

To God Alone Be The Glory

Misconception. It's easy to misunderstand things, don't you think? When you were growing up, or when you were new to Christianity and were learning the truths of the Bible for the first time, how often did it happen that you didn't hear something right, or heard it right but took it the wrong way? Just take the first thing I said in this sermon as an example: misconception. Was I talking about a failure to understand? Or was I giving the Virgin Mary a new name, as in Miss Conception? That's not necessarily a bad name for her: Miss Conception. After all she is the only woman in all of history to conceive a child without the aid of a cell from a human father. But perhaps, if Miss Conception were here, she would encourage us to take the spot light off her and shine it on the child that was conceived in her, the child she gave birth to in Bethlehem.

What misconceptions did you have to overcome as you were growing in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ? Linda Buchanan of Hagerstown, MD, wrote in to a magazine called Christian Reader (Kids of the Kingdom), "My son, a kindergartner learning to read, was enjoying the Christmas lights as we drove around checking out the beautiful decorations. Noticing one display in a yard, he promptly spelled out the letters, 'N-O-E-L' and asked what word it was.

"Noel," I replied matter-of-factly. Back came an exasperated response, "But, Mom, if there's no 'L,' then what does it spell?" "Noel," by the way, is a French word which means "a Christmas carol." You can also shout "noel" as a way of communicating your joy. And "noel" can mean the word "Christmas."

Misconceptions occur often among the young. Margaret Nix Windley of Portsmouth, VA reported ("Kids of the Kingdom," Christian Reader), "I did not realize just how closely my 18-month-old toddler had been listening to Christmas carols until she picked the peas off her plate, threw them on the floor, and said with an excited smile, "Peas on Earth."

Now there's a common misconception about Christmas—what God means when he proclaims in the Bible "peace on earth." See if you can pick up on the misconception of "peace on earth" in this story by an old German man. This man fought with the German forces in the First World War. Remember that in the early 1900s warfare was not high tech but hand-to-hand trench warfare. Soldiers lived, fought, and died in trenches full of mud and blood and vermin. In those trenches, dug in the fields of France, enemies could actually hear each other talking. They didn't need satellites to locate the enemy. The enemy was just over there.

One cold, moonlit Christmas Eve, the old German, then a young soldier, crouched in the bottom of a trench.

Because of the annual Christmas truce, the fighting had stopped. Suddenly, from the British trenches a loud, sweet tenor voice began to sing “The Lord Is My Shepherd,” and the sound floated up into the clear, moonlit air.

Then, from the German trenches, a rich baritone voice tuned in, singing the same song, The Lord Is My Shepherd, except auf Deutsch: “Der Herr Ist Mein Hirte.” For a few moments, everybody in both trenches concentrated on the sound of these two invisible singers and the beautiful music and the harmony. The British soldier and the German soldier sang praise to the Lord who was their shepherd. The singing stopped, and the sound slowly died away.

“We huddled in the bottom of our trenches and tried to keep warm until Christmas Day dawned,” the old German soldier remembered. “Early on Christmas morning, some of the British soldiers climbed out of their trenches into the no man’s land,” the area between the two battle lines where no one wanted to go, and few came back from.

One of the British soldiers carried a football (what we would call a soccer ball). (The British hardly went anywhere without taking along two things: their teapots and their footballs.) The English soldiers started kicking around a football, in a pickup game out there in no man’s land, between the trenches.

Soon “Some of the German soldiers climbed out, and England played Germany at football in no man’s land on Christmas Day in the middle of the

battlefield in France during the first World War.” (By the way, England won that game.)

“The next morning,” reported the old German soldier, “the carnage began again, with machine guns and bayonet fighting. Everything was back to normal.” (Stuart Briscoe, “Christmas 365 Days a Year,” Preaching Today, Tape No. 135—adapted.)

Ohhh, and it was such a great story till that last part. Peace on earth. We would all like the fighting to stop. And there’s nothing sinful about longing for peace—all fighting is a result of sin. We were rightly glad when our soldiers came home from Afghanistan and Iraq and Viet Nam and Korea and Germany. In fact, it would be excellent if no nation needed an army. And I think we’d all enjoy getting along within our families and neighborhoods and schools and workplaces. Imagine how nice it would be if no one expressed strong opinions as facts, especially opinions that can’t be backed up by facts. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could all express our feelings without overdoing it and without someone taking the things we say in a way we didn’t mean? Then we’d have peace on earth, right? Perhaps, but still not the “peace on earth” the Bible means.

Because Jesus was born to be our Savior, we can and certainly should strive to be peacemakers. “*Blessed are the peacemakers,*” Jesus taught (Matthew 5). But if we want to understand biblical “peace on earth,” let’s start by

understanding who Jesus Christ is. In the Christmas Day Gospel, John 1:1-14, the Holy Spirit reveals through the evangelist: ¹*In the beginning was the Word.* Before we go any further, it would be good to know who the Word is. Who are we talking about? The Holy Spirit identifies the Word for us at the end of today's Gospel: ¹⁴*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.* Even third graders can figure out that 'the Word' is Jesus.

¹*In the beginning was the Word.* At Creation, when time started, the Son of God was already there. ¹*...and the Word was with God.* So Jesus and God were together, as two different persons. Got that? Okay? Then we're ready for more. ¹*...and the Word was God.* So Jesus was God. "Wait, wait, wait. Pastor Cordes, I thought you just said that Jesus and God are two different persons. Now you're saying that Jesus and God are the same thing." Yes, that's right. You've got it. No misconception. "But that doesn't make sense! How are we to understand 'peace on earth' if we can't understand the Prince of peace?" Well, you're right, it doesn't make sense. But it's still the truth. There are things about God that we just can't fully understand. But with the help of the Holy Spirit, we

can accept God's description of himself as valid and true.

Let's look at more. The Word, Jesus ²*...was with God in the beginning.* ³*Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.* "Wait, wait, wait. I thought the Creed teaches us to say, 'I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.' God the Father is the Creator. Now you're telling me Jesus is the Creator?" Yes, that's right. You've got it. No misconception. Look, just because the Father and the Son are two different persons, like you and I are two different persons, doesn't mean that there is more than one God. Whatever actions the Father takes, such as creating, the Son of God also takes, because there is only one God. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can accept God's description of himself as valid and true.

It really helps if we focus on what Jesus was born to do for us. The Holy Spirit reveals this about Jesus: ⁴*In him was life, and that life was the light of men.* ⁵*The light shines in the darkness.* Jesus came to give us light, to help us see the truth, to help us follow the truth like a path, to help us understand God's love for us so that we may be truly alive—with no misconceptions.

Without the Holy Spirit's help, we could easily misunderstand or reject

Jesus. Others certainly have. ¹⁰*He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.* How do you like that? The creatures not recognizing their Creator! The redeemed not recognizing their Redeemer! ¹¹*He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.* Talk about missing out on “peace on earth.”

Praise be to God! You have not missed out on “peace on earth.” The Holy Spirit declares, ¹²*Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.* That’s what we are: children of God! Are you not amazed at this, fellow children of God? If you are not astounded at your blessed position, perhaps you have forgotten that we used to be enemies toward God. Perhaps you have forgotten, or dismissed, how many times this last week our sinful flesh rose up against God, and we disobeyed him or we made other things more important than God’s Word. We rebels needed to be rescued. So the Word, God’s Son, took on human flesh, setting aside his unlimited greatness, to pursue greatness as one who humbly served. Because Jesus was born, we get to be reborn. We get to be ¹³*children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.* God wanted to have peace with hostile us. So he figured out how we could become his dear children through Jesus.

That is what God wants us to understand when we hear from him about peace on earth. God didn’t want us to have to wait until he takes us to heaven before we have peace. He gave us peace already—peace with him, peace on earth.

We understand “peace on earth” better when we try to understand Jesus, the bringer of peace. Augustine was a pastor in the 300s. He wrote a Christmas poem to help his people understand Jesus better. It’s been translated from Latin into English. It doesn’t rhyme, but all the meaning made it through to English.

Maker of the sun, He is made under the sun.

In the Father He remains, from His mother He goes forth.

Creator of heaven and earth, He was born on earth under heaven.

Unspeakably wise, He is wisely speechless [having just been born].

Filling the world, He lies in a manger.

Ruler of the stars, He nurses at His mother’s bosom.

He is both great in the nature of God, and small in the form of a servant (Leadership, Vol. 8, no. 4).

This is Jesus, the Son of God, the Word, born for you that you might have eternal life through faith in him. No misconception.