

Editorial: What Christmas teaches about power on Earth

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With the 2022 mid-term election approaching and the 2024 campaign not far behind, Christians have reason right now to pay attention to what Christmas teaches us about power. It isn't what we're being told to believe about power.

What we're told to believe is we must accumulate enough earthly power—namely, political and financial—to obtain and keep the upper hand. Otherwise, we are weak, and weak people lose.

Christians who believe that line aren't paying attention to the Christmas story.

[A recent study](#) found 91 percent of Americans celebrate Christmas, while only 22 percent of us feel confident we “accurately could tell the Christmas story found in the Bible from memory.”

Interestingly, [65 percent](#) of Americans identify as Christian, which requires a certain amount of familiarity with the Bible. Apparently, however, many who long have identified as Christian do not have enough familiarity with the Bible to be able to tell one of Christianity's central stories without leaving out details. Might one of those details relate to the role of power?

Power and Jesus' birth

The biblical account of Jesus' birth—the Christmas story—tells us Jesus was born into a poor family. His mother, Mary, was put in an exceedingly compromising position by none other than God. Thankfully for her, God

intervened in her life a second time, telling Joseph not to ditch her.

Mary had no earthly power, and what limited power Joseph had was limited further by God making his standing in the community tenuous. Not an envious place for a poor man to be.

Additionally, Jesus was born among a poor and oppressed people. At the time of his birth, his parents were doing what Rome forced all its subjects to do; they were traveling at their own expense to be ... counted? Yes, they took days away from earning a living, and risked life and limb just to prove they existed.

Once they got where they had to go—that “little town of Bethlehem” in the shadow of power—Jesus’ parents couldn’t buy or impress their way into a better place to sleep or give birth than near a manger. I’ve slept in roach motels better than that.

They welcomed shepherds that night. No dignitaries.

Sometime later, magi arrived. They may have been the only dignitaries to notice Jesus’ birth. Herod, the only other person of note, was alarmed by the magi’s visit and exerted the power Rome allowed him. His order to kill all Jesus’ young peers sent his parents fleeing with Jesus for their lives, and the magi sneaking back home.

No, there’s not much power—earthly power—on Jesus’ side of the Christmas story. In fact, there’s not much earthly power on Jesus’ side of his entire life story. The whole of Jesus’ way ran counter to earthly power. It still does.

Earthly power vs. Jesus’ way

Between Pentecost and when Constantine co-opted the cross of Christ for his own military and political ends—a span of almost 300 years—Christians

understood earthly power was not Jesus' way or, by extension, theirs. As a result, they often were misunderstood, derided, despised and even persecuted.

Ever since Constantine, however, Christians—especially those in the West—have clamored for earthly power, and they clamor still. They clamor now.

The Christ of Christmas never clamored for earthly power. Indeed, *that* Christ, *that* King is the crucified one. Meanwhile, many who identify as *that* Christ's followers are swinging for Malchus' ear (John 18).

Early Christians who took Jesus' teachings seriously knew their power rested in their weakness. The apostle Paul was one such follower of Jesus. His letters could be characterized, in part, as treatises commending human weakness as a portal of God's power.

Today, however, some Christians believe the exact opposite, that their power—earthly power—is God's power. They believe those who do not fight using earthly power to gain and keep earthly power are weak—without power.

Counter to the countering story and life of Jesus, some of these Christians are ready to use force to gain earthly power, and to do so in Jesus' name. Some of them are agreeable to violence even if their political efforts are succeeding.

Peace on Earth, indeed.

A contrary story

Another of Christmas' teachings is that Jesus came to us by way of virginal purity. Is there such purity in earthly power these days? Has there ever been? Yet, earthly power would have us believe it is pure.

Much of earthly power is a pimp looking for bodies to sell, and any body will do. Jesus' way is not through consorting with such power, and to prove the point, Jesus went to the cross. Even without Jesus' example, God's prophets regularly and consistently warned God's people against going to bed with earthly power.

Christians will need to remember this in the days ahead, when they are told they will lose if they do not align with one politician or party. Christians will need to remember the Christ of Christmas and the Christ of the cross when earthly power seeks to seduce them with a different story.

Thankfully, there are Christians serving in powerful places who are mindful of the difference between God's power and earthly power. They know the risks of the latter and seek to honor God with what power they have. This, too, is part of the Bible's story.

Christmas teaches those with eyes to see and ears to hear that *earthly* power is the contradiction. That so many Christians are chasing after earthly power makes one wonder if they have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Christmas teaches Jesus' way is counter to the way of power. Christians, of all people, ought to pay close attention to this lesson from Christmas. Especially this Christmas.

Eric Black is the executive director, publisher and editor of the Baptist Standard. He can be reached at eric.black@baptiststandard.com or on Twitter at [@EricBlackBSP](https://twitter.com/EricBlackBSP).