib sheet and lying on a pillow. Said Holland, "I was absolutely awestruck" to discover "the most beautiful, tiny, baby boy." Inside of the box on a scrap of paper was a note which read, "I'm Timothy. Please take care of me." And so, Timothy Christmas was taken to the church nursery, cleaned, clothed, taken to the local hospital and taken eventually to a foster home. Charles Holland noted that God used this experience to vividly remind the people of the way Christ entered a dark and hostile world, unwelcome, even unwanted and opposed (From *The Baptist Standard*, Texas, USA, December 12, 1979).

Christ has come to us. You and I this Christmas can't ignore the Christ of the crèche, the cross and who now wears a kingly crown. To do so is to reject him. But to receive him will change your life, not just at Christmastime, but forever. How controversial is that?

