

# Put the Dickens Back in Christmas! In late 1600's in Colonial Boston Celebrating Christmas was Illegal

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Theme: [History](#)

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*In the late 1600's in colonial Boston, [the celebration of Christmas](#) was against the law. Indeed, anyone evidencing the "spirit of Christmas" could be fined five shillings. In the early 1800's, Christmas was better known as a season for rioting in the streets and civil unrest. However, in the mid-1800's some interesting things changed the cultural response to the feast and, in 1870, Christmas was declared a federal holiday (which is to say that prior to 1870, Christmas was not a day-off in America). What happened?*

American Christmas demonstrates the amazing influence of literature on a culture. The first important book was by the author, Washington Irving (of Sleepy Hollow and Rip Van Winckel fame):

In 1819, best-selling author Washington Irving wrote [The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, gent.](#), a series of stories about the celebration of Christmas in an English manor house. The sketches feature a squire who invited the peasants into his home for the holiday. In contrast to the problems faced in American society, the two groups mingled effortlessly. In Irving's mind, Christmas should be a peaceful, warm-hearted holiday bringing groups together across lines of wealth or social status. Irving's fictitious celebrants enjoyed "ancient customs," including the crowning of a Lord of Misrule. Irving's book, however, was not based on any holiday celebration he had attended - in fact, many historians say that Irving's account actually "invented" tradition by implying that it described the true customs of the season.

✘ The second book, however, was, by far, the more influential: Charles Dickens' [A Christmas Carol](#). When Dickens is dubbed, "the man who invented Christmas," it is not far from the truth. For the American cultural celebration of Christmas largely began through the popularity of Dickens' classic story. That same fact, though, accounts for much of the non-religious aspects of America's celebration.

Dickens' A Christmas Carol does not overlook the birth of Christ. It presumes the religious aspects of the day and its presence is woven throughout every part of the story-line. There is a brief mention of Bob Cratchett and his son, Tiny Tim, attending Church on the day. But it was not this part of the story that caught the popular imagination. All told, it was the "spirit" of Christmas that sold America on the importance of the day.

Dickens wrote in the depths of the Victorian era. That period was marked, both in England and America, by a rise of romanticism, a popular sentimentality for "old things," "traditions," and "customs." The century before had been dominated by the Enlightenment, when all things rational ruled the day. Indeed, it is not incorrect to see the sentimentality of

the Victorian period as a reaction to the coldness of reason. It was a swinging of the cultural pendulum.

America's religious history has been a conflicted mix since the very beginning. The New England colonies (among the earliest) were settled largely by Puritans, dissenters from the Church of England, who wanted a radical reform of English Christianity. Unable to achieve their desires in England, they came to America and established their Churches here. They opposed Church festivals and frivolities of almost every sort. Their strict and dour form of Christianity waned and morphed over the decades, becoming a fairly moderate version of generalized Protestantism. The lower colonies (Virginia and to the South) were settled (officially) by Anglicans. However, migrations quickly populated those areas with dissenters, particularly the Scots-Irish who were largely Presbyterian with Baptists as well. Catholics were a tiny minority, restricted, for the most part, to Maryland.

English Churches outside of the Catholic and Anglican were non-liturgical. The "feast" of Christmas was as absent as the "feast" of anything else. It was not part of their consciousness. Thus, the growth of a popular Christmas in the mid to late 19th century took place outside the walls of the Church. It became a cultural holiday, with an emphasis on family and the home.

Surprisingly, Christmas is probably far more a part of Protestant Church life in America today than at any time in our history. But the echoes of cultural Christmas remain strong. When Christmas Day falls on a Sunday, Christianity in America revisits its conflicted past. It is not unusual to see Churches of a more Evangelical background cancelling Sunday services, deferring to Christmas as a "family" celebration. For liturgical Churches (Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, etc.) such a practice seems scandalous in the extreme.



Christmas decorations in Dallas, Texas. Photo: OrthoChristian.com

I might note, however, that the "power" of Christmas as an event in our culture, is rooted in the culture rather than the Church. In the Orthodox Church, Christmas is but one of twelve major feast days. If those feast days fall anytime other than a Sunday, attendance at Church will be thin indeed. And though Christmas is one of the three greatest of the twelve (Pascha, Christmas, Theophany), only Christmas and Pascha (always on a Sunday) receive great attention in America. Those of us who feel a certain superiority in our Church's celebration of the Christmas feast, would do well to reflect on our own neglect of the other feasts.

This is not an article about what "should" be. Cultures are what they are and got that way by their peculiar history. If America were an Orthodox or Catholic country in its beginning, many of the other major feasts would likely be national holidays and their customs would be widespread. Such is the case elsewhere in the world.

There are protests against the secular Christmas that say, "Put the Christ back in Christmas!" From a liturgical point of view I've wanted to add, "And put the Mass back in Christmas!" It is, after all, a feast of the Christian Church. Neither of these, however, will likely be dominant in a culture that once had little Christmas at all.

Another suggestion I might make is to "put the Dickens back in Christmas." I can think of no better homage to the man who "created" the modern celebration of the holiday than to read

his delightful A Christmas Carol. If you do not want to read, the single most faithful movie presentation of the book is (to my mind) the [version](#) with Jim Carrey .

But, more than this, would be the moral of Dickens' story: Christmas is well-kept by a life of generosity and kindness. That dear story is one of profound repentance, the healing of relationships and the righting of wrongs. Dickens' Christmas was synonymous with a life lived in accordance with the gospel. He said it well at the end of his story:

*"Bob Cratchit was very surprised, and so were many people who found Scrooge so changed. Scrooge became a better person. To Tiny Tim, who did not die, he was a second father. Scrooge became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city or town in the world could know. It was always said of Scrooge, that he knew how to keep Christmas well. May that be truly said of us, and all of us!"*

I absolutely think that Christmas should be a time for Christians to gather in Church to give thanks for the birth of Christ. But outside its doors, no one of us could do better than Scrooge. The busy-ness of Christmas, as well as the business of Christmas, could do well to listen to the words of Scrooge's partner, Jacob Marley, the tortured soul doomed to wander the world in chains. Scrooge observed to him that he was always a good man of business. Marley replied:

*"Business!" cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. "Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!"*

Would that such business were as popular as the tinsel and trees. Thank you Charles Dickens, for having said it so well.

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