

## CONFRONTING CULTURAL CONTROVERSIES 1: **“REMOVING CHRIST FROM CHRISTMAS”**

This morning I'm going to launch a new series that will span into next year, well into next year. I have for some time wanted to preach about some of the more controversial issues facing the aspiring Christian; in what seems to be, becoming a more and more secular cultural. I thought to begin after the State of the Church address on Jan. 1, but recent developments regarding the whole Christmas Holiday verses Solstice Celebration has pushed up the start date...and pushed my 'preaching buttons' if you will!

We have all heard of some of the more recent and increasingly insidious attempts to completely secularize our cultural understanding and celebrations of one of the two most revered 'Holy Days' celebrated by Christians. Christmas and Easter. If the secularists, atheists, agnostics and their most verbal mouthpieces, the ACLU were really smart, they'd more productively spend their time tackling Easter than Christmas, because celebrating Jesus' birth is way more innocent, and far less impactful than recognizing the profound and eternal consequences his death and resurrection have made in the history of the world. It's important that Jesus was born, don't get me wrong, but it is more important that he lived, died, and most important of all that he was raised from the Dead and lives forevermore; offering eternal life to all who will accept and believe in Him! Amen?

That being said, this series will not be just my attempt to point out everything wrong in our society and culture, but to try to help us as wannabe followers of Jesus who wish to live authentic and meaningful Christian lives in the midst of this secular society in which we find ourselves, to do so. There is plenty wrong with our society...but the truth be told...there is plenty wrong inside our seemingly safe church walls too...if the truth be told.

We as Christians, and especially we as Christian Churches are not so perfect, and have been less than circumspect in our attitudes, behaviors, and our actions relating to our society, our culture and our larger world. We sometimes must look like ostriches, with our heads buried in our Bibles or bellybuttons, occasionally appearing to drop some bomb of judgments and condemnation, when what Jesus would do...looks as foreign to what we do...as Yoda does to Superman! Whatever attempts to analyze and critically explore our culture must be undertaken with a humble attitude that we as Christians have been part of the problem...if the truth be told!

If we Christians had been as faithful as Jesus instructed us to be; over these past 2000 years, the preaching of this series might not be necessary or helpful. But because we haven't, and because of where we find ourselves today, and because I have hope that this group gathered in front of me today might positively impact our immediate culture and community; I hope this group of messages might help us recall, remember, and respond to our God inspired mandate to "Be in the world, while not being part of the world."

I'm sure some of you have been following the recent decisions that many retail stores have made about the official greetings that will be employed in their stores, and the use of non-offensive secular sayings in their advertising campaigns this 'holiday season', and how some other stores have forbidden the Salvation Army Bell Ringers from ringing their fund raising bells outside their doors. Bill O'Reilly on FOX News has been covering this phenomena for the past couple weeks. I discovered an interesting poem on his website this week that encapsulates the current dilemma; let me share it with you, and then we'll get to work.

"Way back in 1822 Clement Clarke Moore wrote a poem called "'Twas the Night Before Christmas," which was first published in the New York Sentinel Journal. Moore, the son of the New York Bishop who had presided at George Washington's inauguration, had no idea his verse would become world famous, beloved by people everywhere.

But because there is mention of a certain "Saint Nicholas" in the poem it may, alas, have to be revised in order not to offend Americans who don't believe in saints or even Christmas for that matter. We cannot be having any exclusionary poems now, can we? So with apologies to Clement Moore and everybody else, I (Bill O'Reilly) humbly submit this updated poem for your consideration:

'Twas the night before Solstice, and all through the land  
the ACLU was watching to keep things in hand.  
The children were nestled all snug in their beds,  
while forces kept Christmas out of their heads.

When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,  
I sprang from my bed and heard desperate chatter.  
Someone had seen my manger display,  
And wailed very loudly - go away, go away.

How could I be so crass, so utterly wrong  
To show the infant Jesus and sing him a song?

And then, in a twinkling, I heard on the roof  
An ACLU lawyer, looking stern and aloof.  
No manger! No caroling! he said with a snort,  
And if you don't comply immediately, I'll take you to court!

He was chubby and plump, a right surly old elf,  
And I laughed when I saw him in spite of myself.  
He dallied no more, but went straight to his phone  
Lamenting the manger, in a most pitiful moan.

But I in the spirit, said nothing unkind  
Christmas is forgiveness whatever you find.  
A wink of his eye and a twist of his head,  
Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread.

Christmas will survive, the folks will demand it,  
Even if secular lawyers will not understand it.  
Then I heard him exclaim, as he drove out of sight,  
Happy Solstice to all, and to all a good night!

Now, I don't claim that Bill O'Reilly has the fairest, finest, or final word on anything, but I am proud to stand and deliver to you from the One who does! I am also indebted to Bob Duffett, our DWU President/Baptist Preacher of last week for inspiring me with one verse from his text, that I wish to apply to my own message this morning. Let's hear it again.

*"In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it."* John 1: 1-5

This simple text contains the most profound truth we so desperately need to hear regarding our hand-wringing, faith-shattering, mind-numbingly stupid debate over singing Christmas Carols in public schools, placing nativity scenes on public property, or saying Merry Christmas at Wal-Mart! *"The light shines in the darkness...and the darkness can never extinguish it."* I spent a good deal of time trying to discover the exact meaning of that word translated 'extinguish' in this verse. My discovery was interesting. It is a word with inexact definitions that range from *'can never extinguish it'*, to *'couldn't put it out,'* to *the darkness has never overpowered it or absorbed it or appropriated it, and is unreceptive to it,'* It has also been translated: *'the darkness could not understand it, comprehend it, could not apprehend it, and can not put it out.'* Do you see the point?

Many sincere secular people are making decisions to withdraw or withhold explicit references to Christ this Christmas season with all good intention not to be offensive to those who do not share our faith, and that has caused some others among us, interesting levels of offense in the process. And I also recognize that there are some groups and individuals who just plain despise anything that has blatantly or implicitly to do with Jesus; and who work hard to remove all references/reminders/symbols and even words that might make any intelligent person think that there might actually be a God.

But is our offense rightly placed, boycotting certain retailers, avoiding certain businesses, supporting Bill O'Reilly, condemning certain groups and individuals? I don't think so!

I think Jesus expects something different, something better from His followers. I'm tired of Christians being known just for what they're against! I want to be known for what I'm FOR! Jesus spent a good deal of time reminding us that He is the light of the world...and so are we. And what did he say...? That light cannot be extinguished, understood, or comprehended by the darkness. I know we live in a world that often looks extremely dark. But did you know that the darker the darkness, the brighter one candle will shine? You don't believe me; show up here on Dec. 24<sup>th</sup> about 5pm. Jesus went to great lengths in this very gospel to help people remember that we would always be in a battle with the evil powers of this world, why; because the world hated him, and thus hates his followers. But he also reminded them (US) that our purpose in the world was not to hate, ignore, despise, reject, demonize, demonstrate against, boycott the world, but to love it, and redeem it. Listen:

*"I have given them your word. And the world hates them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. They do not belong to this world any more than I do...I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one – as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me...I am in them and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me." John 17: 14-16, 20-21, 23*

I can hardly believe how far we have come. Taking Christ out of Christmas is a secular tragedy, but let's not forget the world is not our enemy, it is our mission field. And let's not forget...the darkness will never be able to 'apprehend' or 'extinguish the light'. Refusing to shop at Wal-Mart till Dec. 26<sup>th</sup> ain't going hurt Wal-Mart.

Being greeted at the door with a jolly “Happy Holiday” isn’t going to diminish my celebration of Jesus’ birth one bit! In fact, it might prompt an opportunity to return a “Merry Christmas – Jesus loves you, you know,” instead!

Have a Merry CHRIST-MASS, a Happy HOLY DAY, a special Winter Solstice, and A BLESSED New Year. Remember, it might be dark outside, and getting darker, but the light inside...inside here, can never be extinguished...so let your lights shine before all the world! Amen

## CONFRONTING CULTURAL CONTROVERSIES 1: **“REMOVING CHRIST FROM CHRISTMAS”**

*“In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.” John 1: 1-5*

*“I have given them your word. And the world hates them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. They do not belong to this world any more than I do...I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one – as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me...I am in them and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me.” John 17: 14-16, 20-21, 23*