

Is Christmas a Sacred Holiday—Or a Secular One?

Songs on the radio proclaim, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year.” If so, it’s because we celebrate the most wonderful event of the ages—the incarnation, when God became a man. The greatest event in history is not when man walked on the moon, but when God walked on the earth. Author C. S. Lewis captured Christmas in this nutshell, “The Son of God became man to enable men to become the sons of God.” We all like to give and receive gifts at Christmas to express our mutual love. God set this example by giving us the greatest gift of all—“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

The sacred side of Christmas revolves around Jesus, whose name means “Jehovah is salvation.” An angel told Joseph “She will bear a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for he will save His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). One author observed, “If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. But since our greatest need was forgiveness, God sent us a Savior.”

The sacred side of Christmas focuses on how Joseph and Mary were forced by Caesar’s decree to travel 76 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be taxed and counted in order to fulfill prophecy. Bethlehem means “house of bread.” How appropriate for Jesus, the bread of life who nourishes the spiritual needs of starving humanity, to be born there. The sacred record also tells how God revealed the Savior’s birth to shepherds and wise men, people on opposite ends of the social spectrum. The Magi were rich scholars, evidenced by the

gifts they brought; the shepherds were uneducated and poor, bringing no gifts but their worship. Ironically, Jesus was both the Good Shepherd and the wisest man to ever live (even greater than Solomon—Matt. 12:42). The message is simple—Jesus came to save those on both ends of the social spectrum and everyone in between.

Several times in school and church plays, I have played the role of the tight-fisted sinner known as Ebenezer Scrooge. At the risk of sounding like him again, the secular side of Christmas has been overrun with Santa Claus, elves, flying reindeer, Frosty the Snowman, the Grinch and a host of other mythical characters. No, I'm not against fiction, fantasy or fairy tales with wholesome storylines that cater to kid's imaginations. In fact, I've played Santa Claus with all three of my kids over the years. What I am opposed to is the effort to totally secularize Christmas and remove any reference to Jesus—the real reason for the season—from the public arena. I want to tell the CEO's, advertisers, retailers, profiteers, commercializers and store owners that you can't spell Christmas without C-H-R-I-S-T! Without Him, there would be no such thing as Christmas. I want to shout it from the rooftops—it's all about JESUS.

The devil doesn't care if you celebrate Christmas so long as your focus is off the main character and meaning. Someone said it well, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing!" It is easy to get so "wrapped up" (pun intended) in our shopping, decorating, feasting, celebrating and gift giving that we forget all about the true meaning of Christmas. Someone aptly said, "He who has not Christmas in his heart will never find it under a tree." Material things only provide us with a temporary emotional thrill that disappears like melting snow, especially when the bills arrive in January. As Doctor Seuss reminded us in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, even the Whos in Whoville learned that Christmas doesn't come from a store.

It might surprise you to know the name “Ebenezer” appeared in Scripture centuries before Charles Dickens used it in his 1843 classic novel *A Christmas Carol*. In the secular story, the name was given to a bitter money lender who hated Christmas and was a killjoy to his clients and family who celebrated it. In the Bible, Ebenezer is the name of an ancient town in Israel (1 Sam. 4:1; 5:1) and the name applied to a sacred stone the Prophet Samuel erected to memorialize a place where God supernaturally intervened in a battle against the Philistines. “Then Samuel took a stone and set it between and Shen. And he called its name Ebenezer saying, ‘Thus far the Lord has helped us’ (1 Sam. 7:12). Christ is our stone of help—the Rock of Ages and the Chief Cornerstone upon whom we build our lives.

With all the secularization of modern Christmas, we could all use an Ebenezer-like experience. Scrooge was transformed from a cruel and greedy miser to a kind and generous man by the aid of three spirits. We are transformed from death to life and from darkness to light with the assistance of three helpers too—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Like Scrooge, we will become better people after our spiritual encounter. Remember, Christmas commemorates the sovereign intervention of God for mankind. As Billy Graham noted, “Bethlehem’s manger crib became the link that bound a lost world to a loving God.”

As much as we enjoy the secular fairy tales, we can’t afford to ignore or forget the sacred side of Christmas. While there are many good stories of fiction, the story of Christ remains factual! So, this is a simple reminder to go back to Bethlehem, to revisit Mary and Joseph in the stable, to adore the Messiah in the manger, to worship with shepherds and wise men, to sing with the angels and to celebrate this Savior sent from God. We can have a Christless, secular Christmas and have nothing or we can have a Christ-filled, sacred Christmas and have everything! {eoa}

Ben Godwin is the author of four books and pastors the

Goodsprings Full Gospel Church. His weekly telecast, The Word Workshop, airs on TV-16 and Charter Cable #10 on Mondays at 9 p.m. and Tuesdays at noon and live streams on . To read more articles, visit his website at and take advantage of his 4-book bundle for \$25.