

Silent Night – or Not?

By Coty Pinckney, Desiring God Community Church, Charlotte NC, December 30, 2010

This Christmas season, as usual, we sang “Silent Night, Holy Night” by Josef Mohr. This year we also heard Andrew Peterson’s “Labor of Love,” which provocatively begins by contradicting the traditional carol:

*It was not a silent night
There was blood on the ground
You could hear a woman cry
In the alleyways that night
On the streets of David’s town*

So which was it? A silent night? Or a night of crying out, a night of blood and pain?

How should we answer such questions? Our authority cannot be our traditions. Nor should our authority come from confidence in one lyricist or another. Our authority must be Scripture itself, on this matter and on all others to which the Bible speaks.

So what does Scripture say about the day of the birth of Jesus?

Not much, actually. Of the Gospel writers, only Luke tells us anything (note that the wise men in Matthew 2 do not arrive in Jerusalem until sometime “after Jesus was born in Bethlehem”). Luke’s account simply tells us that Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem:

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:6-7)

That night, the angels appear to the shepherds, who then find the newborn King and report what the angels have said.

That’s it. That is the entirety of scriptural revelation about the day Jesus was born.

So was it a silent night or not?

If we read Luke’s account carefully, we notice two points:

- First: Luke does not even tell us that Jesus was born at night. He may have been born during the day, with the angels appearing to the shepherds at night several hours after the birth.
- Second: While Jesus’ conception was miraculous, there is nothing in Scripture to indicate that his birth was anything other than normal. And normal human births include blood and amniotic fluid, the cries of the mother and the cries of the child. In the absence of Scriptural statements to the contrary, it is most likely that Jesus’ birth was by no means silent and peaceful.

So is “Labor of Love” right and “Silent Night” wrong? Should we remove “Silent Night” from our repertoire of Christmas carols?

Consider “Labor of Love” first. This song too includes a number of extrapolations from Scripture that may not be accurate:

- 1) The song refers to the stable. But Scripture does not tell us Jesus was born in a stable, only that he was placed in a manger, a cattle feeding trough. Despite thousands of manger scenes, there may not have been any animals present at Jesus’ birth. Perhaps the place Mary and Joseph were staying had once been

used as a stable, and no longer was, yet still contained a manger; perhaps Joseph carried the manger from a nearby stable into the place they were staying, because it was the right size. We simply do not know.

- 2) Andrew Peterson pictures Joseph and Mary alone at the birth, in the middle of the night, with no midwives present. We have already seen that the birth need not have taken place at night. Furthermore, given the culture of the day, except in an extreme emergency Joseph would not have been present at the birth. Since Joseph had relatives in Bethlehem (he “was of the house and lineage of David,” Luke 2:4), it seems most likely that one or more of his female relatives assisted at the birth.

So “Labor of Love,” while not contradicting Scripture, is probably wrong in some of its depictions.

But what about “Silent Night”? Is this peaceful, quiet setting contrary to Scripture and what we know about normal human births?

I have had the privilege of being present at the births of all six of my children. I would not describe any of those births as peaceful. However, an hour later, once mother and child are cleaned and rested, there has always been a time of wonderful peace and joy. This, I believe, Josef Mohr accurately portrays in “Silent Night.”

Imagine a time in the middle of that Bethlehem night. The shepherds have come and gone. Baby Jesus has fallen asleep and rests on Mary’s breast. This young girl lingers awake, pondering what the shepherds have said, and what Gabriel told her nine months previously. Her fingers stroke her Child’s head. She grasps His fingers, and, lost in wonder, praises God that she can be His handmaiden.

Surely now, once the pain and crying are over, once the excitement of the shepherds is past, there is a silent night. God in the flesh, tender and mild, love’s pure light, sleeps nestled against his young mother.

He was born in pain. There is much pain ahead. But after the labor of love there was indeed a silent night.