



## **Creating New Holiday Traditions**

They were all gone—missing! I looked under the beds, in the cabinets, behind the furniture, on top of the refrigerator and even in the hamper. I searched the entire house but there wasn't a single Bible to be found. Finally, the gold words, "Holy Bible" caught my eye from among several other books on a bookshelf, and I triumphantly marched into the living room where all the kids were suspiciously quiet. Opening my old King James Bible to the second chapter of Luke, I lifted my voice above the family's groans and proceeded to read: "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that the world should be taxed..."

This least favorite of all our holiday traditions came with me into our newly blended family. All the kids dreaded having to sit through the reading of the Christmas story while staring at all the gifts spilling out from under the tree. Whether or not anyone actually listened to the Bible reading is anyone's guess—but hey—everyone was reminded of the reason for the season.

Reading the Christmas story may have been a tradition I brought into the family, but our kids actually created a tradition of their own. My children and stepchildren alike united in their efforts to prevent the delay in opening their gifts. That particular year, Sara was the culprit who hid all of the Bibles in the house, but every Christmas we expected some sort of sabotage from the kids.

One of the most creative tactics came from my daughter, Jennifer. As the family gathered around the tree, she presented to me a beautiful glass snowball with a Nativity scene inside. When you wound it up, the snow globe told the Christmas story. They heard it twice that year!



Another year, Aaron, my eccentric son, offered to read the story for me. Naturally, I was thrilled that one of our kids finally took an interest in this very important part of our Christmas morning. Aaron began his reading with “Jesus” and ended with “was born”—with nothing else in between. Nice try.

So many of our favorite childhood memories are of repeated experiences within family holidays and vacations: good smells, good feelings, good times. Have you ever found yourself reminiscing over Grandma’s special Christmas dumplings, or how you and your dad always performed your traditional job of hanging the lights on the house the day after Thanksgiving? Children and adults alike find comfort in these expected traditions we establish as families. Traditions create building blocks for strong, caring, happy families.

Blended families are unique because they actually combine two established family traditions together in a second marriage. Both the husband and wife will bring old traditions with them. Some family customs are generational, handed down from grandparent to parent to child, but others are developed within their previous family structure. If your traditions involved an ex-spouse, it is probably better to let that one stay in the other household where it can remain something special between your child and the other parent. However, because yours is a new family where different family members are coming together, you will need to establish your own new family traditions.

Traditions provide wonderful settings for teaching family values through the sheer strength of repetition. God even used traditions to instruct the Children of Israel. Over and over again they were told to celebrate an event by doing something in a specific way—teaching their children from generation to generation. We learn much more powerful lessons from activities we participate in year after year, than from an occasional lecture. Since many traditions create a relaxed and happy atmosphere, learning is more likely to take place.



Christian values during the holidays become more important as we watch the world around us try to remove every reference to Christ in the Christmas season. Christmas trees are now “holiday trees,” and department store greeters have changed their greetings from “Merry Christmas” to “Happy Holidays.” Our Christian values become part of who we are, so why not take advantage of our special Christian holidays to reinforce them in our families?

Creating new holiday traditions can be a lot of fun, especially if you make it a family affair. These little building blocks establish your own family identity and provide a way for everyone to feel connected to each other. Traditions say: "This is how we do things as a family . . . This is the little shop where we stop for hot cocoa on the way home from getting our tree every year. This is how we decorate our Christmas tree. This is our special holiday dessert. . . This is who we are." Doing things together as a family builds up your sense of being a family—and this is especially critical in the blended family.

Here are three fun ideas to help you get started in creating meaningful new holiday traditions for your blended family:

- Let your family be the secret gift-givers to a needy child or family. This tradition will help everyone in your family to appreciate their own blessings. You can choose someone in your church, pick a name from an Angel Tree in a mall, or go to charitable organizations in your community. There are always plenty of families or children right in your own city who are less fortunate than you.
- Make this a family project by starting a Christmas fund. About three months before Christmas, set a jar or box in a prominent place in your home. Have everyone contribute coins or dollars toward the special family’s Christmas gifts—even if you don’t choose the child or family until just before Christmas. Every time someone does a random act of kindness, drop in a quarter. Encourage your family members to give out of their allowance



money. If your teen has a job, they can give a dollar or two from their paychecks. Does your family frequently eat out at fast-food restaurants? Have a meal at home and drop what you would have spent on the restaurant meal into the Christmas jar. By the time Christmas rolls around, you will have the money to go shopping for your family—and everyone in the family will have invested in it.

- Make the shopping trip a family affair. Discuss what you can afford from your fund, do a little bargain hunting, wrap the gifts, and your family will have made another family's or child's Christmas very special.
- Choose a family Christmas tree together. Nothing says Christmas like the fragrant smell of fresh pine. If your family likes having a real tree, then make the hunt for the perfect tree a family event. Take everyone to the nearby Christmas tree farm and hike around until everyone finds the tree that meets all of your "perfect tree" criteria. Does it have a straight trunk, nice, full branches, and a height of at least six feet?
- The next step is to cut it down. All the kids, boys and girls alike, can take turns with the saw until the job is done. The sound of laughter will always rise above the sound of grumblings. After the tree is cut, the kids can load it onto the truck and unload it into the house, where dad can fit it into the stand.
- If you don't have a tree farm or just don't want to go to this kind of trouble, there are plenty of Christmas tree lots in most towns. Make the time special by topping it off with a cup of hot cocoa and marshmallows.
- Appreciation Envelopes. One way to connect as a family is to verbalize your appreciation for each other. This can be done by giving everyone an envelope with a family member's name written on it. The idea is to write a note of appreciation for the person whose name is written on the envelope. Hand the envelopes out about a week before Christmas. This allows everyone enough time to think about what they will write.
- Open and read the notes whenever you gather as a family to celebrate Christmas—Christmas brunch, Christmas dinner, or Christmas Eve. The



envelopes can be put in a basket to be drawn out and read aloud by dad, mom, or everyone taking turns. The writer can sign their note or remain anonymous—whatever works best for your family.

- Building each other up with words of appreciation enables you to connect as a family. Your teenager will have a written reminder from a steps-sister or step-brother about their unique and wonderful place in the family—something they can read and re-read after the holidays are over.
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