

Thoughts on the Celebration of Christmas

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It has become fashionable in Christian circles in the past decade to lament people forgetting the true meaning of Christmas. The battle cry is "Keep Christ in Christmas." The common concern is that materialism and greed have replaced gratitude and giving. Pastors admonish congregations to remember Jesus' Birthday, "the reason for the season." These actions have had little to no effect in America. The beat goes on. Could we be singing the wrong song in our efforts to take Christmas back?

For nonbelievers, there never was a Christ in Christmas so their behavior is to be expected: they behave true to their nature. A dim flame of what George Barna calls "cultural Christianity" does burn for many so they attend a service or mass and try to do something good. Sentimentalism is often the motivation leading to the expectations that are so often dashed in reality as people's relationships and the accumulation of things become the focus and ultimate disappointment on this holiday. Depression is rampant this time of year.

Many believers have succumbed to the sentimentalism and materialism so rampant in the culture. The recognition of Christ being "lost" in Christmas celebration confirms that "the means have become the end" for many. Should we be surprised when, as a whole, the church has lost its saltiness and has become virtually indistinguishable from the world? Should we be surprised that a celebration established by the traditions of men and set on a day of pagan feasting in an effort to Christianize the festivities is instead paganizing the church? We behave true to unsundered parts of our soul, and try to be politically correct as we celebrate, knowing that our attendance at church will be tolerated as long as we keep it out of the public eye.

Too many church leaders recognize this but are satisfied with a verbal spanking of their flock with the obligatory admonitions to take time to remember the baby Jesus, now and every day. We suffer penance of acknowledging our wrong--between carols sung--and are then free to mark the day in ways we choose. The means of celebration have become the end.

Perhaps it is time to remember the Israelites; they, too, got lost in the means--of being God's blessed people--and forgot the intended end--to bless others--as Messiah came to the world through them. They had the Truth living and walking among them and many did not know Him--or receive Him. He wasn't what they expected! They wanted a King who would free them from tyranny immediately, with no strings attached. THIS Messiah was humble and loving, yet firm and just. He spoke of humility for His followers. It meant a personal submission to Who He is, not their expectations. They were not willing.

It seems we, too, do not want to acknowledge Him for Who He is. We have followed the traditions of men and chosen to focus on Jesus' birth; misty-eyed reminiscing about the Baby long enough to feel satisfied that we have honored Him so we can move on to our chosen activities. In the beauty of the hymns and carols of Christmas, is it possible we have lost our focus?

Perhaps it is hard to "Keep Christ in Christmas" for several reasons. Friends, He is no longer a Baby! That Baby is our Lord and Christ, the Risen One, the Ancient of Days Who has conquered sin and death. He IS very much our God, fully in control and having all authority in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

As the chosen people didn't want to receive a humble child grown to manhood, so we don't seem to want a King; especially a King who is coming again soon in all His glory. Perhaps to avoid the danger of sentimentalizing, He never told His followers to remember His birth. He did tell them to remember He is coming back and to grow in Him through the power of His Holy Spirit; to tell the Good News, to make disciples and to watch for His return. THIS Jesus, the Mighty Warrior, the God-Man inspires a little more fear as we recognize that we will need to stand before Him and give an account: for nonbelievers, a question of salvation; for believers, an accounting of how we have used our gifts and served Him.

We'd rather reflect on the little Baby He was for a brief time than the El Shaddai He is for all time.

He's so much, well....*safer* as a Baby than as our King.

Maybe we have also misunderstood His direction to be as little children; the Christmas picture of the innocence of children as they portray the nativity or sing *Away in the Manger* or simply look to us for help. Perhaps we have the mistaken impression that we are to be like children, disdaining to mature in the faith, since we are saved by grace, nothing more is needed. We regret the loss of our childlike innocence and look to children to remind us. We give lip service to the concept, fully recognizing the impracticality of adults being as children. Yet is that the case? No matter how sophisticated we consider ourselves, His ways are not our ways; His thoughts are higher than ours. We could never grow past Him. We don't have to go back to childishness but rather grow into a mature understanding of our childlike weakness and need in the face of His strength.

Fear/awe of God is the beginning of wisdom. Nothing childish about that.

Does Christmas need to be reclaimed? Do we need to be forcibly reminded to celebrate Jesus? Who is He to us--that Baby of 2000 years ago or the Lord of Hosts and our soon-coming King? Perhaps if we consider Who He is today we can put the false battle between secular and Christian celebration of Christmas behind us. We can leave the materialism, greed, disappointment and foolish sentimentality behind and move on to an understanding of where we are now in "*HIS-story*;" awaiting the return in power and glory of the One Who is mighty to save; being in relationship with Jesus as He is now, fully, personally submitted to His perfecting of us as He prepares His Bride for the feast to come--the church victorious.

Now *there* is something to celebrate!