

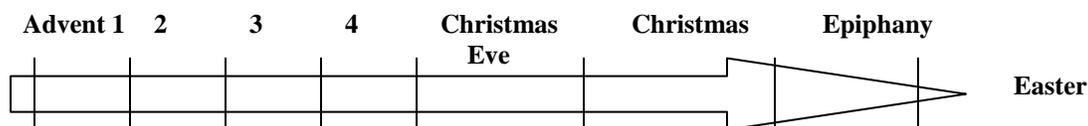
# This Is the Christ Postmodern People Need to Hear About

By Thomas G. Bandy  
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Christmas is the pivot on which the spiritual lives of postmodern people turn. They may approach it sentimentally, mystically, philosophically, or even commercially. They may celebrate it, expectantly, thankfully, generously, or selfishly. The feelings it engenders may be associated most readily with snow, colorful parties, cherubic children's choirs, or even old reruns of *White Christmas* and *A Christmas Carol* (original non-colored version, of course). The one thing you can be sure about is that nobody except the clergy and a handful of diehard Christendom church veterans make any connection between Christmas as the rest of the so-called "Christian Year".

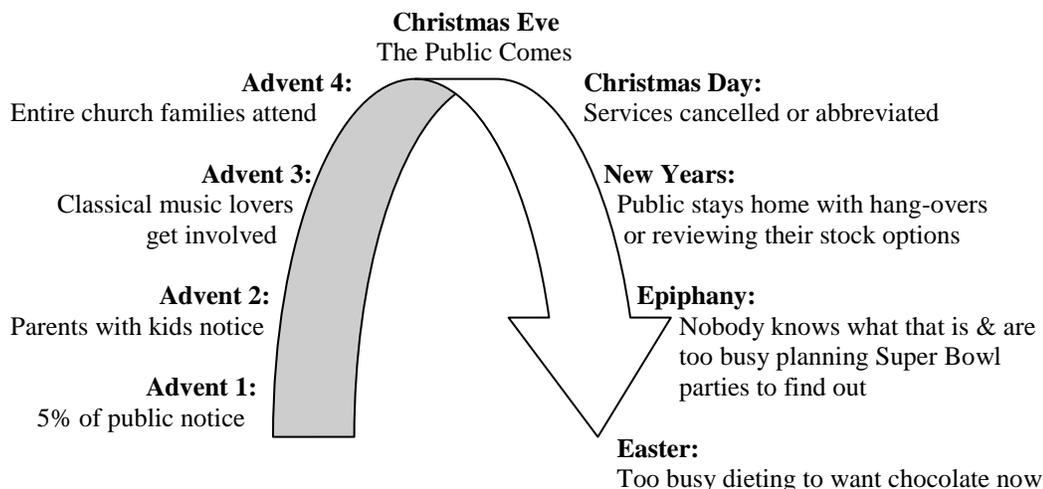
Modern Christendom clergy will do their best to educate and exposit, or chide and chasten, the public about the "true meaning of Christmas", but they live in the illusion that they have 365 days to do it. Or, in these latter days of church decline and public indifference, they live in the illusion that they at least have about six weeks including advent and the first part of epiphany to tell the Christmas story. Therefore, modern church leaders make a strategic error. They fail to recognize the crucial significance of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day as the pivot on which the entire church program turns.

Modern Christendom church planners assume the public will give the church fairly consistent attention for about six weeks.



Therefore, the church begins with advent hymns (no traditional carols yet, please!) and somewhat obscure lectionary texts vaguely describing a coming Messiah in metaphors nobody (except presumably the clergy, some seminary professors, and random archbishops) really understand. Christmas Eve services assume the attendees have acquired a wealth of knowledge from the past four weeks. The church can afford to cancel Christmas day services as a concession to opening presents, and anticipates that the same attendees will continue to come to services to learn about the Magi, the flight into Egypt, the massacre of the innocents, and the boy Jesus in the Temple.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way anymore. In the postmodern and post Christendom world, public interest in Christmas rapidly rises to literally a fever pitch ... and just as rapidly subsides into indifference. The church has a brief window of opportunity to communicate a brief, clear, life-transforming message that will change the lifestyles of a spiritually hungry, institutionally alienated public.



The fact is that unless the spiritually hungry, institutionally alienated public are profoundly and decisively presented with an experience with Jesus Christ on Christmas Eve, there is little chance of getting their attention until, perhaps, Valentines Day. Indeed, even veteran church people only seem prepared to admit that they are pregnant with the potentialities of God for the 12 days preceding and including Christmas Eve. Youthful singles, elderly singles, childless couples, and people who do *not* like classical music or old fashioned churchy hymns don't really get on board the "Christmas Train" until the Sunday before Christmas. (That's about 90% of the public). Once Christmas is over, even the veteran church people are burned out having invested all their energy into repeating historic traditions and re-living old memories. They are now looking forward to the dreaded annual meeting. The only "magi" on their radar screen are the "magicians" who will make last year's operating deficit look good. The "flight into Egypt" has been replaced by the "flight to Florida or Arizona"; the "massacre of the innocents" is now associated with filling out nominations to the official board, and "the boy Jesus in the Temple" has become a matter of recruiting grudging 16 year-olds to begin catechism lessons.

It has got to change. Surrender Christendom. Give up the illusion that the public, and even your own church people, will give you six weeks to unpack the power of Christmas. And unpack you must ... powerfully, experientially, and urgently ... because time is not on your side.

If Christmas is the pivot on which the lives of postmodern people turn, then Colossians 1:19 and 20 are the pivotal verses on which worship planning for Christmas turns.

*For in him (Jesus) all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,  
and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,  
whether on earth or in heaven,  
by making peace through the blood of his cross. (NRSV)*

That's it. Let go of all the other lectionary texts, and preach on that only every worship service throughout December ... and especially on Christmas Eve. Tell the stories of the birth of Jesus, but make this passage the not-so-hidden foundation. Sing the carols of Christmas, but make these two verses the constant refrain.

Postmodern people long to hear about *this* kind of Jesus. This Jesus was born, not for religious insiders and their children, but for them and their adopted children through their spouse's fifth marriage. This is the Jesus in whom the whole fullness of God ... however anybody wants to define that universe of blessing ... was pleased to dwell. Exactly how the whole fullness of God could be packed into a human being is not really an issue postmodern people worry about. They don't require rational explanations and complex philosophies. They just need to know it ... to experience it ... to have the confidence to surrender their lifestyles to it.

Postmodern people don't need all the theology. They just need to experience the touch of the incarnate God. They need to experience this remarkable Jesus. If they want to, they'll think it through later. Right now ... this Christmas Eve ... at this pivotal moment of the year when people are more susceptible to life-changing experiences that at any other time ... they just need to glimpse the fullness of God. If it takes rock music, do it. If you have to replace the carefully guarded liturgical traditions of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to do it, do it. On the other hand, if you have to revive the long forgotten liturgical traditions of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century to do it, then do that. Your veteran church folks may be puzzled, or even irate. So what? Is the incarnation for their enjoyment or for the world's transformation? Has the Good Shepherd come to spend all his time with the found or the lost? Who is Christmas for, anyway?

- The Christmas Jesus is for the people with a deep longing to be changed ... to be different ... to be other than selves for whom they are subtly, perpetually ashamed every day.
- The Christmas Jesus is for the people with a deep longing to be whole ... to be healed ... to recover from the physical, emotional, mental, relational, or spiritual brokenness which handicaps them every day.
- The Christmas Jesus is for people with a deep longing to be free ... to be liberated ... to escape from the self-destructive behavior patterns that they have chronically denied ... or from the

abusive behavior patterns that has robbed life of meaning every day of their existence and marketing gurus, corporate giants, and political powers chronically deny.

- The Christmas Jesus is for people with a deep longing for mentors ... for spiritual guides ... for somebody with absolute integrity and pure insight to guide them through the ethical ambiguities that they face every day.
- The Christmas Jesus is for people with a deep longing for vindication ... who are victims ... who have been helpless before the personal intimidation and derision of bad people and do-gooders alike, and who long to feel self-esteem again every time they awaken to a new day.
- The Christmas Jesus is for people with a deep longing to fulfill their destiny in the midst of a renewed and refreshed creation ... who want to take responsibility for themselves and for creation ... and who want to feel the personal satisfaction of hearing somebody cosmic say *Well done, good and faithful servant!*

That is the kind of incarnate God the public wants to hear about. More than this, that is the kind of incarnate God the public wants to experience in their hearts, in their lives, and in their lifestyles.

It amazes me how Christendom churches so often fail to recognize the urgency and opportunity of this pivotal moment of the year for postmodern people. Worship leaders say *Well here we are at this time of year again* or *Let's celebrate a good old-fashioned Christmas!* They waste time futilely trying to convince people that Advent is the *real* start of the year. All the while, they miss the opportunity of many lifetimes to communicate the fullness of the Gospel in a single, pithy, powerful moment.

- No clergy are prepared to engage non-member seekers in earnest conversation, because they are exhausted visiting all the non-resident members;
- No choirs are prepared to learn new, relevant music because they are too busy rehearsing old traditional music;
- No laity are prepared to follow-up the visit of a stranger on Christmas Eve with a friendly visit on Christmas Day, because they are too busy opening presents with their families;

Churches are unprepared for strangers ... on the one evening of the year when strangers are most likely going to come to church. They are preoccupied with themselves and their little customs, and have little time or attention to spare for Bob and Sally (Roberto and Maria, or whomever) and their deepest yearnings. They are obsessed with watching their kids sing and their grandparents smile, with little energy to spare to observe strangers mute because they don't even know the words, or singles frown because they are all alone in the world.

Church leaders need to waken to the urgency of the postmodern world. You won't have this rare, incredible opportunity of Christmas for much longer. Those strangers, who came last year, won't come back next year. The fire of spiritual expectation that burned bright this year will diminish next year. The interest in Christianity that sparked their attendance this December, if unaddressed, will shift to some other religion next year. The publics are walking away from the church even as the Christmas Eves and Christmas Days come and go. Why? Because the truth is that they are not satisfied with old-fashioned Christmases. They long to experience an incarnate God. You won't have this opportunity much longer.

The key question you have to answer right now about Christmas is this: *Who is Christmas for?* Christendom churches forever answer that question incorrectly ... and unbiblically. They are forever saying:

*Christmas is for children.*  
*Christmas is for families.*  
*Christmas is for choirs.*  
*Christmas is for church members.*  
*Christmas is for believers.*

Biblically speaking, Christmas is not for any of those people. Christmas is for the public. Christmas is for the spiritually hungry, institutionally alienated people who instinctively know that it is of pivotal importance to their lifestyles and eternal salvation, but who are so unfocussed about it that they express their enthusiasm by being sentimental, philosophical, mystical, or just plain commercial about it. Yet they know, deep inside, that it is important. Unless you shift your worship planning, music preparation, and preaching to help them experience Jesus “in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” ... to help *those alienated strangers who never come to church* finally and irrevocably “get it”... your Christmas celebrations will no longer be truly Christian. They’ll just be Christendom.