

Pastor calls for 'un-blending' of secular, sacred Christmas traditions

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LEAWOOD, Kan. (ABP) — A Baptist pastor thinks he has a solution to the dilemma about whether it's more appropriate to say "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays" in secular settings like department stores.

Mike McKinney submits that tensions that flare between Christians and secularists this time of year aren't about "taking Christ out of Christmas," as some religious observers believe, but rather because Christians have allowed their holiday to become too secularized by blending the celebration of Christ's birth with non-religious symbols like Santa Claus.

McKinney, pastor of [Leawood Baptist Church](#) in suburban Kansas City, is calling for a "reformation" of Christmas by separating secular and sacred aspects of the holiday.

McKinney says Christians and non-Christians alike would benefit from recognizing they are in fact celebrating two different holidays — one a religious commemoration of Christ's birth and the other a winter festival marked by hustle and bustle with secular roots.

Fixing Christmas

McKinney wrote the booklet titled *Fixing Christmas for Everyone: A Plea for the Reformation of the Christmas Season* proposing an un-blending of the "winter holiday" and "birth of Christ" traditions.

"It is simply not right to sing 'Silent Night' and 'Jingle Bells' as if they

belong to the same holiday," McKinney says. "It is not right to honor the birth of Christ the Lord and to celebrate the arrival of Santa Claus the jolly old elf within the context of the same holiday."

McKinney says there is nothing wrong with singing "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" or "Frosty the Snowman" in December — in fact he enjoys much about the season — but they simply don't have anything to do with Jesus Christ.

He says he is alarmed at how comfortable that both Christians and non-Christians have become with how Christmas is observed in America.

"Lots of folks are comfortable with blending Jesus with Santa, the Nativity with the North Pole, Angels with Elves, and Shepherds with Reindeer," McKinney says. "I am not!"

He says the mingling of secular and sacred is behind the conflict that arises every year over holiday greetings in the marketplace. The word "Christmas" is technically a religious title associated with the Christian faith, he reasons, so non-Christians can rightfully ask what winter shopping has to do with Christianity.

McKinney says for centuries Christians have commemorated the birth of Jesus Christ in their homes and churches with traditions, carols and Bible stories. Until fairly recently, he says, many Christians began their holiday on Christmas Day and followed it with 12 days of festivities ending with Epiphany on Jan. 6.

Many of the images now associated with the Christmas season didn't come along until the last century. The story of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer appeared as part of a Christmas promotion in 1939 by Montgomery Ward and became even more popular when Gene Autry released it in song in 1949. Frosty the Snowman joined the Christmas lexicon in a song written and performed in 1950. A 1957 book by Dr. Seuss *How the Grinch Stole*

Christmas introduced another character now affixed to the holiday.

McKinney says Christmas in the United States has evolved into a highly secularized and commercialized winter festival supporting various stories, traditions, characters and activities. Christians have adapted to the trend by ending instead of beginning their Christmas on Dec. 25.

In fact, he says, the phrase "Merry Christmas" no longer carries religious connotations in the public marketplace, but rather refers to a massive winter holiday season celebrated by people of all kinds.

Two separate holidays

"We truthfully have two separate and distinct holidays," he writes. "We should admit it and do something about it!"

McKinney says Christians and non-Christians together could "reform" the Christmas season by "slight modifications in our thinking and practices." He says doing so would benefit everyone, and no one has to lose anything.

"I suggest we separate the 'Winter Christmas' traditions from the 'Christian Christmas' traditions," he suggests. "I believe the two traditions can be 'unblended' without harming either. They can exist side-by-side in ways that can affirm both."

McKinney says people of all faiths would benefit from a clear distinction between a non-religious winter holiday and a highly religious Christian Christmas. He proposes the term "Christmas" be used only by Christians in a religious sense, while the secular celebration be renamed a "Winter Holiday."

The Winter Holiday would continue to begin many weeks before Dec. 25, enjoy the non-religious elements now associated with Christmas and end with post-Christmas sales on Dec. 26.

The Christian Christmas would follow preparation through Advent, begin Christmas Day, and continue into the New Year.

McKinney says Christians could choose to observe one or both holidays, while many non-Christians would be relieved to have the issue of Christ removed from a secular holiday.

McKinney said in an email he first went public with the idea two years ago, but didn't prepare the booklet until this year.

Last year he went on a radio talk show popular in Kansas City and talked with listeners both pro and con for two hours. He was recently interviewed for an upcoming article in the *Kansas City Star*.

McKinney said he has received emails from clergy supporting his idea since it received mention two weeks ago in a newspaper columnist's [blog](#).

McKinney said Leawood Baptist Church, which is affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, is learning to think of Dec. 25 as the beginning of the Twelve days of Christmas.

The church brings out decorations on Christmas Eve and leaves them up through Epiphany. Many small groups and Sunday school classes have their Christmas parties after Dec. 25.

"We strive to think of Dec. 25 as the beginning of our sacred holiday and with the idea of spiritual renewal carrying the spirit of Christmas (Christ) into the New Year," McKinney said.

-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.