

As 2002 draws to a close, I find myself once again caught in the duality of Christmas created by the tension between the celebration of our faith and a secular celebration of a holiday.

There are still plenty of signs of Christmas in the world, carols in the mall, carols by candlelight and the activities of many churches as they try to get the real message of Christmas to a community many of whom have long given up on a religious celebration in favour of family reunion, holidays and fun.

Hey, wait a minute, that sounds like me. Yes, the problem for Christians, especially Christian teachers with the end of school this year so close to Christmas Day, is that the world's celebration sounds so much like our celebration. Yes, we will go to church on Christmas Day, we will say grace at Christmas dinner, we might even sing happy birthday to Jesus and have a cake so that the children understand Jesus' birthday but its still - family reunion, holidays and fun that will fill our time.

How should we react to this criticism of our celebration of Christmas?
Three possible reactions are:

Do nothing

As Christians we have been freed from the legalism and expectations of the society we live in. Our whole life needs to be a celebration of the faith we have in Christ and what he has done for us in coming into the world and sacrificing his life for us so that we might know God. Christians ought to celebrate with all joy and excitement and especially at Christmas time. Live, enjoy Christmas, the holidays and the fun, secure in the knowledge that Christ is Lord and that your real home is with God.

Keeping the traditions

The desire of many Christians to continue to have an impact on the world will encourage them to keep the traditions. They will look to remind a society, drifting further and further from its creator, that Christ is still the issue that challenges their life. They will support carol by candlelight, look for Christmas cards with Christian symbols and messages (an ever decreasing commodity in secular stores), be involved in school, church and social functions celebrating Christmas, recognise Christ on Christmas Day by attending church, praying at Christmas dinner, putting a cross and angels on the Christmas tree, exchanging presents as recognition of what God has given us and in generally looking to maintain all the symbols and traditions.

Reaching out

For many Christians, Christmas is a time to reach out to others. It's a time to invite others, who may not have somewhere else to go, to your home for Christmas lunch. It's about giving time and money to the charities that bring a Christian message of hope and encouragement with practical giving to those who fear Christmas as a time of loneliness, poverty and depression. It's about being active in supporting your church and reaching out to others, about giving generously because of what God has given to us.

I pray that this Christmas might be one that captures all three of these approaches and gives the world the message that Christ is alive and well this Christmas.

John Gore