

Religion Today
December 18-24, 2005
Megachurches: Taking the "Holy" out of the Christmas "Holi-day"
Paul V.M. Flesher

OK, it is now clear that "American Megachurches closed on Christmas Sunday" is the "BIG" story of the season. Not only are American newspapers, columnists and reporters aghast at the audacity of these churches remaining shut on Christmas day, but the story has been broadcast around the English-speaking world. A quick Internet search reveals a long story in an Australian paper and an indignant columnist in England's Independent newspaper. And that's just the start.

This story reveals a lot about the religious and secular character of American Christmas rites. While newspaper stories already have mentioned some of the most obvious features, I want to discuss some observations that have not yet appeared.

First, since World War II, most Protestant churches have shifted the emphasis of Christmas worship to Christmas Eve rather than Christmas Day. Indeed, today even small churches often have more than one service on Christmas Eve.

More revealing, the members of these churches show their preferences for worship on Christmas Eve by attending these services and largely ignoring the services held on Christmas Day. Most of the megachurches canceling Christmas Day worship are having four or five different Christmas Eve services less than 12 hours earlier. That hardly sounds as if they are ignoring the importance of community Christmas worship.

Second, yet the canceling of worship on Sunday, Dec. 25 because it is Christmas reverses the Protestant Reformation beliefs that lie at the heart of America's founding.

The Reformation rejected the Catholic liturgical calendar of Saints' days as un-biblical. In 16th-century Britain, the Scottish Calvinists ("Presbyterians") and later the English Puritans likewise banned the celebration of Christmas and Easter for the same reason. In some versions of the law, even worshipping in church was forbidden on Christmas. People should carry on with their everyday tasks. The American Puritans followed this view.

By contrast, the Puritans and the Calvinists emphasized the importance of the Sabbath. Not only did they ban all job-related work and require people to attend services (sometimes twice!), but the American Puritans were expected to use Saturday to prepare food for Sunday because even household chores were forbidden on the Sabbath.

So America's founding fathers and mothers ignored Christmas and concentrated only on Sunday worship. Today's megachurches are doing the opposite, they ignore Sunday in favor of Christmas.

Finally, what reason do these megachurches give for canceling Sunday worship on Christmas Day? They are doing it to encourage family togetherness, whether to allow their staff (paid and volunteer) to spend the day with their family or to recognize that their parishioners have left town to be with their extended family. So while Christmas Eve celebrates the birth of Jesus, Christmas Day celebrates the togetherness of family and friends.

This message is the same as that of secular, popular culture. An analysis of Christmas films and TV shorts shows a surprisingly standard approach to the meaning of Christmas. On the one hand, they ignore the Christian meaning, with the exception of a couple of TV shows such as "Charlie Brown's Christmas," which features a Christmas pageant. On the other hand, the meaning they supply is the importance of friends and family getting together, usually for a meal and for distributing gifts. This approach can be seen in films such as "A Christmas Carol," "How the Grinch Stole Christmas!," "The Polar Express," and even "It's a Wonderful Life," as well as in TV shows such as "Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and "Olive the Other Reindeer."

Many of these films have a second point to make as well, namely, that Christmas is not about getting presents. Indeed, in the "Grinch" this negative point is more prominent than the positive one about family.

But many of these films, such as "Christmas Carol" and the "Grinch," contain a telling reversal. When the main character(s) realizes that Christmas is not about presents, then the presents are distributed. This is particularly clear in the "Grinch," when the Whos sing despite having lost their presents and their feast. When the Grinch hears their voices, he brings it all back. The message is that Christmas is about family and friends, but you can have your presents and fancy food too.

So yes the megachurches make an important, albeit secular, point that Christmas is about family. But what will they be doing with their family? Yes, you guessed it. They will be opening presents and eating a nice meal.

It seems that these churches have given over Christmas Day to the same activities as non-Christians who celebrate Christmas.