

Christmas means 'God with us'

Yesterday evening, digging through some old papers, I found a note I had written to my parents on Christmas 24 years ago. At that time I was a junior in college and the note was a cynical attack on the hypocrisy and commercialism that surrounds celebrating Christmas in America.

I sat cross-legged on the floor of my writing-studio, the box of old papers in front of me, the yellowed note in my

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hand. How vividly I recalled that Christmas morning when I had pinned the note on the tree in the big two-story house in Florida. The night before, on Christmas Eve, I had taken my girlfriend home and then driven through town on my way back out to the house. The streets in the tiny community were almost deserted except for a single drunk, staggering toward his car at the end of the block. He looked up as I passed, and I recognized him as one of the town's leading citizens.

Something inside me shattered. If this is Christmas, I thought, then I want no part of it. I went home that night and wrote the note, condemning Christmas and all those who celebrated it. I arose early the next morning, before the others got up, and drove to the First Baptist Church. I took the money I had saved for presents, put it in a blank envelope and slipped it under the door of the pastor's study.

For a number of years after that, my Christmas sermon topics reflected my attitude: "No Room for Jesus," "Christmas More Farce Than Force." But time mellows people and gives them a broader perspective.

I sensed it recently in California, also. Jackie and I had driven down from the Oregon border to San Francisco. The snow was on the redwoods, and as we drove through the little lumber towns, the rooftops white and the windows decorated with twinkling lights, I felt happy. Then we were in Macy's, the heart of Christmas commercialism—and I was still happy. The music in the air, the bright colors, the smiling faces. The cynic had softened.

There is no Christmas in Cuba, you know. Since 1972, the nation observes July 6 as Children's Day, at which time presents may be exchanged.

Twenty-four years ago, I probably would have applauded such a decision. Now it only seems sad. Not only in Cuba, but in many other nations of the world, because Christ's birth is not worth remembering. We need Christmas, even though it is badly misused. Children need it. So do college students and Communists, soldiers and drunk businessmen, angels, shepherders and cynical preachers. We all need Christmas, for it is the one time when all the world stops and remembers:

"Immanuel. God with us."

What a beautiful time of year.