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A Christmas Gift

By Matt Hook

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“Y’know, scholars talk about the “Birth Narrative” of Jesus being found in only 2 of the Gospels: Matthew and Luke. Mark begins with the Ministry of Jesus. But John has his own way of telling the Birth Narrative. Let’s read John 1:1-14: *1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. 6 There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. 8 He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. 9 The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.*

When I was in high school, we had a Detroit radio personality come to our youth group, and he shared this story: There was a family who lived on a farm, whose father really didn’t enjoy Christmas. He didn’t understand the hype, or the waste, or the worship, or what the big deal was about Christmas. On one particular freezing cold Christmas Eve, his family went to church and he stayed home. After his family left, he was startled when he heard a loud noise like someone threw a snowball at his window. He jumped up to see what it was. And then he saw—a group of sparrows freezing to death in the snow, making a desperate attempt to get out of the cold. He got up and put on his coat, and thought to himself—“if I can just get them into the barn, they’ll survive.” So he went and opened the side door of the barn and turned on the light, but the birds wouldn’t follow him into the warmth. So he opened the big barn door, and turned on that light, but still the birds were fluttering in the ice and snow, freezing to death. He didn’t want those birds to die, and he thought to himself “If only I could become a bird, they could understand I’m only trying to help them. I could lead them all to safety and warmth.” Just then, the church bell down the valley began tolling the end of the service, and it hit him. He understood why God would have come to earth “in the flesh.” And for him, it made all the difference.

Holidays are a time to celebrate the birth of Jesus and to reflect on God’s infinite love, which he pours into our lives. Here are three thoughts we should all remember as we think about next year’s Christmas season:

1. Keep it simple Jesus was born into some pretty sparse circumstances. The son of two poor Galileans, he lived a life of humility and simplicity that became a key element of his ministry here on Earth. We can try to reflect these same Christ-like attitudes.

It’s the simple stuff. We want people talking to each other, helping each other, and growing together. Despite the fact that many new people are coming to our church, we’re finding that the larger we grow, the smaller we must become. We want our members and visitors to experience the same kind of fellowship as people who have lived here all their lives. Everybody needs a “home.”

Let’s see how we can provide lots of opportunities for one-on-one interactions, such as providing food for the homeless, helping needy single parents buy gifts for their children, or showering struggling families with practical, loving support – financially, emotionally, and spiritually.

Simple isn't just beautiful – it's powerful. Let's keep this in mind as we look toward 2006. We don't have to cram your days full of activities, and you don't have to make everything big and complicated. Consider what the Bible says, "*Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.*" (Prov. 19:21 NIV) Keep your holidays simple, so you are free to serve those in need and celebrate with those you love.

2. Be there We give love to people at Christmas when we show up in their lives, serving and celebrating in the name of Jesus (1 John 4:7-9). Our love is not to be limited to "just words and talk; it must be true love, which shows itself in action." (1 John 3:18 TEV)

One way we tell our families and friends that we love them is by giving them our focused attention. Attention says, "I value you enough to give you my most precious asset – my time." When you give someone your time, you're giving them a portion of your life that you'll never get back. You can always make more money, but you cannot make more time.

Isn't it ironic that at Christmas we will spend our money lavishly, yet spend our time like misers? We keep our schedules so full and hectic that we often have difficulty showing up – with focused attention – in the lives of those we love.

Yet Jesus showed his love by being there, "*in the flesh.*" He gave people time and focused attention when they needed his help, when they needed his comfort, when they needed his protection, when they needed an answer to a perplexing problem, and when they just needed time with him. One of our aims at Christmas should be showing up in the lives of those we love.

3. Give with delight God uses giving as an antidote for materialism (Deut. 14:23b), and he loves it when we give with a delighted heart (2 Cor. 9:7). Jesus said there's more happiness in giving than in receiving (Acts 20:35), but here's an important point to remember at Christmas: Giving is a matter of willingness, not wealth. It's attitude, not amount. God doesn't want your possessions; he wants your heart (Matt. 6:21).

We've replaced true, heartfelt, delightful giving with a hollow materialism that keeps us all overspending during the holidays. Instead, we should give from our hearts. In fact, as a pastor, I'd like to see us expand your definition of giving beyond the financial. Imagine how much we could bless others if we simply shared our time and talents.

You don't even have to give something away to share it delightfully with others. For instance, you may have a garage full of tools that, as a gift, you make available to your neighbor or an empty vacation spot that you allow other members of your family to use.

When you don't share, you're keeping others from experiencing the full blessings of God, and you're being a poor steward of all God has given you.

There's another reason we need to learn generosity in giving: It builds our faith as we look to be generous with the world. Everything we have is a "good and perfect gift from our Heavenly Father" (James 1:17 NIV), who lavishes on us "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we belong to Christ" (Eph. 1:3b NLT).

The essence of Christmas is that we simply and humbly give of ourselves, just as God gave generously and sacrificially to us through his Son, Jesus Christ. With this Good News as our center, we can generously show up in the lives of others with our time, talents, money, possessions, and friendship. That's "*the Word becoming flesh.*"