

A cartoon I saw might explain the feelings a lot of Americans have toward Christmas. It shows two homes decorated for Christmas. One has lights everywhere. There is also a large plastic snowman in the yard, a Santa on top of the roof, and a flashing sign in the front yard that says, “Merry Xmas!” It would make the Griswold’s proud. The other home has a simple illuminated nativity scene in the yard. The couple from the first house was looking out their window at the nativity scene in their neighbor’s yard and said: “Some people have to inject religion into everything.”

Is it even possible to have a non-offensive Christmas? The whole point of Christmas is that God came down to get in our faces and stake his claim to the world and his claim to our lives. In a culture that is increasingly secularized, there are many people who haven’t got a clue what Christmas is about. A friend of mine gave a Bible to someone who was going through a difficult time. The person was at a real low point in their life, but in all that time there was never any consideration of turning to God or an attempt to give their life to God and follow him. As my friend gave a Bible to this person, and encouraged him to read it, he suggested that he might start by reading the Christmas story, since it was that time of year. The man looked at him with real surprise and said: “You mean the Christmas story is in the Bible?”

For those of us who know the Christmas story and have read and heard the Christmas story many times, it seems incredible that someone would not know something that basic. But there is a growing ignorance of spiritual things in our culture as we attempt to separate our lives from any contact with, or reference to, God. We are supposed to celebrate Christmas in America, but it seems we are not supposed to remember why.

And we find that Christ is just as unwelcome in our world today as he was when he was born. People are still offended at him. People still reject him. People still try to forget him and ignore his presence. It is easier to just pretend that he never came and does not exist. Christmas cards are decorated with trees,

birds, candles, snow, everything but Christ. Their message carefully avoids any mention of the One whom Christmas is all about.

Don't you want to ask the secular world the question: "*What are you so afraid of?*" I do. There doesn't seem to be this kind of reaction to the story and life of any other religious leader in the world. Why so much hostility toward Jesus? The answer is because the story is *true*, and the world has always understood that Christ is dangerous. He is not just a religious leader among many, he is the *One and Only* (as John's Gospel calls him) Son of God. He is unique. He is Emmanuel—God who came to us in human form. And to recognize that means that everything must be different. It means that God is in search of me and that I have a responsibility toward him. It means that God has a claim upon my life, and that will determine how I am to think, act and live. It means that I can no longer live just for myself because I am obligated to live for God. It means I must recognize a higher authority than myself and surrender to that authority. That is what makes the world afraid. This is why the scripture says, "*He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him*" (John 1:10-11).

Verses 10 & 11 are saying he was rejected. By themselves, these two verses are two of the saddest in all the Bible. Verse 10 declares that the Creator came into the world he created and yet the world did not recognize him. The world that he made (v. 3) did not know its Creator. Imagine. Notice John's 3-fold use of the word "world" in this verse: He was in the world, he made the world, yet the world did not even recognize him. "*Did not recognize*" carries the meaning that they did not embrace him. They did not know him and love him. Instead, they rejected him with indifference. The world missed its great opportunity.

Even sadder is verse 11 where we discover that he came unto his own people, and they did not receive him. Not only did the anonymous world as a whole reject him, but even the people he knew rejected him. The folks back home rejected him too. He did not come as a stranger or alien. He came to his own. They should have recognized him, yet they did not receive him. It is one thing

to be rejected by those who do not know you; it is something else to come to your own people and be rejected by them too. They turn their backs on you. They do not believe in you. He came unto his own, and they received him not. He was rejected by his own people.

The General Electric company once ran an ad that raised the question, “What was Thomas Edison’s biggest blunder?” The ad then reveals that Edison rejected the theory of alternating current developed by Charles Steinmetz. The ad then concludes by stating that when Steinmetz was immigrating to this country, he was nearly refused admission at Ellis Island. One of the men most responsible for the electrification of America was nearly turned away before he got started. That would have been a great tragedy indeed, but a spiritually greater tragedy takes place all the time as people turn away Jesus the Light of the world. They reject their own Creator. The true Light is rejected.

But then...verses 12 & 13 say he was received. By themselves verses 10-11 would look very grim, but verses 12-13 informs us that there is a remnant of those who believe. The end of the story is not the tragedy of rejection but the grace of acceptance. While the majority do indeed reject Jesus, there are some that believe. Those who believe are granted the privilege to join the family. They are brought into God’s family through a new birth.

John states in these verses what the new birth is *not*: Not of *natural descent*; that means it is not by inheritance, not by human ancestry. You cannot get into the family of God by being raised in a Christian family. New birth is not of blood. As I’ve said before, “*God has no grandchildren!*” Not of *human decision*; it is not by determining to live as a Christian or live a good life that one becomes a Christian. You cannot make yourself a Christian. It is not merely positive thinking or clean living that makes you a Christian. It is not by the will of the flesh, but by the new birth. Or of the will of man; it is not the efforts of others that make you a Christian.

No pastor, priest, bishop, or pope can make you a Christian. It is not by the will of others. To be born of God, to have a new origin from God, is the result of

God's gift of life made possible to those who receive him. It does not come because of human relationships, achievements, or determinations. It is a gift of grace. We become a Christian by the will of God. Becoming a Christian is not an external act but an internal embracing of Jesus—an illumination of the darkened soul of sinful humanity. And we are invited to receive him.

Ron Hutchcraft tells the story of Harold. Harold wanted to be in the annual Christmas play which was always a big production in his town. But Harold couldn't always keep up with the other students in his class. The directors of the children's play did not want to hurt Harold's feelings, but they were worried about whether he could handle a part. They finally decided to give him the part of the Inn Keeper. All he had to say was, "I'm sorry, there is no room at the Inn." Well, the night of the big play came, and the church was packed. At the precise moment Mary and Joseph came and knocked on the Inn's door. The whole village of Bethlehem shook as Harold tried to open the cardboard door to the Inn which was stuck. At last, he got the door open, and the pitiful young couple stood there looking all too real to Harold, but with a little coaching he blurted out the words: "I'm sorry, all the rooms are full. There's no room for you here." The couple turned sorrowfully away and began to walk off stage when suddenly the door of the Inn swung open again, and Harold ran up to the couple and said in a loud voice so that everyone could hear, "Wait a minute. Come back. You can have my room." It was an absolutely wonderful addition to the play, even though it wasn't part of the script.

The world has rejected the Son of God, but some have received him. Many were not even interested enough to provide room for the Savior, but we don't have to follow the script, either. We can give him room—room in our hearts.

I pray that all of us will make room today. Amen.