

Advent Conspiracy

Week 1 ~ Worship Fully

Introduction

Conspiracy = the plot or agreement between people (conspirators) toward a harmful, illegal, or subversive purpose.

Hmm, well we certainly are not looking to do anything harmful or illegal. But subversive? Yes, that fits. The Gospel, the proclamation and demonstration that Jesus Christ is the true and rightful King, is by nature subversive. And as those who desire to be faithful/loyal to King Jesus, I guess that does make us conspirators.

But as we enter the Advent season, what exactly are we conspiring about? It doesn't take much effort or observation to recognize that the entire enterprise surrounding Christmas has taken a decidedly wrong turn (commercialization, consumerism, busyness/hurriedness, etc.) to the point that we miss the mark of celebrating the birth of the King. It begs the question, how would Jesus want us to celebrate His birth?

Interestingly, nowhere in Scripture are we told to celebrate Jesus' birth. (Though we do have precedence of shepherds and magi/wise men who did celebrate/worship the birth of Jesus. Perhaps angels could be added to that list as well.) Historically, the first recorded celebration of Christmas was in AD 336. How Christmas has been celebrated/observed has obviously evolved over the centuries. Today, Christmas is just as much a secular holiday as it is a Christian one, if not more so. But that isn't exactly what we're conspiring against. This is NOT a "Take back Christmas for Christians!" campaign. That's not what this Advent Conspiracy is about.

Rather, we're asking the question, how has/is our accepted/inherited form of celebrating Christmas forming us? With that, are there better ways to celebrate that both honor Jesus more and form us to become more like Him? So we'll be looking at how the secularization and commercialization of Christmas impacts us and exploring how to subvert that for more Kingdom-oriented, Jesus-honoring ways.

We will be joining a movement (Advent Conspiracy) that has been going on since 2006. (You can read more about that, as well as find more resources, here... <https://adventconspiracy.org>)

In our ongoing effort to be disciples/apprentices of Jesus, we first must recognize that, prior to becoming disciples of Jesus, we have already been disciplined by something/someone else. So when Jesus calls us to repent, He's primarily asking us to sever the relationship that has trained/conditioned us thus far and learn a new way of life. Sadly, instead of going through a process of deconstruction and reconstruction (which is admittedly challenging), our tendency is to try to make both ways of life fit together, to somehow syncretize them. This results in a rather pathetic, tame, even corrupt version of Christianity (i.e. the modern Church in the United States, generally speaking). We don't want that, do we?

What exactly have we been disciplined by as modern Americans? Consumerism (among other things, but this is a BIG one). It's our way of life. And nothing brings that into such sharp focus as the holiday season. Americans spend over \$900 billion around Christmas (that's BILLIONS...every year). In contrast, the estimated cost to provide clean water (the lack of which is one of the leading causes of death every year globally) to those who need it is \$20 billion.

Our friends at the Advent Conspiracy put it this way, *"The fastest growing religion in the world is not Islam or Christianity; the symbol of this rising faith is not the star and crescent or the cross but a dollar sign. This expanding belief system is radical consumerism. It promises transcendence, power, pleasure, security, and fulfillment even as it demands complete devotion."* Of chief concern is that we do not recognize consumerism for the idol/idolatry that it is.

Jesus said, *"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."* (Matthew 6:24) Money here is more literally translated as Mammon...the personification and deification of money. Consumerism is just the modern form and ideology of Mammon.

Ironically, for consumerism to work we need to stay perpetually dissatisfied. This keeps us wanting more in the vain attempt to satisfy a longing that money (and the stuff money can buy) can never satisfy. This is how the U.S. economy is designed to run. Not to mention the human cost of all the stuff we buy (the cheap labor of products from other countries and the deplorable working conditions of those people) and the cost to the environment. The world literally cannot handle our rate of consumption. This, my friends, is what we are conspiring to subvert.

With that in mind, we'll be looking specifically at how we can...

- Worship Fully
- Spend Less
- Give More
- Love All

This is WHAT we are conspiring to do and HOW we are subverting the system in order to orient ourselves toward Jesus and point the way for others. (This also outlines for us the four weeks of Advent.) So we begin with...

Worship Fully

When you think or hear the word "worship" what comes to mind? I suspect, for many of us, what comes to mind is a context or setting where worshipful activities happen, like a Sunday service with music, prayer, preaching, offering, etc. While that's all fine and good and can be quite beautiful, powerful, and inspiring, we need to be careful that we don't compartmentalize worship to certain activities done in a certain setting. Worship is something we do with all of our life and all of our being.

Consider what the apostle Paul said in Romans 12:1-2, “*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to **offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.** Do not conform any longer to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will.*” (emphasis added)

Theologian Gregory Beale has a book entitled *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry*. Author James K.A. Smith has a book entitled *You Are What You Love*. Obviously they both unpack what they mean in depth in their books, but the titles alone are enough to give us pause.

When we think of “worship” it is important to consider the following:

- What is the object of my/our worship?
- What is the goal of my/our worship?

As we explore those questions we come face to face with another question: “What do I/we want?” One of the most important things for us to know and be aware of is our wants, our desires, our passions. The reason is, it’s what actually rules and shapes our lives. This is why one of the most important questions we often see Jesus asking people is, “*What do you want?*” He’s inviting people to become aware of, to get in touch with, what is going on deep inside of them. Understanding our deep desires goes a long way in helping us understand what we worship and why we worship.

Sadly, people (unconsciously...I hope) often see “worship” as a means to an end (i.e. if I go to a worship service, God will “bless” me). The posture is often as receiver as opposed to giver. Properly understood, we give/offer worship, while God receives worship. When we worship, whether privately/personally or communally/corporately, we lay ourselves before God; we acknowledge that we are His; we give Him ourselves to form and shape for His purposes. The question is, then, is this what we want, or are we coming to God as a means of fulfilling some other want/desire?

Our friends at Advent Conspiracy put it this way, “*The things we desire are the things we worship. During Advent—a time of conspicuous consumption—we need to look closely at what we want and desire.*” I would add, we need to keep close tabs on our wants/desires all the time, not just during Advent...though Advent does create a nice opportunity to bring them into focus.

Now I want to be clear, the goal is not to eradicate, deny, or suppress our wants/desires, but rather to have our wants/desires reordered, shaped, healed, and channeled properly. Jesus wants us to bring our wants/desires to Him, honestly, authentically, genuinely...not so that He can grant them, but rather to explore and examine them with Him and ultimately to get our wants/desires aligned with His. And what we discover is that He is what we ultimately want. We were created by Him and for Him, and we are only fulfilled when living life WITH Him.

So Jesus is the object of our worship, and the goal is to give ourselves fully to Him so that we can be transformed (healed and reshaped). Anything less will not do. In Matthew 15 Jesus confronts

some of the religious leaders of the day for using worship, piety, religiosity for lesser reasons/wants, and He quotes the prophet Isaiah whom God used to confront the same thing centuries before, “*These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.*” (see Matthew 15:1-9; Isaiah 29:13, emphasis added) Our hearts are where our deepest wants/desires dwell, and yet we are often out of touch with them. The psalmist teaches us something about worship when he writes, “*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*” (Psalm 139:23-24)

The last thing we want to do at Christmas is to miss the point of it all. This is exactly what we risk in the commercialization of Christmas. Questions we may want to keep in front of us throughout Advent are, “*How am I (or how are we) worshiping Jesus through all the busyness, activity, spending, etc.?*” and, “*How is all this forming me/us? What formative effect is this having on me/us?*”

Now, in keeping with the season of Advent, let’s consider some of the familiar characters of the Christmas story and what they have to teach us about worship.

Let’s start with Mary and Joseph. Worship for them looked like having their entire lives turned upside down as they consented to the will of God. Their plans, their dreams, their expectations...all out the window. Additionally, they had to endure the embarrassment of scandal and the relentless ridicule of people for the rest of their lives. From Mary and Joseph we learn that worship is costly, inconvenient, and uncomfortable to say the least.

Angels feature prominently in the Christmas story, delivering divine messages to Mary (Luke 1:26-38), Joseph (Matthew 1:20-21), and the shepherds (Luke 2:8-20). Interestingly, these angelic appearances were not in any of the “religious” places...not in the Temple, not at a synagogue. The angels appeared with BIG news in ordinary places, homes and hillsides. The worshipful responses (consent to the divine will; obedience) also occurred in ordinary places. So we learn that worship can (and should) take place ANYWHERE and is not confined to religiously designated spaces.

We like to schedule our worship, don’t we? Sundays at 9:00 am or 11:00 am. But for the shepherds, worship was an interruption, perhaps even a disruption, to their regularly scheduled programming. They were just minding their own business, when all of a sudden, BAM “*...the glory of the Lord shone around them...*” (Luke 2:9) and “*...a great company of the heavenly host appeared...*” (Luke 2:13). There goes their quiet, uneventful evening. So from the shepherds we learn that worship can be, and often is, spontaneous. Perhaps what we consider “interruptions” are actually divine appointments and opportunities to worship (through serving a neighbor or lending a hand or an ear). Moreover, there’s always a risk of the unpredictable when we go off script. But let’s face it, life is more improv than we’d like to admit.

How about the magi? What can we learn about worship from them? Their worship was risky, costly, and inconvenient. They traveled a great distance (at least 1000 miles, and an estimated three-month journey, one way). Traveling back then was always full of risk. Additionally, they

interacted with King Herod, someone who was not mentally or emotionally stable, inadvertently letting him know that there was a newborn king. That whole situation could have gone much worse for the magi, as evidenced by how it went for boys aged 2 and under in the vicinity of Bethlehem. Furthermore, the magi came bearing costly gifts, which they bestowed upon a poor family. This informs us that worship can/should have an element of redistributing wealth involved.

Worship, in all its multifaceted dimensions, runs completely against the grain of a consumerist society and the practices we've picked up as we live in this society. Worshiping Jesus is a radical thing. Ironically, at Christmas time, when Jesus gets more airplay than any other time of year, the celebration of His birth has actually been co-opted as fuel to keep the economic machine running. How might we, in our desire to worship Him fully, subvert the system that wants to commercialize/commodify our Lord? It probably starts with making sure we're not commodifying Him ourselves...which circles us back to the question, what do you/we want? The answer to that question will determine what and how we worship.

2024 update--As you've probably figured out by now, we did Advent Conspiracy last year. You may be wondering, "*Why are we doing the same thing again this year?*" Good question.

First of all, our hope is that one year later we're all different people, at least a little bit, from who we were last year. So the same material might land differently this year. Second, many of the points and topics we've covered this past year coalesce nicely at Advent. Just reading through this first week of Advent I was struck by ideas that we covered through Sacred Rhythms (the Ruth Haley Barton book we began 2024 with), The Way We Worship series we went through, and the Sermon on the Mount series. So Advent Conspiracy serves as a recap/review of the year in many ways. Lastly, ideally, Advent Conspiracy isn't a "*one and done*" sort of thing, but rather a movement we continue to be a part of.

So I'm simply going to add a few comments—like this—to last year's study guide, and maybe a fresh question or two each week. The updates will be in this font and color so you can distinguish the additions from the original.

Possible Discussion Questions:

- What do you enjoy most about Christmas/the Christmas season? Or, what is your favorite Christmas tradition?
- What stresses you out about Christmas? What do you not enjoy about it? What is your biggest frustration around Christmas?

- How do you feel about Christmas and this time of year in general? How have your thoughts/feelings about Christmas evolved over the years?
- What is your hope and expectation for Advent this year? What will need to happen for those hopes to be realized? (Or, what might get in the way of your hopes and expectations being realized?)
- What do you feel you have choice/control over and what do you feel that you don't have choice/control over?
- Each year, when Christmas is over, do you find yourself more happy and fulfilled or more frustrated and disappointed? Explain.
- Why do we routinely miss the wonder of Christmas? What trap do you fall into during this season? What can you do this year so that you and yours can experience the wonder?
- If you were to start from scratch, back to the drawing board as they say, how would you reimagine the celebration of Jesus' birth?
- What do you want...I mean, really, really, want...at the deepest core of your being? Do you even know? Have you allowed yourself to explore and discover your deepest desires? If so, how is your life ordered in such a way as to fulfill those desires?
- What "lesson" of worship (from the characters of the Christmas story) did you need to be reminded of this year?
- What are your thoughts and feelings about how you/we have been conditioned/formed by the consumerist society/culture we live in? What are some ways (practices) we can utilize in order to be reformed/transformed to a more Kingdom-oriented way?
- Who do you feel most free to love without the price tag of a gift attached during this season? How can you be like that with more people?
- When was the last time you REALLY thought about the incarnation? God became flesh! Why have we allowed ourselves to become numb or callous to this?
- Advent is more than being warm and fuzzy about Christmas; it is about being captivated by a God who enters our human experience and begins the ending of injustice. Obviously we see injustice all around us in this world. All you have to do is turn on CNN for about 12.5 seconds and you will hear about injustice. Drive down the streets and you will see injustice. We must submit to Jesus' lordship and face injustice head on with love, not more anger. God became flesh... love comes down to bring justice. As you consider "worship" how does confronting injustice fit into that?

- Now that we're coming to the end of our year of BECOMING, how are you different today than you were a year ago? To what, specifically, would you attribute to that change? Or, of all that we've covered this past year, what sticks out to you the most?

Soul Training Exercise ~ Naming Our Desires/Longings In Jesus' Presence

Advent is meant to open us up to our deepest longings. Unfortunately we tend to get distracted by all the seasonal hubbub that we are out of touch with what Advent is designed to get us in touch with.

As Ruth Haley Barton asks, *"When was the last time you felt it—your longing that is? Your longing for love, your longing for God, your longing to live your life as it is meant to be lived in God? When was the last time you felt a longing for healing and fundamental change groaning within you?"*

Moreover, longing (deep desire) also brings with it an ache, and we have not really been trained to know what to do with our aches. We tend to try to make them go away—through escape and distraction, by ignoring or denying, or by medicating them away. But we need the ache of our longings. So this week we're going to try and get in touch with them. Jesus invites us to identify/name our desires and longings.

Again from Ruth Haley Barton, *"Settle into a comfortable position that allows you to remain alert. Breathe deeply in this moment as a way of releasing any tension you might be holding and become aware of God's Presence, which is closer than your breath. Allow yourself to enjoy God's Presence in quietness for a few moments...Allow yourself the full realization that you have Jesus' complete attention (because you do!) and hear His question addressed to you: 'What do you want Me to do for you?'...Give this question and its answer all the time it needs...Don't feel as if you have to do anything; simply relish the intimacy and richness that come when we are able to 'be with what is' in God's Presence."*

With all the activities of Advent and Christmas, this may be the most important thing you/we do all season.

(*The excerpts are from Ruth Haley Barton's book *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation*)