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The Necessity of Christmas

A few years ago I visited a mega church to see their Christmas pageant. The pageant was all one would expect from a church with over 1,000 members and a multi-million dollar annual budget.

At the end of the play they decided to make sure that we all new why Jesus had been born, so they added to the story a graphic final scene of Jesus' crucifixion. The sight of our Lord's death certainly put the brakes on the Christmas spirit for that evening.

It felt wrong when I experienced it but I couldn't say why. Now I know why. Behind their artistic decision was a clear theological perspective. It's what I've come to call the "Jesus was born to die" theology. In this view the Father's plan was to provide his Son as a perfect sacrifice to appease his wrath against human sin and therefore make it possible for those who really, truly believe to have forgiveness.

Two problems: First of all, the scripture says the Father's plan was the adoption of humanity as his children (Eph. 1:1-5). The Father didn't create us so he could forgive us of sin. He created us so he could adopt us as his children. The forgiveness of sin is just one obstacle the Father overcomes in the fulfillment of his plan.

Second of all, Jesus says the Father doesn't want sacrifice (Matt. 9:13, 12:7). He's not some blood thirsty ogre who only forgives if someone suffers. He's our Dad and he wants us to know and understand that. Jesus put our sinful flesh to death so it would stop blinding us to the truth about his Father and our son-ship. (Col. 2:13).

So Jesus was born to seal our adoption. St. Irenaeus says that he became what we are so that we could become what he is. St. Peter calls it becoming partakers of the Divine Nature (2 Peter 1:4). He wasn't born to die, he was born to live; to live forever in humanity so that humanity could live forever in and with him.

That means that the Son would have become flesh whether Adam and Eve sinned or not. Adoption was the plan from the beginning of the world and therefore the Son was going to be born into human flesh no matter what kind of flesh that turned out to be. Christmas is not just the Son becoming flesh so he could twiddle his thumbs for 33 years waiting to be killed. Christmas is an absolutely necessary step in the plan of God: it is the union of the Trinity with humanity.

Adam's sin made the Son's incarnation a crucifixory experience but Christmas was destined to be celebrated whether the world fell or not. Now I know why my soul was so troubled at the end of that pageant. The beautiful necessity of Christmas is not our sin, it is the necessity of the Father's passionate heart for our adoption.

~ Jonathan Stepp