

Closed on Sunday: Celebrating Christmas with the family

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It's often argued that theologically conservative churches have been successful because they require a good deal of their members in loyalty, time and money. But the opposite case can also be made: that conservative churches are closely attuned to popular culture and are more inclined to accommodate that culture—and in that respect they are successful because they require less of their members.

So what does it mean that Willow Creek Church and several other evangelical megachurches have canceled services for Christmas Day, which this year falls on a Sunday? Willow Creek has advised members to stay home and celebrate the holiday with family, according to the *Chicago Tribune*. “We don’t see it as not having church on Christmas,” says a spokesperson for Willow Creek. “We see it as decentralizing the church on Christmas.”

But Calvin College historian James Bratt says this move demonstrates “how totally identified with the culture [evangelicals have] become. The church has subordinated to cultural icons, and family is one of them. . . . The logic of that is you should celebrate the holiday in its true sanctuary, which is the home.”

The origins of Christmas reveal the complexity of deciding what is a concession to culture and what is a corrective. One explanation of Christmas is that the Western church decided to celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25 because the date coincided with a pagan festival that honored the sun’s rebirth after the winter solstice. The feast to commemorate the birth of the baby Jesus, in other words, provided an alternative to a sun-worshipping festival and also offered a counterclaim: Jesus is the “sun of righteousness” who comes with healing in his wings (Mal. 4:2). It might be said, however, that the church was simply adapting to the culture, and “baptizing” it by giving it Christian meaning. And if so, is that so bad? Cultural adaptation itself follows an incarnational principle: the gospel is embedded and embodied in culture, for the sake of the culture’s redemption—that is, its healing

and wholeness.

For most Christians, Christmas is a high point in the Christian year. It is not only a day but a season for remembering and witnessing to the incarnation: God has not left us alone, God has come near to us in the Christ child, God has become one of us in human form, which gives us both healing and hope.

The celebration of Christmas should be a family affair. But Jesus taught us a new way to think about family as well as about God. We are all children of God, Jesus is our brother, and the followers of Jesus are our true family. And so the church especially remembers at Christmas those who have no family, or who are estranged from family. It remembers those who are lonely on this day. It is with this extended family that we should want to celebrate the birth of Christ.