



We exist to love Jesus and live for Him.

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The Spirit of Christmas by Ryan Reese

We envision a congregation whose love for Jesus and one another leaves a clear and compelling witness for Christ.



And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Luke 1:30-33

Every year when the holidays come around I tell myself I'm not going to rant and rave about how our society is missing the true meaning of Christmas. The idea has surely become a Christian cliché. But a simple trip to a local toy shop once again ignited my zeal for the Lord, giving me the desire to turn over the cash register, chasing Rudolph out of the temple court with a whip of cords.

What did I see? My wife wanted to find an Advent calendar for the boys, helping them count down the days to Christmas. The store owner said there were two options from different popular toy makers, who shall remain unnamed (I know how Baptists like to boycott). We could choose the official "Advent Calendar," a simple living room scene equipped with a tree, presents, stockings, milk and cookies, and you-know-who coming down the chimney on day 25. Or we could purchase the "Nativity Scene" Advent Calendar, a modern barn yard set complete with farm animals, hay bales, farm tools, and children dressed in overalls and boots. Sometimes I just can't hold it in, and blurted out in confusion, "these have nothing to do with Jesus!" Spreading generic Christmas cheer for unknown reasons is one thing, but these were ADVENT CALENDARS! What is Advent? The word means "coming," when we celebrate both the *coming* of the Son of God to Bethlehem two thousand years ago, and the future event of His second *coming*. What is a nativity scene? Even Wikipedia knows it to be a depiction of the birth scene of Jesus Christ. These toymakers decided to keep the Advent countdown—but the one *coming* is Santa. And they like

the idea of the barn and animals, but replace the birth of the Christ-child with the feeding of pigs. God bless us, everyone!

But before we drive the heathens out of the temple we might ask ourselves if we really "get" Christmas. Do we celebrate Christ's coming and anticipated return in a way that reflects the true meaning of Christmas? Last week my four-year-old took his mother and I to school in showing us what Christ's coming was about. As a few of you know, our church invited you to take part in World Vision's Christmas giving program. This gift-giving program is not for children who need to add more plastic toys to their overflowing rooms, but kids who need things like food, medicine, water, and school supplies. You can purchase something as small as a water-purifying tablet or as large as a herd of cattle. So we went to the website to let Ezra decide what our family should give. The need that most troubled his little heart was clean water. He could not believe that some little boys and girls don't even have water to drink that doesn't make them sick. Shortly after making the selections, he approached his mom and asked if he could pick out some of his own toys to give to little girls and boys who don't have them. Janean obliged and entered his room with a big box which he began filling. His mother was shocked by the items he was putting in the box—the things he loved the most. Not wanting him to be *too* generous, she said, "Ezra, you don't have to give them your

favorite toys." He replied that *because* they were his best the kids who got them would be really excited. When he was done, and his dad was left without the second sword necessary for a "sword fight," Ezra said, "Mom, how do we put clean water in the box?" She smiled and said we were sending money for clean water. He asked how much money we were sending, and after being told the amount, he said, "that should buy a lot of water, Mom." But what he said next brought us both to tears. "Mommy, we should probably send them all our money." Now Ezra is a selfish, sinful little boy—don't misunderstand. But when he compared the needs of others with his great wealth, Ezra wanted to respond with grace. He wanted to give his best.

What is the point of Christmas? God saw tremendous poverty, tremendous depth of need in the human race. And He gave the best that He had, his own Son. As Paul said, "though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9 ESV). Our world is still full of need—both spiritual and physical. Our culture says Christmas is about showering our rich families with more gifts. What if we turned the table? If Christmas is about God meeting our greatest need with His best, how should we celebrate? We could use our money, our time, and our words to bring to others the things we take for granted: salvation, daily bread, clothes, and medicine. I think that would make the one who *came* and *is to come* very pleased. It might transform our lives too. *

Thoughts on Christmas by Katherine Bigney

Christmas brings different images and memories to mind for different people. I asked three members of our church family two questions about Christmas: What does Christmas mean to you? What is a special Christmas memory? Here's what they had to say.

Anna Catanzaro: In a time where Christmas has become so very commercialized, the great gift of Jesus, Immanuel, coming to earth has become even more meaningful to me. Immanuel means "God with us." What a great gift to be able to remember the truth of who He is, not only at Christmastime, but every day of the year.

My fondest childhood memories of Christmas came from the small town of



Manhattan, Montana. There, my mother's family would gather for the most wonderful times together. On Christmas Eve, we would sit around my bachelor uncle's Charlie Brown Christmas tree complete with bubble lights, and listen to the

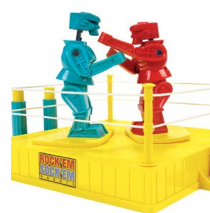
Christmas Story being read from the Bible. Then, on Christmas Day, all the ladies, young and old, would cram into the small kitchen in one of my uncle's houses and make delicious food together... turkey and ham, potatoes and yams, green beans, fruit salad, pies and lefse (a Norwegian flatbread)! Just writing this makes my mouth water. Today, the girls and I enjoy the new tradition of watching classic Christmas movies together. We try to watch at least one a week from Thanksgiving (or even sometimes November 1), until the New Year.

John Picini: Growing up we always read the Christmas story before we opened presents. What kind of cruel torture was this? I secretly hoped it would be the Matthew reading – Luke was so painfully long and detailed. I remember being very excited to see so many presents under the tree. One year there were very few. What could be wrong? Did someone forget to shop? Then my mom (who was holding

back on me) cracked a sly grin and said "Johnny, go bring the presents from my closet". What a relief – Christmas was saved!

But Christmas was sometimes a little disappointing as a kid. Yes, there were always lots of presents, but rarely anything of high dollar value. I think the most expensive present I ever received was Electric Football. What a great present! Most of my presents were socks and pajamas and books and really boring practical things.

Christmas morning was a strict routine: stockings, breakfast, Bible reading, the main event (presents), make a fire, play with toys. Later on, I would sometimes call up a friend or five and we would compare notes on what we got for Christmas. My friend Dan rattled off about five or six pricey, highly sought after toys and games. When it was my turn I realized that I had received very little compared to Dan. But a response was required. "Okay" I thought, start with something flashy – "I got Electric Football!" "Oh cool,



what else?" "Um, well I got, um, I got some socks and underwear and I got a shirt and a huge jar of nuts. Oh and I got a Bible", I fumbled. There was a long pause on the other end. "That's all you got?" "I guess so." "Okay, well I gotta go, bye!" And as I hung up the phone it occurred to me, my friends got cooler gifts than I did. Needless to say, I made no more phone calls that day.

Nowadays, it makes me laugh to think back to those early Christmases. How does a ten-year-old mind get so twisted? The electric football is long gone; Rockem, Sockem Robots didn't ever work very well anyway.

So what does Christmas mean to me? Christmas means all the things my folks were consistently showing me with their traditions – what they emphasized during Christmas. Christmas is about

the One born in Bethlehem – Christmas is Jesus. It is the time of year for me when life becomes quiet and clear and more focused on the truly important.

Reata Wainscott: Christmas is the celebration of the time when God's Son left the glory of heaven and the fellowship of the Father to become a mere mortal in the helpless form of a baby. He knew that He would become sin for mankind as a sacrifice for our sin. The story is fresh and new every year and I never tire of it. How awesome is this great love!

When I was 12, our family was having a hard time. Money was scarce. We lived on a farm and had plenty to eat but gifts would be few and we couldn't afford a Christmas tree. We five kids decided we could make our own tree by cutting down a large sagebrush and painting it white. We had some great ornaments and were looking forward to our project. However, one week before Christmas dad found a tree for a dollar. I was a little disappointed! My gifts were a small red manicure set and days of the week underwear!

I imagine every one of us could share a different memory or story of a Christmas past. As much as those memories might vary, I hope we all have a similar answer to the question of what Christmas means to us. What a great time of year to contemplate and to share the story of Christ and why He came to us as a baby over 2,000 years ago.

As your December days get busy and the calendar gets full, take some time to thank God for the gift of Jesus, and may this beautiful season bring joy and wonder to you and yours. *

