

Saint Nicholas and Santa Claus: *The Truth Behind the Legend and the Meaning of Christmas*

D. Gene Williams Jr., PhD
Defend the Word Ministries
NorthPointe Church

INTRODUCTION: THE REAL SAINT NICHOLAS

When you think of Santa Claus, what comes to mind? A jolly old man with a big belly, a red suit, and a sack of toys? While the modern image of Santa Claus is beloved worldwide, it bears little resemblance to the historical figure who inspired it—Saint Nicholas of Myra. Saint Nicholas was a 4th-century bishop known for his unwavering faith, acts of generosity, and defense of Christian truth. Yet over centuries, his legacy has been transformed into a secular symbol of Christmas cheer.

This paper invites you to rediscover the real Saint Nicholas. By understanding his life, his commitment to Christ, and the cultural shifts that shaped his image, we can reclaim the true meaning of Christmas—a celebration not of consumerism but of Jesus Christ, the Light of the World.

WHO WAS SAINT NICHOLAS?

Saint Nicholas was born in the late 3rd century in Patara, a city in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). As a young man, he inherited a significant fortune, but rather than using it for himself, Nicholas devoted his life to helping others. He became Bishop of Myra, where he was known for his generosity, compassion, and unshakable faith during times of persecution.

One of the most famous stories about Nicholas involves his secret act of charity for a poor father with three daughters. Unable to afford dowries for their marriages, the family faced ruin. Nicholas anonymously provided gold for each daughter by tossing it through their window at night, saving them from a life of poverty. This act of selfless giving became one of the hallmarks of his legacy.

Nicholas was also a staunch defender of Christian orthodoxy. Tradition holds that he attended the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, where he opposed the heretic Arius, who denied the divinity of Christ. Though the tale of Nicholas striking Arius is likely a later legend, it highlights his reputation as a protector of the faith.

HOW DID NICHOLAS BECOME SANTA CLAUS?

After his death on December 6, 343 AD, Nicholas's reputation as a saint spread throughout the Christian world. In the Eastern Church, he was venerated as a Wonderworker, and his feast day, December 6, became a time for acts of generosity. Over time, his image evolved in Western Europe, particularly in the Netherlands, where he became known as Sinterklaas.

When Dutch settlers brought Sinterklaas traditions to America, they merged with local customs to create the modern Santa Claus. Key influences included Clement Clarke Moore's 1823 poem, *A Visit from St. Nicholas* ("Twas the Night Before Christmas"), which described Santa as a jolly figure riding a sleigh pulled by reindeer. Later, Coca-Cola's 20th-century advertising cemented the red-suited, rotund image of Santa we recognize today.

While these changes made Santa Claus a global cultural icon, they also distanced him from his Christian roots. The emphasis shifted from a saintly bishop pointing to Christ to a figure associated with material gifts and holiday cheer.

WHAT NICHOLAS WOULD THINK TODAY

Imagine how Saint Nicholas might react if he saw how his legacy has been commercialized. The man who gave selflessly to the poor and defended the divinity of Christ would likely be saddened by how his image has been co-opted to promote consumerism.

The real Saint Nicholas reminds us that Christmas is not about extravagant gifts or festive decorations. It's about celebrating the greatest gift of all—Jesus Christ. Nicholas's life points us back to this truth. His generosity reflects the love of God, who gave His Son for the salvation of the world. His defense of orthodoxy reminds us of the importance of keeping Christ at the center of the season.

CALL TO ACTION: RECLAIMING CHRISTMAS

This Christmas, let's honor the true spirit of Saint Nicholas by reclaiming the holiday's theological roots. Here are some practical ways to do this:

Focus on Jesus: Read the nativity story from the Gospels with your family. Reflect on the significance of Christ's birth.

Practice Generosity: Follow Nicholas's example by giving to those in need. Whether it's donating to charity, volunteering, or helping a neighbor, let your actions reflect God's love.

Simplify Celebrations: Resist the pressure of consumerism. Instead of focusing on expensive gifts, prioritize meaningful moments with loved ones.

Teach the Real Story: Share the history of Saint Nicholas with children and friends. Help them see how his life points to Christ.

CONCLUSION: SAINT NICHOLAS AND THE LIGHT OF CHRISTMAS

As we consider the life and legacy of Saint Nicholas, we are reminded that his devotion to Christ, his acts of generosity, and his defense of orthodoxy were rooted in a deep commitment to the gospel. The modern portrayal of Santa Claus, though inspired by his legacy, has often strayed far from these theological foundations, becoming a symbol of consumerism and distraction during a season meant to celebrate the Incarnation of Christ.

Let us reflect on the original meaning of Christmas and reclaim its theological roots. Saint Nicholas serves as an example of faith, charity, and steadfastness in proclaiming Christ. His legacy challenges us to prioritize Jesus as the Light of the World, celebrated not merely on December 25 but throughout the entire Christmas-Epiphany season. For a more detailed discussion, see my study *The Lost Holiday in the West: Epiphany*.

APPENDIX A: KEY ELEMENTS OF SAINT NICHOLAS’S LEGACY

1. Timeline of Saint Nicholas’s Life and Legacy

- **Late 3rd Century AD:** Born in Patara, Lycia, in Asia Minor.
- **Early 4th Century AD:** Becomes Bishop of Myra during Roman persecution.
- **AD 313:** The Edict of Milan grants religious tolerance, aiding his ministry.
- **AD 325:** Allegedly attends the Council of Nicaea, where he opposes Arianism.
- **AD 343:** Tradition holds he dies on December 6.
- **6th–10th Centuries:** Eastern Orthodox veneration solidifies; feast day established.
- **AD 1087:** Relics moved to Bari, Italy, boosting Western devotion.
- **17th Century:** Dutch settlers bring *Sinterklaas* traditions to America.
- **19th–20th Centuries:** Transformation into Santa Claus through literature, art, and commercialization.

2. Notable Legends and Their Interpretations

- **The Three Dowries**
 - **Legend:** Nicholas secretly provides dowries for three impoverished daughters to save them from slavery or prostitution.
 - **Theological Significance:** Emphasizes the Christian virtue of generosity and care for the marginalized.
- **The Miraculous Rescue of Sailors**
 - **Legend:** Nicholas calms a storm to save a crew of sailors.
 - **Theological Significance:** Reflects Christ-like authority over nature and intercessory power.
- **Confrontation with Arius**
 - **Legend:** Nicholas strikes Arius during a debate at the Council of Nicaea.
 - **Interpretation:** While historically unverified, the story symbolizes Nicholas’s commitment to orthodoxy.

3. Comparison: Historical Saint Nicholas vs. Modern Santa Claus

Aspect	Saint Nicholas	Santa Claus
Origin	Bishop of Myra, 4th century	Dutch <i>Sinterklaas</i> evolved in America
Focus	Charity rooted in Christian faith	Secular gift-giving tradition
Representation	Religious icons, liturgy	Commercialized imagery
Symbolism	Defender of orthodoxy, protector of the poor	Joy, generosity, and materialism

4. **Feast Days and Liturgical Traditions**

- **Eastern Orthodox Church:**
 - Celebrated on December 6 (Nicholas the Wonderworker).
 - Festivities include hymns, prayers, and veneration of icons depicting Nicholas.
 - Special liturgical readings emphasize his pastoral care and miraculous deeds.
- **Western Church:**
 - December 6 feast day marked with charitable activities and gift-giving traditions.
 - Legacy persists in local customs, such as the filling of shoes with gifts in European countries.

5. **Artistic Depictions Across Cultures**

- **Eastern Tradition:** Icons portray Nicholas with a Gospel book, symbolizing his role as a teacher and defender of faith.
- **Western Tradition:** Medieval art focuses on miracles, such as the three dowries or saving sailors.
- **Modern Imagery:** Santa Claus illustrations by Thomas Nast and Coca-Cola campaigns dominate contemporary representations.

6. **Key Sources and Further Reading**

- Charles W. Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra, Bari, and Manhattan: Biography of a Legend*.
- Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great*.
- Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*.
- Clement Clarke Moore, "A Visit from St. Nicholas," in *The Annotated Night Before Christmas*.

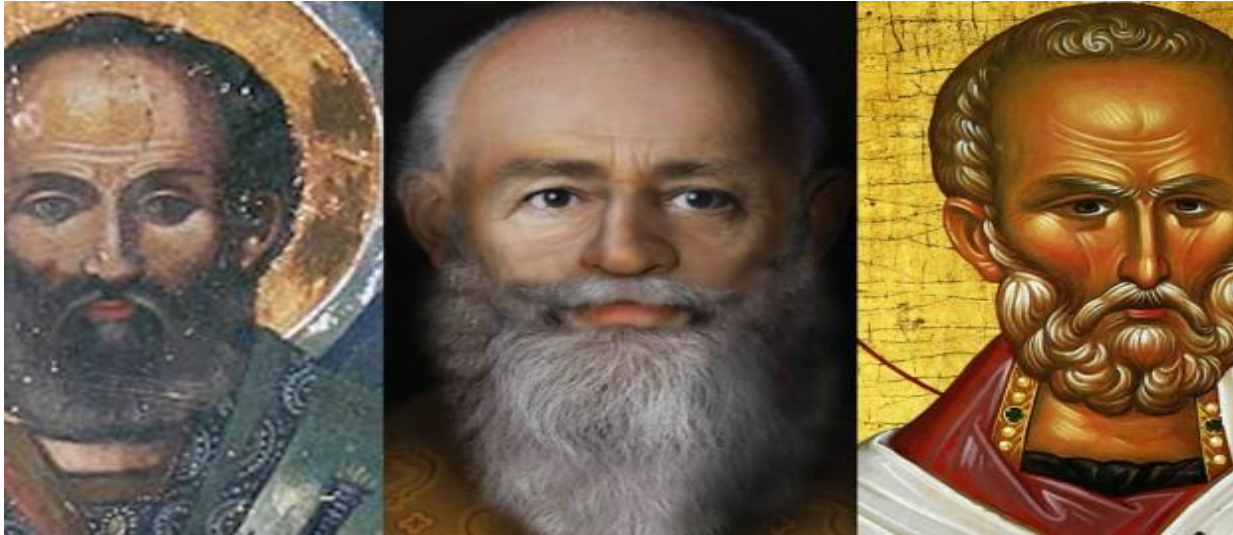
APPENDIX B: ICONOGRAPHY OF SAINT NICHOLAS SLAPPING ARIUS



This appendix features an image of a Byzantine icon depicting Saint Nicholas confronting Arius at the Council of Nicaea. The artwork portrays Nicholas striking Arius, a representation inspired by the 14th-century legend that symbolizes Nicholas's zeal for orthodoxy and the Church's rejection of heretical teachings. This image reflects how hagiographical narratives were visually adapted to reinforce theological truths, such as the divinity of Christ and the triumph of orthodoxy over heresy. It also highlights the role of religious art in shaping the cultural memory of saintly figures.¹

¹ Public Domain

APPENDIX C: IN IMAGES: THE REAL FACE OF SANTA CLAUS



This appendix connects the historical reality of Saint Nicholas with the centrality of Christ in the holiday season. By exploring his authentic appearance through historical iconography and modern facial reconstruction, it juxtaposes the truth of Saint Nicholas with the commercialized and mythical figure of Santa Claus. The three images in this appendix include:

- **Byzantine Iconography:** A traditional depiction of Saint Nicholas, emphasizing his role as a bishop and saint within the Christian tradition.
- **Forensic Reconstruction:** Based on measurements of his skull and bones taken during a 1950s study of relics housed at the Basilica di San Nicola in Bari, Italy, this image was developed by Professor Caroline Wilkinson at the University of Manchester using CGI and anatomical standards in 2004 and refined in 2014.
- **Modern Iconography:** A stylized representation reflecting the continued veneration of Saint Nicholas in contemporary Christian art.

Historical Context:

Saint Nicholas's relics, housed in the Basilica di San Nicola in Bari, Italy, were studied in detail during the 1950s, yielding thousands of measurements and x-rays. Using this data, Professor Caroline Wilkinson and her team utilized CGI technology to reconstruct his face in 2004 and updated it in 2014. The findings present Nicholas as a 60-year-old Greek man of Asia Minor, with a broken nose and a striking resemblance to early Byzantine icons of the saint.

Reflection:

Modern depictions of Santa Claus—shaped by commercial entities like Coca-Cola—diverge significantly from Saint Nicholas's historical appearance and theological significance. While today's Santa promotes a consumer-driven holiday narrative, the real Nicholas was a bishop deeply devoted to defending the faith, protecting the vulnerable, and embodying Christ's love.²

² Public Domain | Face Lab at Liverpool John Moores University | Marian C | Shutterstock

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