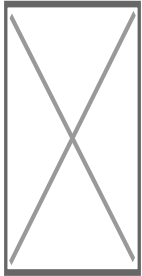


Sharper Focus – Merry holidays or Christmas all year ‘round?

by S. E. Horwood, Captain –



Is Christmas in America primarily a secular celebration of abundance, goodwill, and familial identity, or does it have a deeper meaning in our culture? I've been considering this issue over the last several months as I've seen the media attention focused on eradication of Christian symbols, references and

practices in our society. But the more thought I give to this issue the more it challenges me, because it inevitably reminds me that Christ calls us out of our pews and into our communities. If I argue to keep the references to Christ and Christmas, the conclusion seems to require me to be "salt and light" in my community. But definitions of salt and light can be a very murky stream of thought for the Church today. This is how I process the argument.



Front and center on the secularization agenda is the Christmas season, or should I say the "holiday" season. Shifting away from "Merry Christmas" greetings, the designation of Christmas trees, and the ever present manger scene in public squares, continues to move us away from the unique traditions of American life. This follows on the heels of petitions for the removal of "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, "in God we trust" on our money, and the Ten Commandments from our public buildings—the sum of which looks very dramatic, but should Christians really care? After all, why not secularize our country? Would we live differently?

It seems to me that if the Church actually believes in the meaning of Christmas, and doesn't just argue for images, symbols and vocabulary, then it should also take seriously the message of Christmas. And it is a message that we should carry throughout the year. If the essence of Christmas really transcends commercial trappings in our culture, then it should also be relevant in March, July and October. If we honestly commemorate the birth of "God with us," our Savior and Redeemer, then we should be compelled to work throughout the year to address the issues that Christ did—sin, hopelessness, authentic relationship with the Father, and social injustice. After all, this Christmas we will all sing:

*He rules the world, with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove*

*The glories of his **righteousness** and
wonders of his **love**.*

It seems rather disingenuous to fiercely hold onto the vestiges of the culture of Christmas while not taking an active role in the reason for our Savior's birth. But this is where things get murky. Migrant workers' rights, poverty, gay rights, discrimination, unwanted marriages and pregnancies; these are all Kingdom issues. The people trudging through these muddy waters are the very people that the Church should be pointing toward the Living Water. And these are just some of the American issues.

Internationally, the body of Christ has a tremendous role to play. Something as fundamental as tithing could have a global impact. (World hunger could be eliminated, with billions in excess, if Christians would just tithe.)

So debating how the term "Christmas" is used only has value if we follow through with the argument and align ourselves with the words we sing, penned by Charles Wesley in the second and third verses of "Come thou long expected Jesus":

*...All Thy people's consolation,
Hope of all the earth thou art;
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.*

*Born thy people to deliver,
Born a child and yet a King.
Born to reign in us forever,
Now thy gracious Kingdom bring.*

I don't believe Christmas is merely a secular holiday in America. I think its symbols and celebrations point to something greater than family get-togethers and gift-giving. It is an annual reminder that there is hope, salvation and justice. Arguing to retain our Christian phrases isn't nearly as important as striving to retain the spirit of Christmas throughout the year.

Have a Merry Christmas everyone!