Christmas Film Favorites

Todd Kappelman highlights some favorite films of the Christmas season, encouraging Christians to enjoy the films while separating the sacred from the secular.

A Christmas Carol

In this article we will examine several classics of film and television that have become perennial favorites during the Christmas season. We'll start with a review of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. The 1938 Metro Goldwin Mayer version is our primary reference, although there are several remakes and versions that would be worthy of our attention. Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* remains one of the all-time favorite seasonal films and is worthy of an annual viewing for a number of reasons.



The primary reason that the *Carol* is still important is that Christmas has become a commercial disaster that tends to focus our attention on the material aspects of the season and neglect the spiritual and humanitarian dimensions. *A Christmas Carol* must be understood as the loud cry of a Victorian prophet sounding the warning of the evils of poverty. The settings in Dickens' stories, illustrating the abysmal conditions in nineteenth century England, have long been understood to be a valuable reminder of the social inequities during the industrial revolution. This is the background of the famous Christmas tale.

The film opens with Ebenezer Scrooge's nephew Fred playing in the snow with several young boys. One of the boys is Tiny Tim, the handicapped son of one of Scrooge's employees, Bob Cratchet. The story develops quickly as the merry and cheerful lives of every man, woman, and child in England are contrasted

with the disgruntled and miserable life of Scrooge (Reginald Owen). Scrooge is a rich business man with want of nothing, and yet he cannot, or will not, find it in his heart to enter into the spirit of the season. At midnight on Christmas Eve all of this will change as he is visited by the three ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future.

The ghost of Christmas past shows Scrooge his childhood school and friends. He remembers the time as mixed with joy and confusion. Joy because of his friends, and confusion because his father does not participate in the season in the same manner as other families. It is at this point that he becomes hardened as a young man and turns to a life of greed.

When the ghost of Christmas present comes, Scrooge is shown how other people are spending the evening. This is where he learns that Christmas may be enjoyed in spite of being poor and that it is a time of opportunity for those who have material blessings to share with those who do not.

Finally, when the ghost of Christmas future comes, Scrooge is shown the grave that awaits him. He inquires whether one may not change his ways and thus alter his destiny. Although the ghost, who is actually the Grim Reaper, does not respond Scrooge surmises that this must be possible or the ghosts would not be visiting him in the first place. Scrooge learns his lesson in the end and has what amounts to a “conversion” for Dickens. The film and story conversion amount to a humanitarian change of heart and are thin on the Christian emphasis in spite of the presence of worship services and praying families. What we should take with us from the film is the fact that we can learn from the past and appropriate it in the present for a better future. Likewise we can use the Christmas season as an opportunity to focus on that which really matters, which for Christians is the birth Jesus Christ.

Miracle on 34th Street

Miracle on 34th Street, much like *A Christmas Carol,* is an example of the humanitarian variety of Christmas films.

Miracle on 34th Street opens during the Macy's Annual Thanksgiving Day Parade. The man who has been hired to play Santa is drunk, and the organizer, a Mrs. Doris Walker (Maureen O'Hara), is desperate to find a suitable stand-in. Fortunately the real Santa, a.k.a. Kriss Kringle (Edmund Gwenn), has been wandering the streets of New York and reluctantly agrees to help out. After the parade is over he begins to work at Macy's as the store's Santa Claus and causes quite a commotion.

Being the real Santa Claus, Kringle puts the children first and the commercialism last among his job concerns. He has been instructed by the store manager to influence the children to ask their parents for toys that are in abundant supply and thus help to sell the store's surplus merchandise. Kringle laments the request and will have nothing to do with further commercializing the season.

Kringle elects instead to listen seriously to the children's requests and send their parents to rival department stores if necessary to secure the desired presents. This causes the store's manager and Mrs. Walker great concern about what Mr. Macy, the owner, will do when he finds out. The customers could not be happier with the store and it is considered a great humanitarian gesture on the part of Macy to put the children ahead of the profits. Other stores follow suit, and there is a citywide, then nationwide, movement to assist customers and children ahead of the store's interests.

There is a major plot twist when Santa is brought to a competency hearing in the New York County Court because he claims to be Santa Claus. His trial is front-page news, and everyone anxiously follows the story to see if the court will

find in favor of the existence of Santa Claus or rule that it has all been a commercial hoax of the tallest order.

Mrs. Walker's daughter, Susan (Natalie Wood), has been watching the story unfold and serves as a prop for those who posture themselves more realistically to the Christmas myth of Santa Claus and reindeer. The little girl has been raised by her divorced mother to accept nothing but the sober truth about life; there are no fairy tales, myths, or Santa for this young girl.

However, when Santa is found to exist in actuality by the court there is a new opportunity for both the girl and her mother to reconsider their skepticism. The mother willingly concedes the existence of Santa Claus, but the daughter is much more demanding concerning what is necessary for her to believe. The emphasis of the story is not Christian specifically, but rather humanitarian. The lesson is that if one will turn from one's crass commercialism and embrace one's fellow man the true spirit of the season can be enjoyed. As Christians we should be happy that a classic such as this warns us against the pitfalls of materialism, yet cautious about adding too much by way of Christianizing the story.

How the Grinch Stole Christmas

As we continue in our survey of Christmas films you will notice the difference between films such as Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, which have a more humanitarian emphasis, and films like *It's A Wonderful Life,* with a stronger Christian emphasis. The film we now turn to consider, Dr. Seuss' *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, conveys more of the humanitarian message. This is the first of two animated classics to be reviewed.

The tale is set in Whoville where the inhabitants are preparing for their Yuletide celebration. The Whovillians enjoy a classic Christmas similar to that of most middle-class

suburbanites. There are plenty of presents for the children, snacks and food of every conceivable kind, trees, fireplaces and even “roast beast.”

The Grinch (Boris Karloff, voice), a villainous creature with a twisted and defective spirit due to his tiny heart, lives in the mountains of Whoville. He is devising a scheme to steal Christmas from the townspeople below by taking the trees and gifts and food. The Grinch’s rationale is that Christmas is somehow dependent on these things. If he steals them it will cause the Whos to wake up on Christmas morning and “find out that there is no Christmas.”

The Grinch pulls off the heist and returns to his mountain hideout with every tree, gift, and crumb of food from all the Who houses only to discover a most startling surprise on Christmas morning. The Whos in Whoville awaken and begin to sing songs in spite of having no presents or food. The Grinch cannot understand how Christmas can come “without ribbons and packages, boxes and bows.” He had expected the Whos to “all cry boo-hoo.” Instead, he finds that Christmas does not come from a store. At this discovery the Grinch’s heart grows three sizes. He has seen the true meaning of Christmas.

There is an extremely important message in Dr. Seuss’ cartoon classic. Christmas does not come from a store and we should not participate in the commercial trappings of the season to the detriment of the real reason we have cause to celebrate. The season is about Christ, the Savior of the world, and it should be used as an occasion to celebrate this fact with fellow Christians and witness to those who are lost. We can learn from the Whovillians that Christmas can come without all of the whistles and bells that have become so much of the emphasis in our contemporary celebrations.

The message that we should be careful of is the simple humanitarian turn that is so frequently substituted for the real message. The Grinch has a change of heart, much like the

change of heart experienced by Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, and Mrs. Walker in *Miracle on 34th Street*. It should not be inferred that this is a complaint against Dr. Seuss for not rendering a Christian message; that was certainly not his intent. It is, however, a reminder that the Christmas season is not a success just because we use it as an occasion for good will to our fellow men. It is true that the world needs more good will between men, from the nuclear family to international affairs. But Christ said that "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly." True abundant life and good will which will last for eternity are found in a personal relationship with Christ. Keep this in mind and have a truly merry Christmas.

It's A Wonderful Life

We are offering a list of suggestions for films which may be enjoyed by the whole family as both a point of fellowship and an opportunity for reflection during the Christmas season. The film we'll now consider is Frank Capra's 1946 classic *It's A Wonderful Life*. This film has achieved a cult status as the embodiment of why we should be thankful as well as a reflection on the dignity and value of every individual regardless of one's perceived worth.

The film is the story about a young man named George Bailey (James Stewart) who is saved from suicide by a guardian angel named Clarence (Henry Travers). In the opening sequence the people in Bedford Falls are giving thanks to God for what George has meant to them. The scene of the action then changes to the celestial heavens where Joseph, Clarence, and God are discussing the need to intervene in George's life.

George's father, the owner and executive officer of Bailey Building and Loan, suffers a stroke at the beginning of the film and George, the eldest of two children, must assume his father's position. George foregoes his desires to travel and go to college. Instead he remains in Bedford Falls and marries

a childhood acquaintance named Mary Hatch (Donna Reed). He and Mary are poor but extremely happy during the early years of their marriage. The events in George's life will become unbearable when the Building and Loan is in danger of a scandal and foreclosure through no fault on his part. Considering his life insurance policy, he concludes that he would be better off dead than alive.

The dramatic action of the film shifts when Clarence, George's guardian angel, rescues him from his suicide attempt. In response to George's statement that everyone would be better off if he were dead, Clarence offers George a guided tour of what Bedford Falls would be like if he had never been born. One of the first and most startling discoveries George makes concerns Mr. Gower, a druggist whom he worked for when he was a young boy. George had prevented Gower from making a deadly mistake in filling a prescription that would have killed a patient. However, on this occasion George was not there to prevent the accident. Without George Bailey, Gower spent twenty years in prison and became an alcoholic.

The events continue to unfold as George learns that the men saved by his brother Harry in World War II were killed because George had not saved his brother from drowning when they were young. George's wife, Mary, has become an old maid and his children Zu Zu, Tommy, and Janie were never born. The town is no longer called Bedford Falls, but Pottersville, after George's arch rival and evil banker Mr. Potter (Lionel Barrymore). The entire town—from the druggist, to the girl next door, from the saloon owners to the librarian —is different as a result of George's having never been born. There is an oppressive cloud over the town as it mourns the loss of a citizen it never knew.

The idea that all men have a purpose can only be understood in light of a world created by a God who designed that purpose and gives all men a chance to fulfill their end. Frank Capra's classic *It's A Wonderful Life* can serve as a reminder to all

this Christmas season that God puts each and every individual here for a specific purpose. It truly is a wonderful life!

A Charlie Brown Christmas

We conclude our series on films and television specials of the Christmas season with what many believe to be one of the most overtly Christian programs in the genre, Charles Schultz's *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Thus far we have looked at *A Christmas Carol, Miracle on 34th Street, How the Grinch Stole Christmas,* and *It's a Wonderful Life*. The major division between these films and specials is that some have a merely humanitarian theme, and others have a more or less classic Christian interpretation of Christmas. We have mentioned that there is nothing wrong with the humanitarian emphasis as far as it goes, but Christians should understand the finer distinctions between the two renderings of the meaning of Christmas.

A Charlie Brown Christmas opens with Charlie Brown in his usual state of mild depression, searching for the meaning of something. This time it is the true meaning of Christmas. He proclaims to Lucy that it just does not feel like Christmas and that his problem is that he just doesn't understand it. Lucy charges Charlie Brown five cents and tells him nothing of any value; her solution is a naturalistic approach with a focus on monetary gain.

Charlie Brown's little sister, Sally, is a prototypical adolescent. She proclaims that all she wants for Christmas is everything that is coming to her; she wants her fair share. She represents the voice of all who equate Christmas primarily with a time of getting presents. It is sad when a child believes this about Christmas; it is tragic when an adult holds the same view. Lucy interrupts the exchange between Charlie Brown and his sister Sally to announce that we all know that Christmas is a big commercial racket. The truth here is that we all know that Christmas has become a big commercial

racket; the tragedy is that we do so little about it.

The scene changes again when Charlie Brown is put in charge of the Christmas play and must find an appropriate Christmas tree. In true Charlie Brown fashion he selects a pitiful specimen that is losing all of its nettles and cannot support itself. The tree becomes a symbol for Charlie Brown and the limp and pathetic status of our contemporary celebration of Christmas; something has gone terribly wrong. Lucy's jaded expectations and Sally's crass materialism have only led Charlie Brown to a deeper state of depression. The answers have failed to comfort him, thus the season looks bleak and hopeless. This leads to his final cry for someone who knows the true meaning of Christmas to come forward.

Linus, the blanket introvert virtuoso, enters and assumes center stage. As the existential hero of the story, the true meaning of Christmas has not eluded him. He tells Charlie Brown that he will now give an account of what Christmas means. In a direct quotation from Luke 2:10-11, Linus tells them of the annunciation by the angel concerning the birth of the baby Jesus.

> *And the angel said unto them, Fear not: For, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. (KJV)*

In this, the most overtly Christian of the Christmas specials we have discussed, there is a clear and unmistakable account of the true meaning of the Christmas season. Have a merry Christmas and a happy New Year!

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