

A S I SEE IT



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Putting Santa Claus In His Place

It was one of those crisp December evenings when the Christmas lights take on a special glow. Turning down yet another brightly decorated street, we spotted a house that was a dazzling display of lights and decorations. Front and center was a traditional manger scene with baby Jesus attended by Mary and Joseph. To the right three Wise Men approached on camels while shepherds and their sheep stood nearby. Off to the left was Frosty the Snowman and seven glowing plastic candles. And up on the roof above them all was jolly old Santa Claus and four of his reindeer. The star of Bethlehem was up there, too—perhaps as a beacon for Rudolph the Red-Nosed reindeer. The car radio began to play, “Here comes Jesus, Here comes Jesus, Right down Santa Claus Lane . . .”

I know what you are thinking: Here we go again with some old geezer trying to take some of the innocent joy out of Christmas and replace it with guilt. But guilt is not my agenda. I am a child psychologist and a parent of five children, and I am really not so old. I am all for a grand and joyous celebration of Christmas that includes the sharing of presents. But I have a real problem reconciling the baby in the manger with the Santa on the rooftop.

First of all, *Santa Claus is not real*. Yet many of us vigorously promote the lie of Santa Claus’ reality to our children. We weave intricate tales to support the fiction (“That one is just one of Santa’s helpers”). We threaten older siblings to not spoil other children’s Christmas by telling them the truth about Santa Claus. In many homes learning that Santa Claus is make-believe is a right-of-passage akin to learning the facts of life.

Would Christmas truly be empty without Santa Claus?

If we lie to our children about Santa Claus, might we be setting a dangerous

precedent? “Is God just made up, too?” Few of us nowadays lie when our children ask a question about sex, but somehow it seems fine to lie about Santa.

As I understand it, the original Saint Nicholas was a man who exemplified the meaning of Christmas. He reached out and cared for poor children. But our Santa Claus represents much of what is bad about the way we celebrate Christmas. He takes children up on his lap and asks them two very un-Christian questions: “What do you want for Christmas?” Children come to him with lists of their material wants and desires. Do we want children to bring genuine needs to Santa Claus? “My mommy needs surgery and I don’t want her to die.” Santa Claus’ lap is not the throne of prayer.

Our Santa Claus, who always stops at the houses of rich children, sometimes avoids the houses and neighborhoods of the poor altogether. Clearly Jesus is not aboard Santa’s sleigh.

Santa Claus’ second question to children is equally troubling: “Have you been good?” The truthful answer for us sinners is, “No, I have not been good. But I am good.” But Santa is not interested in theology. He expects us to deny our depravity and simply lie: “Yes, I’ve been very good.”

I recommend that we all put Santa Claus in his place. Children are too easily confused by the mixed messages of Christmas. They need us to clearly punctuate the reason for all the fun and joy at Christmas. A few ideas: Provide and deliver Christmas dinner and gifts to a poor family. Sing Happy Birthday to Jesus before opening presents. Enjoy Santa as a *make-believe* person. Use an Advent calendar. Display a Nativity scene. Read the real Christmas story often.

And, of course, tell our children that baby Jesus did not hang his stocking on the stable fence post that first Christmas. ■