

Keep Christ in Christmas

How families can ensure the Grinch doesn't steal their focus—or their faith

BY MARTI PIEPER

Over the internet/Through cyberspace/To Nana's condo we Skype/Netflix tells us the way/To spend Christmas Day/Or else the kids will gripe.

These words may not look or sound much like the traditional Christmas carol, but in 2017, neither does the holiday itself. As the world changes, families change with it.

So what's a God-fearing, Jesus-loving family to do? How can we celebrate the true reason for the season while the world embraces "Happy Holidays"? And how can we use the wonders of Christmas to share Christ's love with a world that often fails to recognize His birth? *Charisma* spoke with five family experts to get their take on how we can keep Christ in Christmas—or perhaps put Him there for the very first time.

Family Ties

Leadership expert, family coach and author Terence Chatmon (doyourchildrenbelieve.com) says keeping Christ at the center of Christmas has become increasingly difficult in a society that places less and less emphasis on God.

"We're in an age when moral and spiritual decay are at an all-time high," Chatmon says. "Not only have we basically taken God out of schools and government and so many other things,

but we've removed Him from the home as well."

In addition to dedicated family time at Christmas, Chatmon emphasizes making connections year-round. Every other Sunday, via conference call, his family (Terence, his wife and their three adult children with spouses) share an hourlong devotional time. For them, Christmas is "more than just gifts and great fellowship and food and so forth," he says. "The way we keep Christ in the center of our Christmas is we have our planning session to set up the devotionals for the following year."

The Chatmons' homestyle celebration includes a pound cake recipe passed on for generations and prepared by the men in the family, who receive an official certificate once they complete training in how to prepare it. But the best times, Chatmon says, are when "one of my children shares the Christ story ... and we have them share how they've been blessed this year or maybe how they've blessed someone else."

The most meaningful Christmas gift, of course, involves sharing the true reason for the season. Holiday worship services, Chatmon explains, provide natural opportunities to introduce unsaved friends and family to the Savior. And each

year, members of his family “adopt” a lost family member and pray for them throughout the year. Christmas, he says, makes an ideal time to give this individual a personalized Bible and explain the importance of the one whose story it tells.

Chatmon also offers special encouragement to husbands and fathers. “Many times, it is difficult for people to come into relationship with God the Father because their earthly father has been such a disappointment. ... I just want to encourage us all, especially dads, that we have to love well.”

But how? He challenges men to “develop a spiritual plan for the family,” a topic on which he speaks across the world. “We have to be more intentional if we’re going to move this generation and this whole nation with some more practical, biblical principles that apply to everyday life,” he says. “Dads, we’ve got to step up.”

Cultural Changes

Deven Wallace, co-pastor with her husband of Redemption to the Nations Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and author of *Warrior Mom* (Charisma House, 2017) agrees that cultural changes have had a big impact on family times at Christmas.

“The ‘selfieness’ of our society right now has really taken a holiday that’s supposed to be about giving and about giving glory to God for what He gave to us ... [and made it] very much a consumer-related holiday,” Wallace says.

But she also sees a direct connection between this excess and Satan’s tactics: “It’s always an assignment against the children. The enemy is always trying to fight the next generation ... getting them off-focus and distracting them from the lesson they’re supposed to learn so that they can perpetuate the faith.”

Wallace says she and her husband, who have four children ages 9-15, are “huge Christmas fans” who work hard to make sure their celebration exalts Christ. In a culture that de-emphasizes God, she says, they want to keep their

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family's eyes on Him. "Even in our decorating, we try to make sure there are focal points that point to Christ continually."

These focal points, Wallace explains, "are unspoken messages to our children, who love the glitter and the lights. When they wake up every morning in our house, they may see a sign that says, "Jesus is the reason for the season," or a nativity scene in the center of our dinner table."

This focus carries over into gift-giving too. In giving to one another, the Wallace family emphasizes God's extravagant gift of Jesus. Since their children were small, she says, "We have made it a point to read the Christmas story before we open presents." And to lessen the culture's materialistic influence, she and her husband create opportunities for their children to give.

"They're allowed to pick one person, family or project," Wallace says, and spend a set amount of money. The young Wallaces have given to children in Guatemala, where their church funds a project; to inner-city kids who ride the church bus; and to others, she explains.

In fact, she believes God has wired human beings to give, pointing to the last part of Acts 20:35, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

"We may think our children enjoy receiving more [than giving], but I would challenge that. ... It's just many times, we don't give [them] the opportunity."

Wallace encourages Christian families to "hold their ground" and "shine the light," refusing to compromise their Christ-centered emphasis even in the presence of unsaved family members.

"We don't change what we do, how we do it or the message we present, even if it's not what they embrace," she says. "And somehow in the gentle, loving consistency, people are impacted."

New Traditions

Christmas brings unique challenges for blended families, author, speaker and "smart stepmom" Laura Petherbridge



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(laurapetherbridge.com) says.

"The holidays are particularly hard because you're dealing with so many more people than you would in a first-time marriage ...," she says. "It's not just going to Grandma and Grandpa's house [anymore]."

To deal with the tensions of getting the blended family together at Christmas, Petherbridge suggests a key strategy: "Talk through the holiday calendar before it arrives. Most people in stepfamilies wait too late to start discussing the holidays. And it creates tremendous stress for the children if they don't know where they're going to be."

Christmas traditions also take on a different role in blended families, she explains, recounting her stepchildren's lack of interest in the "big, fancy" traditions passed down by her own Italian family.

"You have to recognize that those traditions that were important for you may very likely not be [meaningful] for them," Petherbridge says.

She cautions parents in blended families against trying to recreate past celebrations too.

"So often, we try to recreate the family's former Christmas ... when the children were in a different home,"

Petherbridge says. So one of the important things to remember is to create new traditions. And don't be surprised if it takes a few years before [the stepchildren] embrace those new traditions."

Petherbridge also speaks to the unique perspective—and opportunity—of the Christian blended family that faces opposition from the child's other parent. For those in this situation, she asks: "How would Christ react to that person, to that other family member?"

The most important thing parents in that circumstance can do, she says, is to use it as a teaching tool. Throughout the children's lives, she says, "they're going to be encountering people who are opposed to the gospel. ... How do we love the person who is antagonistic toward Christ? What are the things we can do to show the love of Christ, even when that love is unwelcome?" This might be as simple as buying a gift for an unsaved parent or as extensive as driving the entire distance (rather than halfway) to pick up a faraway child. Especially in the case of a high-conflict former spouse, Petherbridge also recommends the use of an Advent calendar as a reminder to "pray a new thing for them every day."

Blended families who want to



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keep Christ in Christmas, she says, should not “expect instant perfection and peace.”

“Understand that new traditions in stepfamilies take time to form ... and that you’re not a bad stepfamily if the first few years are complicated. Know that this is normal—and don’t beat yourself up if something doesn’t work. Each stepfamily is unique.”

Christmas Blessings

Bill and Pam Farrel (*love-wise.com*), best-selling authors, speakers and family experts, also recognize the obstacles today’s families face at Christmastime. But despite changes that can pull families away from a Christ-centered Christmas, Bill points out that technological advancements have both positive and negative aspects.

“The big upside is it has never been easier to be connected than it is right now,” Bill says. But technology “doesn’t take the place of real human contact ... so the downside is we’re going to see more lonely family members going forward. We need to have a strategy as a family to make them feel like they’re a

part of everything.”

Pam adds an important caution: “There’s nothing lonelier than to drive hours and hours or fly in to visit family, only to have everybody stare at their cellphones and not talk to each other.” She suggests providing a basket for phones so family meals remain cell-free.

The Farrels, whose family includes three sons, their wives and four grandchildren, try to accommodate in-laws’ gatherings by holding their family Christmas celebration “anytime between Thanksgiving and Jan. 6.” They check the other families’ plans first and, when possible, include them in their celebration.

Perhaps their favorite family tradition this time of year, however, is the Christmas blessing. During their annual Christmas dinner, they share the Christmas story in small segments. “Everybody gets a card with a verse on it, and each person reads, and then we light the Advent wreath in the center of the table,” Pam says.

Bill and Pam then go around the table to bless each guest. Bill blesses the men

and boys, and Pam, the women and girls.

“We just put our hand on their shoulder, and we compliment them, point out something we’re thankful for about the way God created them ... and then we pray a blessing over them and light the candle in front of them,” Pam says.

People look forward to coming to their home for Christmas because of this tradition, she adds.

“Often in society, we don’t say the things we should be saying to people: ‘I value you. I treasure you. I see this strength in you. I am so glad God brought you into my life,’” she says.

The Farrels highlight another tradition our experts all share: attending church together.

“We always go as a family to Christmas Eve services. ... Sometimes we vacation, and we take everybody to a new city, so we will look for a way to worship together,” Pam says.

But she had the Christmas experience of a lifetime when God asked her to write a blessing for her alcoholic dad.

“I wrote it, I framed it, I read it to my dad,” Pam says. “He cried. He’d never read any of my books, and he had never gone to hear me speak.”

For years, her father had put off asking Christ into his life.

“But when I wrote that blessing, it was like something clicked in his heart, and he understood that God loved him. ... He started asking a lot more spiritual questions and calling just to talk about Jesus,” she says.

As it turned out, that was Pam’s final Christmas with her dad—and her final gift to him. As she went through his belongings after his sudden death, she realized he had spent his last moments with a host of gospel-centered materials, including her blessing plaque. She speaks from heartfelt experience when she says, “I think Christmas is a good time to try and make amends, to give forgiveness, to lavish the heart with love. Christmas is a good time to make relationships whole again.” ♦

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