



Reclaiming Christmas: Seeking an Alternative

How can people of faith celebrate Christmas in a way that will bring more joy, peace, and connection to the message of Christ?

Christmas in America

The 2007 Christmas movie *Fred Claus* seems to encapsulate everything that's wrong with Christmas these days. The dysfunctional Claus family can't enjoy their holiday time together; older Claus brother Fred (Vince Vaughn) can't seem to deal with his brother Nick's (Paul Giamatti) success, and their mother (Kathy Bates) can't accept Fred on his own terms, so the tension at the table is unbearable. To prepare for the holiday, there's ridiculous hustle and bustle at the North Pole that makes you wonder if all this seasonal motion and activity are worthwhile. Fred takes on a Christmas travel schedule that seems impossible to manage—the whole world in one night. There's a moral center to the holiday, but it's squishy, almost indefinable (the movie insists that naughty and nice kids should all be rewarded equally, since all kids are nice, really). And the filmmakers, whether consciously or unconsciously, manage to further the common confusion between sacred and secular, actually playing Sinéad O'Connor's haunting version of "Silent Night" during the scenes of children around the globe opening their presents from Santa on Christmas morning.

Silent night. Holy night. Let's open presents!

If you feel that the celebration of Christmas—especially *your* celebration of Christmas—has gotten off track somehow, you're not alone. In the United States and around the world, many people are seeking a Christmas that is more joyful, less harried, and more centered on things that truly matter—family, friends, service, God. While it will be hard and will require conscious effort, it is possible. People have been doing it for years.



The first Christmas was centered on a poor family of Palestinians who had only each other. This baby would become a wonder-working prophet who brought healing to the suffering, food to the hungry, and hope to the hopeless.

But if you also feel like the culture—our culture—is doing its best to make that kind of holiday difficult for you, you're also not alone. Because it's true. As James Tracy points out in the introduction to *Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ, and Culture*, Americans "feel obliged to go through the motions of preparation for what they have been socialized to believe are Yuletide necessities": spending more than they can afford on Christmas gifts that mean little to those who receive them, spending hours they can't spare looking for parking places and shopping, and going into debt that they can't easily get out from under.¹

Critics of our American Christmas celebrations rightly attack the powerful consumerist basis of today's holiday, and many of them say they long for a return to a time when the birth of Christ was the central reason for the season. Unfortunately, that time did not exist: Christmas has always been, as Penne L. Restad notes in *Christmas in America: A History*, "a radically paradoxical mix of both the sacred and the profane."² If we're going to celebrate Christmas in a more meaningful way, we can't simply go back and pluck out a time and a place

TOP 10 THINGS WRONG WITH CHRISTMAS

1. Feeling disappointed—again—by the season
2. Hours spent searching for *the* present for kids or grandkids
3. *Having* to decorate to keep up with the neighbors
4. Feeling alone or alienated
5. Conflicts with the family
6. Insane travel schedules
7. Credit card bills through *next* Christmas
8. Feeling like you have to give *something* or you're a bad person
9. Not enough peace and joy
10. A loss of the sense of the miraculous

where it was all about Jesus. It's going to take a little more work than that.

But it's all going to be worth it.

What Is Christmas, Anyway?

Christmas as we know and celebrate it in the modern West is a relatively recent invention, depending equally on the church; the literary productions of Charles Dickens, Washington Irving, and Clement Moore; and the mercantile establishment, which early on recognized that Christmas was "a source of vast potential wealth."³ So it's worth our reviewing what Christmas has been since the time of Christ so we can see the roots of our current dilemma—and so we can begin seeking an alternative way to treasure the season when we celebrate Christ's birth. (Those interested in details beyond the simplified history that follows should read Restad's *Christmas in America* and the landmark work by Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas*.)

The early church has no tradition of noting Jesus' birth. In the Scriptures that became the normative texts for early Christian communities, the only passage that seems to have any correlation to our current mania for Christmas gift giving is the story about the presentation of ceremonial gifts in honor of the Christ child by the visitors from the East, the "three kings." While you may have heard defenses of holiday gift giving based on this

passage, it's important to note that these gifts are given to the glory of God, not exchanged among members of the family; Mary and Joseph did not fill baby Jesus' stocking with fruit, nuts, and a Game Boy on the first Christmas.

So, the Bible doesn't have much to say about Christmas, neither in the Gospels nor in the Epistles. In fact, for the most part, the early church was not much interested in the nativity of Christ. Its members were more concerned with the question of when Jesus would return than when he was born or even whether it was important to celebrate that birth; early Christians looked down on birthday celebrations as pagan.

But in the third century, as the speedy assurance of the second coming began to fade, some church fathers began taking a more historical view of the faith, and one of the results was that some tried to settle on a date for Jesus' birth. (They weren't very successful.) It wasn't until the fourth century that the church began to celebrate the feast of the Nativity on December 25, and this date was largely chosen for pragmatic rather than scriptural or inspired reasons: in the old Julian calendar, the 25th of December was the winter solstice, when the sun god Mithras was honored with a festival, and December 25 was also smack in the middle of the pagan festival of the Saturnalia. As has been done with Christmas since then in many places, the new Christian festival swept up elements of these pagan festivals (such as the northern Yule festival, later) into its train: feasting, revelry, and even debauchery swirled around the holy day as the church constantly tried to refocus the energies of the faithful away from the secular feasts they had always celebrated and toward the holy one they were supposed to commemorate now.

The observance of Christmas spread throughout the universal church over the next thousand years, although Christmas merriment still tended too far toward secular excess for many in the church. Finally the Puritans struck down the observance of Christmas in England and some of the American colonies. It snuck back into mainstream culture in the nineteenth century through such literary works as Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* and Moore's "The Night before Christmas," and as entrepreneurs including F. W. Woolworth discovered that people would pay lots of money for Christmas gifts, ornaments, and decorations. Santa Claus was elevated

to a secular icon of giving and generosity, the holiday was refocused on gift giving and family celebration, and we were on our way to the Christmas we have today. It's a Christmas with joyful elements, certainly, but it's also a celebration that, as Bill McKibben notes, encourages the year-round American cultural notion "that transcendent joy comes from things" and even sanctifies it by its perceived proximity to Jesus.⁴

If that bothers you, then it's good to know that some folks have seen an out.

Christmas Alternatives

If it seems next to impossible to get off the gift-giving treadmill, you might think first about refocusing your gift giving. You might start by asking that instead of sweaters, ties, and DVDs this year, your family members consider making a donation in your name to a charity in your community (a food bank or homeless shelter, for example) or one that serves the underprivileged internationally (such as Heifer International). Talk with your family about why you're asking for such a gift, and see if they might join you in giving up some of the tangible presents for the intangible but very powerful sense of helping others.

If your family is going to require some weaning from the American tradition, consider giving gifts from the heart, handmade if you have that talent, or shopping in ways that benefit real people instead of the shareholders of multinational conglomerates. Consider crafts from the two-thirds world (what some people call the third world) at Ten Thousand Villages or some other fair-trade store or festival. Many churches, including my home parish, St. David's in Austin, have alternative Christmas festivals that invite fair-trade organizations, nonprofit charities, and social-service agencies to offer gifts for sale and provide opportunities for charitable giving. (You might even consider hosting an alternative Christmas fair in your community, although you'll need several months to prepare for it, so if you're reading this shortly before Christmas, it may need to wait until next year.)

In the spirit of charitable giving, consider volunteering to help those who are alone, underprivileged, or suffering at Christmas time. One of my favorite Christmas memories is serving Christmas dinner to the homeless and needy at the local Salvation Army; another is of my best friend Chris and me gathering funds from our fami-



Christmas has long been a holiday with secular elements so powerful that they sometimes overpower the sacred.

lies to buy some presents and serve a Christmas dinner to a poor family who otherwise would have had nothing. Talk to your family—or if you are alone on Christmas, ask around about opportunities—about how to make someone else's holiday more joyful.

There are lots of ways to enjoy family togetherness that don't necessarily require rapid-fire exchanges of gifts and speedy reunions. Explore some of these possibilities with those you love. And there are likewise many opportunities for more spiritual immersion into the season, beginning with taking Advent seriously as a time of religious preparation, not simply as a countdown to Santa Claus, and continuing with the idea that Christmas (like Easter) is a season, not simply a day. How might we connect with others, with God, with ourselves, in joyful anticipation of the central truth of Christianity, the occasion when God becomes human and lives among us?

McKibben reminds us that Christmas offers us the best chance of the entire year to realize two essential spiritual truths: that what we desire and even acquire will never bring us true happiness, and that true happiness comes only when we place God at the center of our existence. So, he suggests, maybe it would be helpful to us if we think of Christmas being what it really is: a birthday party for the Son of God. Remember, he says, that while you can and should celebrate at a birthday party, you are not the center of attention, and the gifts are not intended for you. Remember also that for Christians, this is the birthday party of all birthday parties, one that should spin us into a different place, not simply into exhaustion: "Christmas is a time for enormous celebration, but also a time for pondering, for reverence, for awe at our sheer good fortune that God sent his only child into our midst."⁵

Maybe now we could begin to treat it that way.

In *Unplug the Christmas Machine: A Complete Guide to Putting Love and Joy Back into the Season*, Jo Robinson and Jean Coppock Staeheli offer a Christmas pledge that sums up what many of us are really looking for:

Believing in the true spirit of Christmas,
I commit myself to

- Remember those people who truly need my gifts
- Express my love in more direct ways than gifts
- Examine my holiday activities in the light of my deepest values
- Be a peacemaker within my circle of family and friends
- Rededicate myself to my spiritual growth⁶

What's Next?

In this session, your leader is asking you to think about your own way of observing the holidays and how those traditions might align more clearly with your priorities for the Christmas season. One book resource that might help you is McKibben's *Hundred Dollar Holiday*, which contains both an inspiring critique of the way we do Christmas and handy suggestions for how we might do it more spiritually and joyfully with those we love. I also recommend Robinson and Staeheli's *Unplug the Christmas Machine*, a workbook and step-by-step guide to a more spiritual Christmas. Both of these books are excellent for Advent preparation, and *Unplug the Christmas Machine* is particularly suited to congregational use in Sunday schools or adult formation classes.

To better discern the beneficial and soul-sapping spiritual messages we receive from our culture, consider a discussion oriented around the essays in *Christmas Unwrapped*

(eds. Richard Horsley and James Tracy) or the section on Christmas movies in chapter 6 of *The Gospel according to Hollywood* by Greg Garrett (author of this lesson), also available in the Reading Room of The Thoughtful Christian (<http://www.thethoughtfulchristian.com>).

For more information on fairly traded gifts or to find a Ten Thousand Villages store near you, visit <http://www.tenthousandvillages.com>. To request a catalog, read more information on Heifer International, or make a donation, go to <http://www.heifer.org>. To learn more about alternative Christmas fairs, see this item from the Episcopal News Service: http://www.episcopalchurch.org/3577_55346_ENG_HTM.htm.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. James Tracy, Introduction to *Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ, and Culture*, ed. Richard Horsley and James Tracy (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 1.
2. Penne L. Restad, *Christmas in America: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3.
3. Bill McKibben, *Hundred Dollar Holiday: The Case for a More Joyful Christmas* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 29.
4. *Ibid.*, 66.
5. *Ibid.*, 66–68.
6. Jo Robinson and Jean Coppock Staeheli, *Unplug the Christmas Machine: A Complete Guide to Putting Love and Joy Back into the Season* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), 13.