



## **Santa Pause**

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***Note:** I grew up on Santa. He was as much a part of the Christmas season as snow and presents. As a kid, I could hardly imagine how Christmas could have any meaning or joy apart from the jolly fat man in the red suit. Then I was saved by Christ. Everything changed. Suddenly I began to resent the jolly fat man in the red suit for his continual ability to distract both children and adults from what I knew was the true glory of Christmas—the incarnation of the Divine Son.*

*Perpetuating the myth of “Santa” was something Diedre and I determined we would not do before we even had kids. This has in no way hindered the joy of Christmas, anticipation of Christmas, or the worshipful celebration of Christmas. It has, in fact, enhanced it. Our kids are no less excited about a gift simply because they know it comes from us.*

*In the article below, Justin Peters<sup>1</sup> offers a well-reasoned theological critique of the Santa tradition and a Christian’s participation in it. Give his critique some thought, test all things and hold to that which is true—to the glory of God alone! (1 Thess. 5:21; Acts 17:11)*

*Jim Osman*

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Years ago a pastor told me, “Justin, never preach about Santa Claus. You just can’t win preaching about Santa Claus.”

To do away with any suspense, I’m not a fan of Santa. I’ve never cared much for him ever since I learned that he was not real. As an adult, I have cared for him even less and even began to have a bit of animosity toward the “jolly old elf.” However, it was not until last year that I, through circumstances in my life, was actually forced to sit down and

think through exactly who Santa is and wrestle with the biblical implications. I can imagine some will call me legalistic, pharisaical, and Grinchy for trying to ruin what is deemed by most to be harmless, fanciful fun for children one day of the year. I can assure you that these are not at all my motives for writing. I ask that you read the following piece and consider its thesis with an open, theological mind. Consider the points forwarded and evaluate them not against family tradition, common sense, culture, majority opinion, or emotion, but rather against the teachings of Scripture. Our standard for what is true, right, appropriate, beneficial, and edifying to the believer, and glorifying to God, can be nothing but the Word of God (**John 17:17**).

In this article we will examine the history of Santa Claus, his characteristics and attributes, and will then draw some conclusions about the proper biblical approach to this familiar icon of Christmas. It is my prayer that you will give pause to Mr. Claus.

### **History**

The history of Santa is not as well documented as many think. The most widely held view is that the legend began with St. Nicholas, a fourth-century Catholic bishop of Myra in southern Turkey. A cult grew up around the bishop, and prior to the Protestant Reformation, it had become one of history’s most widespread religious movements. According to *The Christian Almanac*, “By the height of the Middle Ages, St. Nicholas was probably invoked in prayer more than any other figure except the Virgin Mary and Christ Himself.” Various acts of generosity and miracles were attributed to Nicholas, including the distribution of gifts to the poor, salvation of a city from famine, and the resurrection of three young boys who had been sadistically murdered and mutilated. After his death Nicholas made various visionary appearances to people in distress and need. He provided comfort and even deliverance from execution for those

<sup>1</sup> This article is offered with permission from Justin Peters. It has been edited for space. You can receive the full-length article by contacting Justin through his website at justinpeters.org.

falsely accused. The documentation of Nicholas' life is actually quite sparse and little is known of him. Some speculate he may not have even been a real person at all. Nonetheless, the legend and the cult grew.

Despite the Islamic advance across southern Turkey beginning in the eighth century and the Protestant Reformation which swept Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, both of which served to hinder the Catholic-oriented Nicholas cult, the legend had grown outside the borders of the church and survived.

Some speculate that a revised version of the legend came to America via the Dutch "Sinter Klaas." The legend/cult appeared to be largely dormant in American culture until new life was breathed into him in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in Manhattan. "Sinter Klaas" became known as Santa Claus and slowly began to be associated with gift-giving. Author Washington Irving (1789-1853), most famous for "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," in his 1809 work "The History of New York" described St. Nicholas as an old man in dark robes who travelled on a flying horse, bringing gifts to children.

In the poem "*The Children's Friend*," published in 1821, Santa acquires his flying reindeer and chimney-top stops. Just one year later Dr. Clement Moore, theology professor at Union Seminary, undoubtedly inspired by both Irving and "*The Children's Friend*," wrote his own poem entitled "*A Visit from St. Nicholas*," which begins with the familiar words, "Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house...." It was Moore's poem which gave us the number of Santa's reindeer (8, with Rudolph being the 9th), their names, and his travels up and down chimneys leaving gifts for boys and girls. Political cartoonist Thomas Nast developed Santa further by giving him a home at the North Pole and a workshop filled with busy elves.

Not everyone agrees with this history, however. Some point toward a much darker origin of Santa. Some researchers trace the legend back to the Norse god Odin, who rode through the sky on a white eight-legged horse. Like Santa, Odin's home, Valhalla, was in the north country. Odin had a long white beard and would fly during the winter solstice between December 21<sup>st</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> with the mission of rewarding good children and punishing the naughty.

Others trace Santa to the Norse god Thor. Thor was generally represented as an older, friendly man who also sported a long white beard. He was associated with the element of fire and generally wore red attire. His mode of travel was a chariot drawn by two white goats named Cracker and Gnasher. He, too, lived in the "Northland," had

elves to assist in craftsmanship, was said to come down the chimneys and perform benevolent acts for humans.

More ominously, though, according to Scandinavian mythology, he "was regarded as the chief antagonist of Christ." In fact, in many traditions from Holland, Scandinavia, Germany, and Bosnia, the Sinter Klaas did not travel alone, but was accompanied by a sinister, demonic being known variously as Hans Trapp, Knecht Rupprecht, Krampus, the Dark Helper, and Black Pete(r), whose responsibility it was to punish children and even drag them to Hell. The Pennsylvania Dutch had their version of the Dark Helper known as Belsnickel, "Furry Nicholas," or "Rough Nicholas." The Dark Helper was not only "dark" by nature, but also because he was covered in soot from his travels up and down chimneys. Though Thomas Nast is rightly credited for creating the modern image of Santa, some argue that his inspiration was not St. Nicholas at all, but rather the Dark Helper. Images of Saint Nicholas portray a tall, slender man attired as a Catholic bishop who looks nothing at all like Santa. Drawings of the Dark Helper, however, portray a horned man clad in fur and carrying a bag on his back. The Dark Helper actually does bear some resemblance to modern Santa, leading many researchers to argue it was actually he, rather than St. Nicholas, to whom we ultimately owe our conception of the iconic yuletide figure.

Researcher Phyllis Siefker states:

*"It seems obvious, therefore, that Santa Claus can be neither the alter ego of Saint Nicholas nor the brainchild of Washington Irving. ...If we peek behind the imposing Saint Nicholas, we see, glowering in the shadows, the saint's reprobate companion, Black Pete. He, like Santa, has a coat of hair, a disheveled beard, a bag, and ashes on his face. In fact, it is this creature, rather than Irving's creation or an Asian saint, who fathered Santa Claus."*

The truth about Santa's history is hard to know for certain, but there certainly seems to be enough evidence to suggest that his origins are not quite as genteel as popularly imagined, though Santa, for most, is about as far from ominous as one could get.

### **Characteristics and Attributes**

I must ask you as much as possible to put aside personal preferences, majority opinion, tradition, and preconceived notions. I ask that you consider the following from a biblical point of view.

We will look at Santa's characteristics and attributes and compare them to God's as we **"take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ"** (2 Cor. 10:5).

**Eternality:** Santa is often portrayed as having a wife, but never a mother or father. He seems to have no real beginning and certainly no end. He has always been around and always will be. Eternality is one of God's attributes. As with all of His attributes, eternity is uniquely His. He is the great I AM. He has always been and always will be (Ex. 3:15; Is. 41:4; 43:13; Ps. 90:1-2; Col. 1:16-17; Rev. 1:8).

**Immutability:** Closely related to his eternity, Santa is also, apparently, immutable. In other words, he does not change. Year after year after year on December 24<sup>th</sup>, he boards his sleigh and makes his appointed rounds with just as much energy, enthusiasm and strength as he has in years past. Time seems to stand still for Santa. Santa appears immune from the passage of time and the curse of the Fall. He never gets sick, never tires, and never seems to age. God is also immutable (Mal. 3:6; Hebrews 6:17; 13:8; James 1:17).

**Omnipresent:** Santa is, in effect, everywhere at the same time. True, he does go from one house to another, but he visits every child's house in the world, all in one night.

In my research I came across a rather humorous engineering analysis of Santa's feat of flying. Assuming that Santa does not visit Buddhist, Hindu, or Islamic children, he still manages to visit some 91.8 million homes in one night. Allowing Santa a full 24 hours, with an additional 6 provided by different time zones with the assumption of east to west travel, he must visit 822.6 homes per second. For all intents and purposes, we can say that he is omnipresent. Omnipresence is one of God's attributes. He is limited neither by space nor time, and is everywhere present in His fullness (Deut. 4:39; 1 Kgs. 8:27; Ps. 139:8; Jer. 23:23-24; Eph. 1:23).

**Omniscient:** This is one of Santa's creepier attributes. He seemingly knows *everything*. Consider the words of John Coats and Haven Gillespie's 1934 song "Santa Claus is Coming to Town": "He knows if you've been sleeping, he knows when you're awake. He knows if you've been bad or good, so be good, for goodness' sake."

From his home at the North Pole, Santa possesses the ability to know when each and every child (and presumably adult) on earth is sleeping and awake. **Proverbs 15:3**, "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good." Eerily similar, is it not? Santa knows our behavior and is apparently qualified to make judgments as to its meritorious value. He sees all and knows all.

Omniscience is also one of God's unique attributes (**Job 21:22; Ps. 33:13-15; 139:1-4; Matt. 6:4**).

**Goodness:** Santa is portrayed as kind, gentle, jovial, and *good*. He also has authority to determine which children have been "bad or good." "Good" is a word that we use to describe everything from people to fried chicken. Describing Santa as "good" is problematic when we consider all of the other divine attributes ascribed to him. God's standard of goodness is moral perfection and complete conformity to His character.

None of us measure up to that standard. We have all sinned (**Rom. 3:23**) and all of us have hearts that are **"deceitful above all things and desperately wicked"** (**Jer. 17:9**). The Apostle Paul knew that **"nothing good dwells"** in us (**Rom. 7:18**) and that there are **"none good, no not one"** (**Rom 3:10-11**). Yet, supposedly, Santa is good by nature. This, too, is in direct opposition to Scripture. In a statement affirming His own deity, Jesus told the rich young ruler plainly, "No one is good except God alone" (**Mark 10:18**). God's goodness (His omnibenevolence) is original to Him and is not possessed by any of the fallen created order (**Ps. 52:1; 107:8; 119:68; 1 Jn. 1:5**).

**Gift-Giver:** Santa gives gifts to good children and leaves lumps of coal for the bad. This is inextricably tied to his goodness. Only One who is intrinsically good by nature is truly qualified to make judgments about good and bad behavior and render the appropriate rewards and punishments.

Santa is a gift-giver and gives with no expectation of anything in return (save for the milk and cookies dutifully left by children). In this aspect, too, Santa looks just like God. God is the only true gift-giver, because only He gives with truly pure motives and **"every good thing and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights"** (**James 1:17**). This should be extraordinarily sobering to all who profess Christ.

None of God's attributes can be fully and perfectly manifested in any of the created beings. Santa, however, manifests not merely one but *many* of God's attributes. Men have taken many of God's unique attributes and fashioned them into a figure known as Santa Claus.

At this point, many will cry foul. "Oh, c'mon! Who thinks of it that deeply? There's not a kid on earth that would ever think such things! Adults don't even think of Santa like that! That's not what we teach! We don't think Santa is God!" This is just the point. Most of us do not think about Santa this way.

I know that no professing Christian would ever dream of consciously ascribing to Santa the attributes of God, but

whether or not we *think* of Santa as embodying the attributes of God, he certainly *does*.

**Jealousy:** Another of God's attributes is jealousy. This may at first seem contradictory. After all, how could an omnipotent God be jealous of anything His lesser? How could God be jealous and still be righteous and good? Though jealousy most often carries a negative connotation, it can be a good thing. For example, any decent husband, upon seeing another man trying to seduce his wife's affections, would become immediately and appropriately jealous. Jealousy (unlike envy, which is always bad) is often *good*. God's jealousy is always good. Of what or for what is He jealous? Himself. God is jealous for Himself—His attributes which comprise His holiness manifested in His glory. To some this might seem egotistical. Not at all. Pride is sinful in humans because we do not deserve honor. God does. God is all about Himself because He is the Creator of all things and He seeks to defend His honor and His glory. He is consumed with Himself and wants us to be consumed with Him as well—for our good!

God says **"I, the Lord your God am a *jealous God*" (Ex. 20:5) and "the Lord, whose name is jealous, is a *jealous God*" (Ex. 34:14).<sup>2</sup>**

Granted, people who honor Santa in their homes are not consciously going after other gods. However, the truth of the matter remains. God describes Himself as jealous – *exceedingly* jealous. God says in **Isaiah 42:8**, **"I am the LORD: that is my name: my glory I will not share with another, nor my praise to graven images."**

Whether or not we *intend* to attribute to Santa the attributes of God is irrelevant. Ultimately it does not really matter what you or I think about Santa. What does matter, however, is what *God* thinks about him. God will give neither His glory nor His praise to another. By definition, Santa is a graven image that tries to share God's glory. If we were able to ask God directly, "Lord, are you OK with Santa?" how do you think He would respond? I cannot imagine He would say yes. In fact, He has already told us more than enough in His Word for us to know what He would say (**Ex. 20:4-5**).

Some might object by saying that we do not worship Santa because he is not real. Neither are the graven images. A graven image is no more real and *yet just as real* as Santa. No, there are no real deities behind the graven images; those created by the Israelites were wood and stone. But we can see them just as we can see Santa in a book, on television, or sitting in a chair in the mall.

"But we don't worship Santa," you say. Maybe not directly. However, by ascribing to Santa the attributes of God we are, in fact, ascribing to him *worship*. This is a crucial point and not to be missed. *By ascribing to Santa, or to anyone or anything else, any of the attributes of God, we are ascribing to him worship*. God is worthy of worship because of His attributes, and these same attributes have been attributed to the fat man in the red suit.

### **The Way Satan Deceives**

Satan and his demonic horde have inspired *every single* false religion that has ever existed. To those who profess Christ as Savior, Satan is equally cunning. He devises clever counterfeits. He offers the prosperity gospel, the social gospel, worship of and prayer to dead saints and the Virgin Mary, a watered-down gospel devoid of calls for repentance. He makes it look as close to the real thing as possible without it being the real thing.

Some of you are reading this right now and are livid! You think that if you do Santa with your children I am accusing you of worshipping Satan. Please, if this is you, I am not accusing you of *anything*. I am simply offering to you a warning from compassion and love from a heart burdened with concern.

Is Santa real? No. But Satan is, and Satan has always desired to make himself look as much like God as possible and to do whatever he can to diminish His glory. Anything that takes on the attributes of God and is the object of any warm feelings (recall the meaning of the root word for jealous) of affection is inspired by Satan. Children love Santa. They have warm feelings of affection toward him. They trust him, they respect him, they even fear displeasing him.

For those who maintain that they can do Santa and still teach their children that Jesus is the real reason for the season, allow me to pose this question: For whose arrival do they most eagerly await? Do children lay awake at night in their beds on Christmas Eve excited about the incarnate God, or about Santa? Of course, it is Santa. It is no coincidence that on the two most revered days in Christendom, Christmas and Easter, there are two fictitious icons possessing divine attributes which seek to steal much of our attention and affection.

### **Considerations**

I know that I will not likely make many friends with this article. It goes against the overwhelming majority opinion, and many will say that I am being alarmist, over-reactive,

<sup>2</sup> See also **Deuteronomy 6:15**.

legalistic, accusatory, maybe even arrogant and self-righteous.

I assure you that these are neither my motives nor intentions. I am not saying that if you do Santa with your children, you are a bad parent and are not saved. It was not until last year that I finally thought through the Santa issue myself, and there are aspects of this issue which we as Christians must consider.

**Lying:** If we tell our children about Santa, aren't we lying to them? In short, yes. When we tell children about Santa Claus (leaving his divine attributes aside), we are, in fact, lying. "Thou shalt not lie" is the ninth commandment, and even though we say that it is just for children for fanciful fun once a year, the inescapable conclusion is that it is still lying.

I remember vividly the day my Mom told my sister and me that there was no Santa. I can see the scene in my mind's eye: sitting at our kitchen table in some ugly yellow and green 70s era chairs, and Mom looking down at the table telling us there was no Santa. It did not come as a surprise to me—I had pretty much figured it out already. I can remember my first thought: "My parents lied to us. What about the things they're telling me about God?" That was, truly, my very first thought. Now, my parents are as kind and loving people as I could have ever hoped to have had for parents, and I love them dearly. They taught us about Santa because they wanted us to have fun and excitement on Christmas morning.

**Distortion of Motives for Right Behavior:** Children are on their best behavior around Christmas. Why? Because Santa is watching and "he knows if you've been bad or good, so be good, for goodness' sake." This teaches children that they should behave and be obedient to parents not because it is commanded by God, but because Santa may not bring them toys. This cultivates an unbiblical motive for obedience.

**Attributes:** Though I need not belabor the point, Santa looks an awful lot like Jesus. He has many of the same attributes and he does many of the same things.

As an aside, have you ever noticed how Santa is often shown wearing a crown of holly? Holly, with its sharply pointed leaves and red berries, was known in middle Europe as the "Christ-Thorn" and was recognized as the archetypal reality of the Crown of Thorns. Jesus bore the crown of thorns, and yet Santa wears it, too. That is too close for my comfort.

That Santa has God's attributes is the single biggest issue. Any phony impersonation of Christ that mimics Him and/or draws attention away from Christ has a dark element

about it.

**For God's Sake:** Knowing what He has said about Himself, I can honestly envision no circumstance in which God would look upon Santa with an approving eye. He is not even neutral on it. We know how He feels because we know how jealous He is for Himself. He will not tolerate anyone or anything claiming even a single one of His attributes.

He does not make an exception for Santa. Our real motive for jettisoning Santa should not be a legalistic one. Our real motive should be out of love for Him. He has done so very much for us. How could we ever approve of anything that shares in His glory? He is our Heavenly Father! He loves us and gave Himself for us. We should obey Him because we *love* Him. We love Him because He first loved us. Our love for God should result in us being jealous for Him.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, dear reader, please let me say again that it is not my intent in any shape, form, or fashion to disparage you in any way if you do Santa with your children. I am not saying you are a bad parent or that you are not a Christian. I am saying, however, that as Christians we need to think through the issue of Santa from a purely biblical perspective. As Christians everything we do should all be done—all be done – for the glory of God (**1 Cor. 10:31**). There is no way that Santa can be done for the glory of God.

Maybe you are reading this and are already midstream with your children and Santa. You've been doing him for years. What to do? Just tell your kids the truth. One of my friends with whom I went to seminary just told his 8-year-old daughter the truth about Santa. She seems to be no worse for wear, and they are all looking forward to Christmas. Your children will understand. In fact, as they grow and look back upon it, they will admire you for it. There's no shame in doing the right thing. And you know what? I can promise you that Christmas will not only be just as meaningful as before, but even more so. The absence of Santa cannot diminish the significance and enjoyment of Christmas for the believer. It can only enhance it. It is my prayer that God will use this article not only to lead us to "give Santa pause," but will also lead us to ponder anew the beauty and majesty of our great King, Jesus Christ the incarnate God.

Sincerely,

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