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Why there is no Christ in Christmas
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(The Christmas column)

When you think about it, it really is odd how rarely Jesus Christ is part of popular Christmas celebrations. Santa Claus, elves, reindeer, gift-giving, feasting, lights, decorations, snow, Christmas trees and even Scrooge feature heavily. But none of this portrays the Christmas story of the birth of Jesus, the child who Christians believe will later become humanity's savior.

To be sure, if you attend church, you will participate in religious celebrations of Christ's coming; Mary's experience with pregnancy and birth; Joseph's patient understanding; as well as the visits of the shepherds and the wise men. And don't forget the Nativity pageant performed by the Sunday school children.

But, if it was not for the manger displays nestled between the flashing-lights of Santa's sleigh and the twice-life-size blow-up snowman in the seasonal panorama on the courthouse lawn, Christian themes would be totally absent from American popular culture's celebration of Christmas.

Consider our video entertainment. Few (any?) made-for-TV shows or movies feature Jesus' birth. Feature movies are just as bad. Take a look at the lists of top five Christmas films -- or top 10 or top 15. No movies featuring Christianity's story appear.

Even "Nativity Story" (2006), a well-done major-release film about Mary's pregnancy, Bethlehem journey and ensuing birth, has dropped from view. If the supposed market for Christian-themed films exists for Christmas movies, it is off the radar.

Why is Christ absent from Christmas? The film "Love, Actually" points to the answer. This 2003 British film has recently taken on new life as a favorite Christmas film, appearing regularly in lists of top 10 Christmas films. It features vignettes of eight quite-different "couples" and their relationships in the run-up to Christmas.

The film has no Santa or snow themes, surprisingly, and the only gift-giving has negative outcomes. But neither does Christianity feature. The Nativity pageant at the film's climax includes lobsters and an octopus, as well as a bluesy Christmas song with full instrumental backup. Neither religious nor non-religious motifs get more than a passing glance.

Instead, "Love, Actually" focuses on family, family relationships and family-like friendships. The older couple has difficulties (forgiven in the end) but the love of their children comes through. The storyline featuring the 10-year-old boy chasing the girl spends most of its time on the support of his divorced father.

Other couples' plots feature romance, both serious and silly, some heading straight to marriage proposals, while others go less far. The aging, single rocker realizes his closest relationship is with his single, longtime manager.

In the end, what is important in "Love, Actually" are the human relationships, whether portrayed as family, romance or friendship. The links among human beings, whether long-established or just beginning, provide the film's climax and its focus of celebration.

Many Christmas films share this emphasis, from "It's a Wonderful Life" to "Dr. Seuss's How the Grinch Stole Christmas" from "White Christmas" to "The Santa Clause," the many variations on "The Christmas Carol" and, of course, "National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation."

If our popular-culture Christmas entertainment themes emphasize family, what does that reveal about the meaning of Christmas? It shows our Christmas celebrations are about us, we human beings and the central element of our lives. While we may need food, shelter and clothing for physical survival, we need relationships with other people to truly live. It is not the body's needs that make us human, but our emotional ties to other people.

So, while Christianity's Christmas may be about God and the gift of his Son, American culture's Christmas is about ourselves and the gift we humans give to each other, namely, our love. That love may be imperfect and subject to all our human foibles, but it ties us together and provides for the foundations of our lives. This is celebrated by non-Christians, Christians and everyone in between.

Is it selfish to celebrate human love and relationships at Christmas? No, for relationships are about what we do for other people. To celebrate that, one day a year, recognizes what we do for each other every day of the year. "Christ" is absent from our cultural Christmas because it emphasizes humanity rather than divinity.