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No, That's Not the True Meaning of Christmas
Scripture: Matthew 1:21; Luke 2:10-11; John 1:1; John 1:14; Philippians 2:6-8; 1 John 3:5
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by John MacArthur

The community where I live doesn't make international headlines very often, but last week the managers of a local residential complex for seniors earned a large-print banner at the top of the Drudge Report. "Christmas Tree Banned: 'Religious Symbol,'" the headline screamed.

Someone in the retirement center's parent corporation decided Christmas decorations are sectarian emblems and banned them from all communal areas. Staff were directed to remove the central Christmas tree that residents had already decorated.

Perhaps the most amazing thing about that story is that it made headlines at all. Every year the Grinches of militant secularism complain about Christmas decorations in public places, and each Christmas seems to produce more stories like that than the last. Lawsuits and protests over decorations have become as much a holiday tradition as figgy pudding.

Of course, Christmas trees are not really religious symbols. There is no biblical, creedal, or ecclesiastical mandate to decorate trees—or to exchange gifts, for that matter. We don't know the actual date of Christ's birth, so even the December 25 date had no special significance to the church for at least three centuries after Christ. Those are traditions that Christians have observed for generations. Like breaking plates at a Greek wedding, such things are cultural customs, not religious rites.

There is certainly nothing sacred about Christmas decorations, and if you don't believe me, take a drive through the typical American neighborhood at night during the holiday season. Yards and houses are blanketed with fake snow, bright lights, and fantasy figures—Santa, Frosty, Rudolph, Jack Frost, gingerbread men, elves, nutcrackers, Scrooge, Charlie Brown, and of course, the Grinch.

Indeed, Christmas in American popular culture is overgrown with folklore, feelings, and nostalgic icons that have nothing whatsoever to do with religious faith. Most popular Christmas traditions are less than 150 years old. One such tradition, dating back to Dickens's time, is the sentimental exploration of the question "What is the true meaning of Christmas?"

The true-meaning-of-Christmas meme even has its own Wikipedia entry. According to the article there, "In pop culture usage, overt religious references are mostly avoided, and the 'true meaning' is

taken to be a sort of introspective and benevolent attitude."

The truth of that analysis is amply illustrated in a growing menagerie of popular Christmas movies. From the classic favorites (played repeatedly in 24-hour marathons) to the cheesy dramas shown wall-to-wall on cable TV each December, Hollywood force-feeds viewers a seriously skewed notion of Christmas. The Hallmark Channel alone is advertising 12 new Christmas movies this month. In one way or another, most of them offer some view on the true meaning of Christmas.

All of them get it wrong.

Frankly, if everything you knew about Christmas came from tree ornaments, house decorations, and Christmas movies, you might not have a clue the holiday ever had anything to do with the birth of Christ. The fact that people think of Christmas trees as religious symbols proves Christians have not made their message clear.

For believers, that surely ought to be a more urgent matter of concern than the so-called war on Christmas. Secularists who can't stand the sight of a Christmas tree pose no real threat to the church or her mission. What ought to trouble us in a culture dotted with churches and filled with professing Christians is that we haven't managed to break through the confusion and commercialization of the year's biggest holiday and show the world what we're actually celebrating.

Christmas is about the birth of Jesus Christ. But it's not just a poignant story about a baby born in a stable because his family was turned away from the inn. According to the New Testament, that baby is God in human flesh, voluntarily stepping down to live among humanity, as a servant, in order to take the burden of others' guilt and pay the price for it by sacrificing his life for them:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.. . .And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:1, 14).

"Although He existed in the form of God, [He] did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6-8).

He "appeared ... to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Hebrews 9:26 ESV). "He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin" (1 John 3:5). "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and He upholds the universe by the word of His power. After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3 ESV). To echo the apostle Paul, "It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world *to save sinners,* among whom I am foremost of all" (1 Timothy 1:15, emphasis

added).

That’s what Christmas is truly all about, and December 25 is as good a day as any to set aside for a special celebration of it: “For today in the city of David there has been born for you a *Savior*, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11, emphasis added). In other words, the “peace on earth, good will toward men” proclaimed by the angels is not merely about peace between nations and goodwill *among* men. It’s about peace with God and grace from Him to us in spite of our sin.

Even the name *Jesus* means “Savior”—“for He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). In other words, the very heart of the *true* meaning of Christmas is a promise of salvation—full and free redemption from the guilt and penalty of sin, “for all those who believe” (Romans 3:22). That is the “good news of great joy which will be for all the people” (Luke 2:10). Miss it, and you will have missed the true meaning of Christmas entirely. Lay hold of it, and you will not only gain eternal life; you can also enjoy a true peace that surpasses all understanding (Philippians 4:7).

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