

Bah-Humbug!

BY JIM FOWLER

Bah-Humbug! That exclamation was made famous by the character of Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' classic, *A Christmas Carol*. Ebenezer Scrooge was an unhappy, negative and cynical businessman preoccupied with his greedy pursuit of money, who did not want to be bothered with; did not want to participate in; and could not get into the "spirit" of Christmas. He repudiated all the folderol associated with Christmas.

Have you ever been charged with being a "Scrooge" at the Christmas season? I suspect that an overwhelming majority (especially men) would have to confess to being thus charged. It may have been your wife who played the part of Marley in admonishing, "Don't be such a Scrooge!"

It occurs to me that a lot of conservative, evangelical Christians have acted like Scrooges during the Christmas season. Now, forgive me if I step on a few toes, for it is never pleasant to be called a "Scrooge," (I know!), but sometimes we have to act the part of

Marley and speak the truth, even though it hurts.

Many Christians bemoan, decry and complain that the cultural traditions that have attached themselves to our Christmas celebration are not biblical or Christian, and should be repudiated. Instead of enjoying the festive season and getting into the "spirit" of Christmas, there are some who become unhappy, negative and pessimistic—like Scrooge.

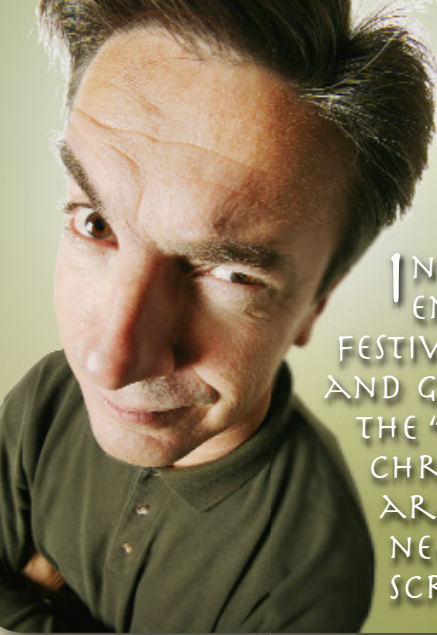
Have you heard (or have you been guilty of) complaining about the commercialization of Christmas? There is no doubt that the Christmas season is the

busiest time for retail sales in the entire calendar year. The advertisements swell the size of our newspapers. We check off the number of shopping days until Christmas.

Why all this commerce at Christmas? It is prompted by the tradition of buying gifts for family and friends at the Christmas season. Is that bad? Is that wrong? I think not, for it is a tradition that is based on the fact that God gave the ultimate gift of His Son, the historical basis for the celebration of Christmas. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..." (John 3:16, NKJV).

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holiday. The evergreen tree, in particular, is a symbol of freshness and the perpetuity of life in God's creation. So, don't be a Scrooge; enjoy the beauty of a Christmas tree and the decorations thereon.

Santa Claus?

There are some Christians who decry and disparage the mythical character of Santa Claus at the Christmas season. They are afraid that if they let their kids believe in Santa Claus and also tell them the story of Jesus' birth, and then a few years later tell them that Santa Claus is a myth, that somehow the child will think that the baby Jesus story is also fictional.

Let's give the kids more credit; they learn how to differentiate between the factual and the fictional. Myths are an art-form that are a part of every culture. They serve an

In response to God's gift, there has developed the gift-giving and receiving that most of us participate in at the Christmas season. It is an opportunity to recognize God's character of generosity, and to experience the joy of understanding that "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). I would want to say to some Christians, "Don't be a Scrooge; get into the spirit of gift-giving at Christmas!"

How About Those Christmas Trees?

Some Christians would tell you that you shouldn't

text for their assertion. It reads, "For the customs of the people are vain: for one cutteth a tree out of the forest...They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not...." The context of that

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THERE ARE SO MANY BEAUTIFUL FEATURES IN THE CULTURAL CELEBRATION OF CHRISTMAS...TO DENY THAT THESE ARE BEAUTIFUL AND EXCITING AND MEANINGFUL IS TO ADOPT THE ANTI-SOCIAL ATTITUDE OF SCROOGE.

have a Christmas tree. They say that it is a custom of Germanic origin, and not biblical. Sometimes they try to use Jeremiah 10:3-4 in the King James Version as a proof-



passage has to do with idols, not Christmas trees! And I haven't seen anyone bowing down to their Christmas tree! Much earlier God had instituted a religious festival, the "Feast of Booths," for the Israelites and told them to bring cut trees. God doesn't have anything against using trees for a religious

important function in the development of imagination and expectation, and in the recognition of reality.

Santa Claus is not a villain! He's not violent, like many children's programs and toys today. He's a jolly old mythical hero who brings gifts for the enjoyment of the recipients. That is a healthy virtue that

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needs illustrating in our mythical lore. So, don't be a Scrooge; Kris Kringle serves a good purpose.

But Christmas Is Pagan, Isn't It?

Some Christians emphasize that the entire Christmas celebration was adapted by early Christians to counteract and replace the Roman festival honoring the bull-god, Mithras. "Christmas is a capitulation to paganism," they claim. (*Bah-Humbug!*) Have you heard anyone advocating a celebration of Mithras? That's a bunch of bull!

Give the early Christians credit for being wise enough to adapt pagan practices and redirect them into the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. The celebration of Christmas does not mean that we are participating in the worship of pagan gods or conforming to sinful practices of the ancient past. Rather, it shows that we are realistic about the cultural expression of our deepest held beliefs. I would say to such Christians, "Don't be such a Scrooge—celebrate the Christianized culturalization of Christmas."

Put Christ "Back" Into Christmas?

There are also those people who keep arguing annually that we

should "put Christ back in Christmas." Did he ever leave? It's still called Christmas, not "Gift Day."

Christmas carols and nativity scenes all attest to the historical and theological significance of the birth of Jesus. If the Apostle Paul were to come back during the Christmas season, I think he would be amazed at all the free air-time that the Christian message of Christ gets during the Christmas season.

So I would want to say to some of these pessimistic Christians, "Don't be such a Scrooge; appreciate the emphasis on Christ during Christmas." [*Preach on, Marley!*]

Sanctimonious Scroogism

Ever so subtly, some Christians have fallen prey to Ebenezer's attitude of cynicism and criticism. They pessimistically complain about the sociological and cultural celebration of Christmas. This is really just a religious form of sanctimonious and pious *Scroogism!*

There are so many beautiful features in the cultural celebration of Christmas in our American society today. The lights, the sounds, the decorations, the fragrance of the trees, the tastes of candies, turkey, dressing, cranberries, the sacrificial gift-giving, family traditions...etc.

To deny that these are beautiful and exciting and meaningful is to



adopt the anti-social attitude of Scrooge. We should enjoy what God has made—including trees, music, color, people, families, social gatherings, churches, *et al.*

Oh yes, some features of our cultural celebration called Christmas have been misused and abused. People drink too much; they eat too much; they spend too much; they give for the wrong reasons. But they do that all year long, too! That doesn't mean we should check-out of life or repudiate our culture. Everything that God has made has been misused and abused—natural resources, sexuality, family relationships, etc. Just because they have been misused and abused doesn't mean we should deny their validity, seek to dispense with them and thus throw the baby out with the bathwater!

Don't be a Scrooge! Forget the *Bah-Humbugs!* Make the most of the cultural traditions of the holiday. Enjoy the Christmas season! □

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"CHRISTMAS IS A CAPITULATION TO PAGANISM," THEY CLAIM. (BAH-HUMBUG!) HAVE YOU HEARD ANYONE ADVOCATING A CELEBRATION OF MITHRAS? THAT'S A BUNCH OF BULL!