

Companies Fight to Keep Christ in Christmas

Speeding 68 miles an hour and plunging 162 feet at an 81-degree angle on its opening drop, Outlaw Run has drawn tourists from across the world to the Silver Dollar City amusement park in Branson, Mo., since its mid-March opening—and those entering the theme park in December will be greeted by another breathtaking sight: a 5-story-tall **Christmas** tree adorned with 400,000 lights.

As part of the park's annual tradition, each evening's lighting of the tree is accompanied by entertainment director Brad Schroeder reading James Allen Francis' classic, Christ-centered poem "One Solitary Life." Attendants take in the twinkling of 5 million lights as they stroll the park, listening to tunes like "Joy to the World" or the "Hallelujah" chorus. They're invited to watch the story of **Christ's birth** unfold through *Living Nativity*, an original play with an 11-member cast. And they won't want to miss the Gifts of Christmas Holiday Light Parade, the final float of which features the Christ child under a banner that reads "The Greatest Gift of All."

It's all part of "An Old Time Christmas" at the park, where each stage production includes a **carol** paying tribute to Christ's birth.

"When it comes to Christmas, we aren't afraid to say we're a **Christmas** festival," says Brad Thomas, president and general manager of the park. "We know that everyone who works here and everyone who visits here is not necessarily a Christian. We don't want to be [too] forceful ... but we do believe that we have values from which we shouldn't run."

It's no surprise that Silver Dollar City, owned and headed by

Pentecostal businessmen Jack and Peter Herschend, is so bold in its presentation of the reason for the season. Yet amid the sweeping cultural onslaught to strip **Christmas** of any “religious messaging” that might offend, few venues are as forward with their public celebrations. Secularism continues to neuter public Christmas expression, leaving such companies standing in stark contrast to a growing opposition.

Despite this pop-culture tsunami, however, a quick look around shows the first six letters of this national holiday—*Christ*—still occupy a central place in millions of Americans’ hearts. And this December, you’ll find depictions of Jesus still appearing—intentionally and boldly—in numerous well-known venues throughout the country.

In Support of Christmas The annual candlelight processional at Walt Disney World’s Epcot was conceived by Disney creative consultant Derric Johnson to tell the story of Christ with the accompaniment of a 50-piece orchestra and mass choir. Holiday evenings at the Orlando theme park include a reading of the biblical account of the virgin birth with a celebrity narrator, who in the past has included Jim Caviezel, Brian Dennehy, Susan Lucci and Marlee Matlin (in sign language).

Many Christmas attractions at the neighboring SeaWorld reflect holiday glitz, but Christian visitors have been pleasantly surprised by *O Wondrous Night*, a production based on the Christmas story that features more than 30 carols and includes live animals, life-size puppets and special effects.

The annual Christmas show at New York City’s famed Radio City Music Hall includes a manger scene with live camels, sheep and donkeys, though the famous Rockettes and Santa Claus still headline the event. This year, audiences in Atlanta, West Palm Beach, Tampa and Nashville can enjoy the touring production.

At Tennessee’s Dollywood amusement park, 300,000 are expected to experience the park’s celebrated “Smoky Mountain

Christmas.” Its *O Holy Night* production, performances by southern gospel’s Kingdom Heirs and the nightly “Carol of the Trees,” which synchronizes thousands of lights to holiday music, are among the Christ-centered elements at the park, which recently announced a \$300 million expansion.

“We embrace the Christian message of Christmas,” says entertainment director Paul Couch. “That’s who we are and what our guests have come to expect. We are uncompromisingly clear that the holiday is about [Christ].”

And five years ago, the Creation Museum near Cincinnati inaugurated “Christmas Town,” a walk-through re-creation of a first-century village where actors portray Joseph and Mary holding the newborn Babe and an archeologist explains the circumstances surrounding His birth. The weekend productions include several other dramas, including a depiction of John the Baptist’s mother, Elizabeth, describing two of history’s most famous births. Crowds have more than doubled since Christmas Town’s inception, often matching summer tourist season numbers.

Campaigning for Christmas But it isn’t just theme parks and dramas that keep the name of Christ alive this time of year. Numerous activists, citizen groups and websites have also risen up to counteract an offensive that has long sought to make Christmas politically incorrect.

Indeed, in many public schools, Christmas programs have morphed into “holiday shows” and Christmas vacations have been labeled “winter break.” Last December, parents in Montana and Massachusetts declared carols a form of bullying. And in October a Bordentown, N.J., school district banned “religious” Christmas music at any school concerts.

Such opposition prompted Bodie Hodge to compile *The War on Christmas*. The new book dispels popular misconceptions about the holiday, points out religious components of holiday

displays are indeed constitutional, and encourages people not to surrender to anti-Christmas forces. A writer and researcher for Answers in Genesis, Hodge grew frustrated by outspoken opposition to the Bible, creationism and prayer that has snowballed into attempts to censor all things Christmas.

“The thing that really surprised me was when we started to see attacks on nativity scenes,” he says. “Even private businesses were attacked.

“One year I went to Australia, and they had nativity scenes all over the place. A lot of people down there are not Christians, but they didn’t have a problem with it. Yet in the States, it was a big deal. We noticed this trend and said, ‘This is an attack of the enemy.’”

The veteran author hopes to educate the public—especially children who have learned to equate Christmas with Santa Claus and presents.

“We want to teach people what Christmas is all about,” Hodge says. “We want to get back to a focus on Christ and worshipping Him.”

Still other incidences show encouraging signs of pushback—like what happened when a woman in Arizona asked for help in 2009 after the U.S. Forest Service rejected her child’s designs for ornaments that would say “Happy Birthday, Jesus” and “Merry Christmas” to be displayed on the Capitol Christmas tree. Thanks to intervention from Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), the federal agency dropped its rule against ornaments with a religious theme.

More recently, in 2012, a pair of pro-crèche forces turned back attempts to remove nativities from public places. Last June, the Texas legislature adopted a law protecting Christmas and other holiday celebrations in public schools from legal challenges.

"I am optimistic about our ability to educate more companies and government officials about their ability to celebrate Christmas," says Jon Scruggs, legal counsel for ADF. "But I also know that many companies and government officials will prefer to pander to 'politically correct' sentiments."

After battling the PC police since forming its "Keep Christ In" campaign in 2005, Tim Wildmon of the American Family Association (AFA) thinks the anti-Christmas crowd is weakening.

"People want to express themselves about Christmas," says the president of AFA, which each year ships up to 1 million "Merry Christmas" lapel buttons. "I think the general public sees the ridiculousness of not calling something by its real name."

So while some are pessimistic about the fate of holiday tussles, Wildmon takes the opposite view. He says that over the past eight years, the percentage of retailers limiting the use of Christmas greetings has declined from about 75 percent to less than 25 percent.

Mat Staver of Liberty Counsel is encouraged too. He organized Liberty Counsel's "Friend or Foe" Christmas campaign a decade ago to educate the public—and, if necessary, go to court. Among the group's victories are overturning bans on nativity scenes, helping seniors prohibited from singing carols at nursing homes, and coming to the aid of students whose schools dictated not wearing red or green during December.

Liberty Counsel issues a "Help Save Christmas" action pack annually, including legal memorandums about the holiday, buttons, bumper stickers and sample newspaper advertisements. The group also maintains a "Naughty or Nice" list spotlighting retailers that permit "Merry Christmas" and other observances while frowning on those who expunge all references.

Liberty Counsel assembled its first list after Boston renamed its 40-foot-tall Christmas spruce a "holiday tree," ignoring

the tree's historic significance: Nova Scotia's shipped a Christmas tree to Boston annually since 1917 to honor the city for coming to its aid after the Halifax Explosion in Halifax Harbour.

Staver observes numerous parallels in the retail world. "We realized you couldn't find Christmas trees on the street; they were called 'holiday trees' and 'holiday decorations,'" he says. "There were clerks who couldn't return a 'Merry Christmas' greeting even if the customer initiated it."

And Wildmon points to another development: "Stores like Wal-Mart and Sears now have a Christmas shop within their stores—something that didn't exist a few years ago. How are you offending people when you acknowledge Christmas? That's bizarre."

Changing Lives Through Christmas Standing up for Christmas makes a difference—even in a deeply religious area like Lancaster County, Pa., home of the renowned Sight & Sound Theatre. Founded in 1976, it expanded to Branson in 2008. After a break in 2012, the theatre's long-running *Miracle of Christmas* recently returned to the Pennsylvania stage and runs through Dec. 30. (Branson's production ends Dec. 28.)

Though based on the Gospels, the play takes some creative license to dramatize the relationships between Mary, Joseph, their parents and Elizabeth. It depicts the turmoil Mary felt when she approached Joseph with the news of her pregnancy and the harsh reactions that greeted her in her hometown.

Many don't ponder such realities in the Christmas story, says co-president and former creative director Josh Enck. He thinks the production illustrates the faithfulness of God and the unlikely people He chooses for extraordinary experiences. Even though Sight & Sound is clear about its Christian roots, key leaders recently reflected on whether to soften its language so more non-Christians would come and find a place of healing.

"We spent some time talking about how to do that and be more seeker-friendly as a ministry, but we came down to the fact that we're not going to hide who we are," Enck says. "We bring the Bible to life in this way—on stage—and we're Christ-followers. People don't have to believe it, but we're going to present it in a way that entertains them and inspires them."

Such conviction is also important to Steve Green, president of the Hobby Lobby chain of retail craft stores. Although the nationwide chain stocks a wide assortment of general merchandise throughout the year, store clerks are encouraged to offer "Merry Christmas" greetings during the Christmas season. Christmas carols and a wide selection of Christian music play overhead year-round in the chain's 569 stores in 45 states. Stores remain closed on Sundays so employees can attend church.

After failing to persuade a supplier to remove objectionable material from its greeting card selection, five years ago Hobby Lobby began phasing out its line of general-market cards to rely solely on a Christian distributor.

However, Hobby Lobby's highest-profile step on behalf of Christmas is the newspaper advertisements it runs in all of its markets on Christmas Day (or close to the date for papers that don't publish Dec. 25) expressing the meaning of the season. The placements originated in 1995 with a quarter-page ad, then expanded to a full page a year later.

Green says his father, David, got the idea after reviewing multiple newspaper ads and getting frustrated that nobody recognized the holiday's true meaning in their advertisements.

"Then he felt like God convicted him, saying, 'Neither are you,'" Green says. "Since we do sell a lot of Santa Clauses and are criticized for commercializing the season, he felt that he wanted to let people know what the season was all about."

The chain's stand has made a difference. Green says he's received letters from other merchants who decided to stay closed on Sundays or have placed their own Christmas ads because of Hobby Lobby's example.

And a veteran cast member of *A Christmas Carol* at Silver Dollar City has seen the impact the park's twist on the long-running play makes on sell-out crowds that attend the show, which is produced up to four times daily.

The Branson production draws a clear connection between the change in Scrooge and his spiritual redemption. Using a split stage, after Ebenezer Scrooge catches a glimpse of his tombstone, he sings to an altar boy (late for the church service occurring downstage) about his need for prayer, followed by the classic hymn "Ave Maria."

"That's when you see the change in Scrooge," says Rachel Wallace, who portrays the Ghost of Christmas Present. "He realizes you've got to have Jesus."

"[At that moment] you can sense a reaction from the audience. You can feel it more than you can hear it. I definitely feel that people have left the Christmas festival with a change in their heart."

So go ahead and say "Merry Christmas" during this season. You never know who might be listening—and be changed by that choice that you make.

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