

Introduction: Welcome to Engage360 Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.

Dr. Don Payne: Hello, again, and welcome to Engage360 from Denver Seminary. I'm Don Payne, and want to wish you all a Merry Christmas. If you happen to be in the UK Happy Christmas it's time for our Christmas reflection. The 1890s were known in the Western world as the golden age because of the widespread sentiment that humanity had transcended its face on civilized nature. But if anything, the technological progress and other forms of progress launched in the late 19th century provided the means for humanity to accelerate its destructive nature. In 1914, the bloodiest war in human history was underway. It came to be called eventually the Great War, but many optimistically referred to it as the war to end all Wars. History, eventually labeled that War World war one, because as we all know, it was followed just over 20 years later by a conflict of similar scale and arguably even worse atrocities.

That great war did not come remotely close to ending such human conflicts and carnage. Yet on Christmas Eve, 1914, something remarkable occurred in the trenches of Belgium where German, French, British, and Belgian troops for fighting. Military historian, Stanley Weintraub records this gripping story in his book, *The Silent Night, the Story of the World War One Christmas Truce*. It started with the German troops lighting candles on small Christmas trees and singing carols. Their opponents heard them and began singing back before long. The fighting had stopped and troops from both sides left their trenches and joined each other. For Christmas day. They played soccer. They exchanged small tokens. They showed each other pictures of their families. On both sides of the conflict, their superior officers were not pleased with this informal and spontaneous truce because they feared it would dilute the soldier's willingness to resume battle with the intensity needed to win a war.

And sure enough, after the Christmas truce ended, some of the soldiers were intentionally shooting over the heads of their enemies with whom they had enjoyed this Christmas comradeship. Weintraub recounts, however that, and I'll quote him here, like a dream, when it was over men wondered at it and then went on with the grim business at hand. And lots of you probably heard this story elsewhere. If it's new to you, you should pick up a copy of Weintraub's book. It's a fascinating portrayal of how the human heart yearns for peace and people will at times take the most startling and unexpected steps in that direction. It does provide a glimpse of hope, however, slight and fleeting that glimpse is. And frankly it shoves in our faces an example of how no amount of good intentions or seasonal sentiment can rescue us permanently or deeply from our condition.

But we need to put that story and others like it in a bigger context. Here we are again at Christmas, and I've noticed that the rhetoric we hear, particularly during times of widespread unrest and conflict, it intensifies at Christmas. It's the popular sentiment that if we all just learn to love each other and internalize

the true spirit of Christmas, we'll get it all together and we'll be happy. As a global population, we're now more educated, more resourced, more technologically sophisticated than ever. But here we are over a hundred years after that bloodiest of all Wars and after perhaps the bloodiest century in human history. The worse things get in our world, the closer those maladies get to home, two messages seem to dominate. On one hand, we hear refrains of a sort of romanticized utopianism. If we all simply get more love in our hearts, you know, that that rhetoric, and that's what we hear a lot at Christmas.

Isn't it? On the other hand is a radicalized utopianism. That's determined to force all things to be right, whether through resolutions or referenda or revolt. One of these leads to a naive withdrawal and sentimentalize of our world's brokenness. And with the other history is replete with examples of how radical revolution tends to create alternate versions of the same oppression and dehumanization that it aimed to repair in the first place. Either version of this human centered utopianism can leave us pretty much right where we are, but what Christians really celebrate can evoke even deeper and more powerful emotions and is actually even more revolutionary. God showed up in human history in person and set about the redemption of the world through the limitations, the frailty, the suffering, and the scandal of human existence.

It was the strangest message ever in a world that even then, knew only one way to get things done, straightforward power, okay. The incarnation shatters all those perceptions, those preconceptions about how the world is made, right? It strips away all our illusions about our ability to create utopia, either through feel-good romanticism of a, like a worldwide group hug or through the intense and calculated overthrow of oppression. The gospel that summarizes God's redemptive ways through the incarnation actually pulls us into the fray to fight oppression and injustice and to heal brokenness in both large scale and tiny scale ways. But it frees us from both the burden to fix what we cannot fix without being as evil as what we aim to fix.

And it frees us to let God take hold of our efforts and use them, even multiply them in ways we might never be able to detect. It frees us, and it obligates us to be God's agents without having to be God. So I'm about as disgusting a Christmas sentimentalist as you'll ever find anywhere. Every year at this season, I hear Andy Williams saying it's the most wonderful time of the year. And I think, yes, give me another cup of hot chocolate and put another present under the tree, and hang another stocking, and let it snow, let it snow, let it snow. I can't get enough. I even know the strange power of Christmas music because years ago, when my kids were young, we were having a family game night one summer, and it was not going well. There was cheating and denial of the cheating and the evening was turning sour at a record pace.

I got up and put a Christmas CD on our player and the mood changed almost instantly. The entire evening was salvaged, but if we really want to get into the Christmas spirit and stay focused on what it's really all about, I mean, those are the lines we use, right? We have to look at how God chose to redeem the worst.

There is in the world and in each of us, by taking up residence in the weakness and the poverty and the death of our world, nothing about that makes sense to the world. But that is the only path to the redemption of the world and the culmination of that redemption in the kingdom of God, that's utopia. And we can't manufacture that. We can't force that we can't sentimentalize or theorize our way to that. We can actually do something far more potent and liberating. We can follow that model, as we strive for things like more humane legislation.

We can follow that model as we feed the hungry, as we cry out against injustice. And as we find better ways. The incarnation gives us the pathway between sentimentalism and revolution so that we can be fully engaged with the needs of the world, through the redemptive power of the gospel, while trusting God to be God and to orchestrate the kingdom. God will always surprise us with how comes about if we live in that type of courageous, trusting, and engaged manner. And that my friends is a great Christmas gift. On behalf of all of us here at Denver Seminary and all of us here on the production team for Engage360. Thanks for listening. Thanks for praying for us, for supporting us, and thanks for what you do in the world incarnation and Merry Christmas.