

Where is Christ in Christmas?

By Cathy Lynn Grossman, USA TODAY

Merry Christmas. Seriously. And some people do mean seriously.

A vocal faction of believers, grumpy about Christmas gone wild, insist that Christians should get a theological grip.

"Christmas is being marginalized every day of the year, when pastors fail to preach who Christ really was," says Michael Horton, who blasts these trends in his new book, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church*.

Christmas without the specter of the cross, without awareness that this is a baby born to die for mankind's sins, is a fancied-up fraud, says Horton, professor of theology and apologetics at Westminster Seminary California, and associate pastor at Christ United Reformed Church in Santee, Calif.

"Santa becomes a substitute for Christ. He'll give you presents whether you were good or bad. It's hard to imagine Santa returning to judge the human race and consign anyone to hell. But that (judgment) is what Jesus came to save us from," says Horton, who tells his children Santa works for Jesus.

But other Christians say love, peace, good will and generosity are well worth celebrating.

"A lot of the Christmas celebration is a nostalgic veneer that doesn't really connect very deeply theologically," says Mary Helene Rosenbaum, head of Dovetail Institute for Interfaith Family Resources, based in Boston, Ky.

When she advises religiously mixed families, she finds what works best is pragmatic: Elevate the holiday trappings over doctrine.

"We really are becoming a secular society," she says. "When you ask people their religious identity, they're really talking about their sense of community and belonging," not wrestling with ideas about God.

Even some who lament the rise of a less religious Christmas reluctantly agree with her.

"The focus on peace and giving gifts allows you to safely focus on nice things instead of the idea that God sent his son Jesus to be Christ, who dies on a cross. It's human nature to want to take the 'nice' without the 'truth,' " says Ed Stetzer, director of LifeWay Research in Nashville

It's not that Christmas partying is wrong: There just has to be a larger purpose for it, says pastor and author Rick Warren. His newest book, *The Purpose of Christmas*, cites celebration as one of the three things announced by the angels at Christ's birth, along with salvation and reconciliation to God.

But social scientists say several trends work against the push to focus on doctrine:

- The percentage of U.S. adults who say they have no religious identity has more than doubled, from 7% in 1990 to 15.2% in 2008, says sociologist Barry Kosmin, principal investigator of the American Religious Identification Survey and a research professor at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn.
- Data from Christian trends researcher Barna Research in Oxnard, Calif., finds the long-familiar bump in Christmas church attendance is mostly somewhat-regular attendees coming in from the cold more often.
- Interfaith marriages — in which couples often blur or ignore religious differences — have increased from 2.9% of U.S. adults in 1973 to 8.5% in 2006, says Tom Smith, director of the General Social Survey for the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

But ultimately, the most significant reason behind the shift away from focusing on a religious Christmas that stresses the birth of Jesus may be found in the latest survey from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

The survey found that more than half of U.S. Christians (52%) today do not say Christianity is the exclusive path to eternal life.

Horton blames Christians themselves for taking the Christ out of Christmas. "Secularism cannot be blamed on the secularists, many of whom were raised in the church. We are the problem," he says.

