

Hillsong, Silent Night and the Danger of Judging by Outward Appearance

Jesus taught that we should “not judge according to appearance, but practice righteous judgment” (John 7:24). We can learn an important lesson about this from an incident that took place late last year concerning Hillsong, Australia’s Christmas presentation.

Along with many others who saw the video on YouTube, I was absolutely appalled by Hillsong’s super-slick, cabaret rendition of Silent Night.

It was the farthest thing you could imagine from the words “Silent night, holy night” and some viewers rightly dubbed it “Unholy Night.”

From the dissonant jazzy sounds to the cabaret dancers, it was nothing less than shockingly irreverent.

Not surprisingly, there were online articles denouncing Hillsong, and friends contacted me, asking me to please write my own article about this travesty.

Because I have no open door to interact directly with Hillsong leaders (despite my attempts to do so in the past), I could only ask myself how in the world they could produce something like this.

To be sure, I have differed with some of Hillsong’s methods and message over the years, but this seemed to go way beyond anything I could imagine, especially since they are famous around the world for their praise and worship.

Obviously, I didn’t have all the facts, but what possible explanation could there be? The whole cabaret arrangement was

atrocious, inexcusable, irreverent, mocking ... The list goes on and on.

Still, I did not want to speak or act without more information or a clear leading from the Lord, and while I was giving the whole matter prayerful consideration, a Twitter follower shared with me a comment made by one of the pastors at Hillsong in Australia.

He explained that this despicable version of Silent Night was designed to be cringeworthy in every way—in other words, it was intended to elicit the kinds of responses that it drew—and it was written and produced to portray Herod's alleged desire to worship the newborn King.

This, then, was meant to be the world's version of Silent Night, which was anything but holy.

The pastor also explained that later in the Christmas play, in adoration of Jesus, Silent Night was sung again, this time the right way, in stark contrast with Herod's version.

Now, you still may not like what Hillsong did, and you still might not agree with their overall methodology, but the great reminder for me was this: I went through every scenario that I could think of, trying to figure out any possible explanation for this travesty, and I could find none.

Yet there was an explanation, and it was one that I had never considered. Honestly, who would have ever thought of it without being told?

In years past, when Nancy and I did more counseling, we would sit with a husband who would explain his side of the story and think to ourselves, "He's obviously in the right. There's no possible way that his wife could explain her way out of this."

And we would rack our brains trying to think of another side to the story, but there was none.

Then, to our surprise, the wife would share an angle that we never could have considered, making us realize that there really were two sides to the story after all.

Of course, there are plenty of things that are black and white, such as when a professing Christian leader announces that he now embraces same-sex “marriage.” That must be confronted and addressed.

There are also times when the indisputable evidence clearly convicts someone of guilt, like stealing money or committing adultery, in which case the “explanation” does not explain away the guilt.

And we are always called to judge whether certain actions or words or practices are biblical or not.

We must use discernment and walk in wisdom, especially with so much foolishness in the body of Christ today, not the least in our charismatic circles.

But the Hillsong “Unholy Night” controversy reminds us that we must be very careful in how we make our judgments, not judging by mere outward appearances but rather judging righteously.

In this case, the outward appearances were damning, but there was more to the story than met the eye.

Again, you might still differ with Hillsong’s Christmas presentation, and you might still take issue with some of their teachings or with their overall approach to ministry. But for those who completely threw them under the bus because of their cabaret version of Silent Night, this should be a cautionary lesson.

It’s a lesson we should all learn well, since we will be judged in the same way that we judge others.

And it’s a lesson I try to remember before I ever write or speak, since it’s far better to wait and be sure than to

launch an unrighteous attack.

Let's make this a teachable moment.