

COVER STORY: Standing Firm in Faith Through the Holidays

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The Light of the world has come! His coming is what we celebrate at Christmas. From the very start, His light drew people who hungered for truth from far and wide.

There has been a lot of discussion about what day of the year Jesus was actually born. The truth is, we may not know the exact day when He was born, but we do know that He was born, He lived, He was crucified and He rose again.

Removing God from Public Display

Statistics say the majority of Americans are favorable to public displays of the Ten Commandments, nativity scenes and other Judeo-Christian and Christmas themes. Yet, it seems there is a minority who are proactively using the letter of the law to coerce the majority to cower to the beliefs of the few, banning any mention of God in public.

Increasingly over the last few decades, there has been an intentional attempt to remove any semblance of Christ, Christianity, even *CHRIST*-mas from the public square. Sadly, over the years we have seen the affect even in the church. There has been a gradual removal of anything deemed offensive to the very few, even at the behest of the majority.

A few years ago, I had the pleasure of meeting and ministering with Stephan Tchividjian, the eldest grandson of Billy Graham. One of the things I remember Stephen saying was, "Rules

without relationship leads to rebellion.” This explains what we see happening more and more in our nation today, as those who have no relationship with the God of the Commandments have rebelled to the point of opposing any representation of Him in the public arena.

You may remember that in 2012, during the National Convention of one of the two major political parties in Orlando, there was a vote to reinstate God back into their party platform because He had been removed. It took three different votes to pass the measure, but even the third time, there was much dissension.

Who ever thought there'd be a struggle in our nation to reinstate God? Wow! The good news is that it doesn't take God three times to force a consensus to reinstate us into His platform. Our triune Holy God is already in agreement with Himself. No confusion there.

The tragic removal of God from the public arena has been seen in many places in various ways. Back In 2004, a judge ruled that a Bible had to be removed from a public display from an old monument in front of the Harris County civil courthouse lawn. The monument and Bible display had been there since 1956 honoring Businessman and Philanthropist, William Mosher. Mosher was honored with a small lighted display case in front of the courthouse for his contributions to the Star of Hope Mission, which has served thousands of homeless, desperate, and destitute individuals and families in the city of Houston throughout the years.

The display, which was maintained by private funds and individual citizens, included a King James Bible, honoring Mosher's faith and love for the Lord, which compelled him to do the work of ministry to others. A judge in 2004 ruled that the Bible must be removed from the display after an individual complained that a Bible displayed on public property was unconstitutional.

In 2011, at the Veterans National Cemetery in Houston, one rogue director censored the language of pastors and chaplains saying that they could not mention God during funerals for veterans. Local veterans and volunteer groups had accused cemetery officials of banning them from using religious speech—including the words Jesus and God, even statements to family like “God Bless you”, during services at the cemetery.

How outrageous! I shudder when I think about how many men and women buried there were people of faith who gave their very lives to defend our freedoms—including the freedom of faith which was now being stripped from them in their final resting place. My grandfather and biological father are both buried in that very cemetery, having served this nation proudly.

Remember the Reason for the Season

Despite many examples of the erosion of the values and freedoms we hold dear, I believe the majority of people in our nation, regardless of their faith, respect and cherish the Christian values and foundations that they have benefited from. People around the world celebrate, in some capacity, the Christmas season, even if they do not truly understand the significance of why they are doing so. That is why it's important for us as the Church to reflect and demonstrate the true meaning, or as the saying goes, “The Reason for the Season.”

We Three Kings, written by John Henry Hopkins Jr in 1857 for a Christmas pageant, is said to be one of the first Christmas carols written in America that became widely popular. It may even be one of your favorite Christmas carols! Scripture, however, does not refer to kings but rather “magi” or “wise men,” and we are not given a headcount as to how many of them there actually were. But we do know they travelled for up to two years, possibly, following a light in the sky that led them to Jesus. And they brought gifts fit for a king.

Nestled in the middle of the Christmas story was the mystery of Jesus' life: Even though He was a king, He was born to die, that we may live.

From the Manger to the Cross

In 2003, we saw the story of the crucifixion minister to thousands throughout the nation and around the world from a surprising source—Hollywood—with the release of Mel Gibson's production of *The Passion of the Christ*. With the movie's graphic depiction of what the suffering Jesus endured for the joy set before Him—our salvation—came a new realization for many of the reality of the crucifixion. For others, the movie generated questions. As the cover of one national magazine boldly inquired, "Did Jesus really have to die?"

Even with the controversy surrounding the graphic violence involved in the scourging and death of Christ, an R rating would not be sufficient to accurately portray the extent of His suffering, from the physical pain of the beatings to the emotional pain and loneliness of betrayal. Crucifixion was a form of capital punishment and considered the most humiliating and brutal way to die. The word *excruciating* did not exist until a word was needed to describe the pain of death by crucifixion.

I remember reading a description of what Jesus most likely went through from a medical perspective, written by the late Dr. C. Truman Davis. Each time I read it, I still get deeply gripped of heart and moved to tears with the revelation of Christ's love and sacrifice for us.

It is impossible to have a strong foundation as a Christian unless we have a revelation of the passion of Christ, the work of the cross, and the power of the Resurrection and how it can transform our lives today. Without that understanding, we are apathetic believers at best. But that revelation changes everything!

In some circles and especially in our western culture, we have heard about the cross so often that the thought of our sins that put Him there does not still break our hearts or ignite a burning passion of gratitude within us. We sometimes take for granted the high cost of love that was displayed upon the Cross for us. We tend to put more focus on “self” rather than fixing our eyes on the Author and Finisher of our faith.

The timeliness of the message of the cross cannot be overstated. We need it more than ever. We need to be rekindled in heart with a renewed revelation of the work of the cross and the Holy Spirit’s power that is available to each of us. From Genesis to Revelation, from the beginning to the closing of scripture, we read of the Tree of Life, the fullness of life through Christ, revealed in full display on the Cross, that we may have life and life more abundantly.

From the manger to the cross, we see the scarlet thread of God’s love and redemption revealed.

He Dwells Among Us

It is important, not only during the Christmas season but throughout the year, to reflect the Light of the world, who became man over 2000 years ago. Because He is the Word who dwells among us, we have a joy and a strength beyond human comprehension. We have peace that surpasses all understanding. May we, the church, let our light shine in such a way that it draws others close to the Lord, like the star over Bethlehem drew the Magi. May we be an example to those around us so they too can find their faith, hope, peace, and joy in the midst of their difficulties.

Jesus is the Word who dwells among us, and He is the Light of the World. Oh, how we need a whole lot of light in the darkness!

Joyful Expectation

The four weeks leading up to Christmas are known as Advent, a word defined as “the arrival of a notable person, thing, or event.” The primary themes of Advent are hope, faith, joy, peace, and love. To Christians, Advent is about anticipation, not only for the first coming but also for the second coming of the Lord.

We can't just look at where we've come from, we can't live encamped in the past. We have to focus on the future with an expectation that God will fulfill His promises.

Light Has Come

The Jewish traditions observed in Hanukkah, or the Festival of Lights, shares some similarities with Advent. Hanukkah celebrates a time when there was only enough oil to keep the lamp in the Temple lit for a few hours, but it lasted for eight full days as the Jews fought to reclaim the Temple from the Greek-Syrians. Then they celebrated the miracle God did for them by providing this light. And during Advent, we celebrate the miraculous birth of Jesus, the Light of the World. Hope came into the world as the Word who dwells amongst us.

Today, the world needs the light of Christ like never before. He loved us so much that He gave Himself to us that we might live in His Word, know His Word, share His Word, and be a witness of His light to a world that desperately needs Him.

In a world of difficulty that seems to be covered with darkness, this season gives us an opportunity to boldly declare the miracle of God, the birth of Christ! We have the Light of the World living in us! It should permeate our lives and radiate from us to those around us. A little light in a dark room illuminates the entire room.

It is time to remember the promises and the great miracles God has done, the great miracles God is doing, and the great miracles God will continue to do. We need to share our hope,

faith, joy, and peace because the Light has come into the world and the Word dwells amongst us!

Joy to the world, the Lord has come!

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