



ILLINOIS Focus



Ron Aguilera, President

THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS



During this Christmas season, you'll hear one word more than any other. It's not "merry," or "tree," or "Santa," or even, unfortunately, "Jesus." It is the word, "gift." By the end of November, and sometimes even before then, we begin a frantic dash to find the right gift for everyone on our list. The word "gift" consumes us for a month. Many people think that gift-giving at Christmas was started by the Wise Men when they brought gifts to the baby Jesus. But it was God who

Master Jesus amazingly and out of sheer generosity moved to save us." If it weren't for God's generosity, we would have nothing. The air we breathe is a gift of God's generosity. The blood coursing through our veins is a gift of God's generosity. The fact that our hearts are beating is a gift of God's generosity. Every good thing in your life, including your life itself, is a gift of God's generosity. But God's greatest act of generosity came on the very first Christmas when He gave us Jesus.

Christmas or Xmas? Or does it matter? Maybe it's just me, but it seems like Xmas has become the accepted shorthand replacement for Christmas. Some argue it is an intentional attempt to take Christ out of Christmas, and in an increasingly secular culture, that may be true. For me, I am reminded that in the Greek alphabet, X is the symbol for the letter 'chi.' Chi (or X) is the first letter in the Greek word for Christ, and therefore Christ has not been removed. And yet, it seems to be the only time of year or event that this abbreviation is used. Can you imagine any of the following catching on— Xseries for World Series? Xbowl for Super Bowl? Xgiving for Thanksgiving? Funny how those seem out of place.

As I reflect on the Christmas season, I realize more and more Jesus is forgotten, and that Santa is the central character of Christmas. To quote an article I read recently, "Our root problem has to do with our view of God and our relationship to Jesus. We have been taught to think of the King of the universe more like a super-Santa than a jealous God who holds us accountable to His Word. We forget that His favors are designed to conform us to His image, not meet all our wants."

started it all when He gave the first Christmas gift. The Bible says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16 NIV). On the first Christmas, God gave the greatest gift of all, He gave His Son. He gave His Son to die on the cross for you and me. Jesus is the original Christmas gift. We only give because God gave to us first.

So, I want to remind us today that the spirit of Christmas is the spirit of generosity. In Acts 15:11, the Bible says, "We are saved because the

So, this Christmas season. Let's celebrate with full hearts and great joy the reason for the season, Jesus, and all He means to us. May He come quickly!

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ISSUE FOCUS

CHRISTMAS



The second chapter of Luke records the noise and mayhem occurring in the wider world during the birth of Jesus. Lots of activity. Lots of movement. As history has outlined, the tensions of that era were profound and complex, not merely complicated. And it is into that context, Matthew records, there is a word: "God With Us."

Various "actors" were playing in the drama of the day, others were focused on the crises in the moments, still others were more interested in the Christ. And this last group were not even from the flesh and direct bloodline of the being-birthed baby. While divisions ran rampant throughout the various cultures of the day, a small group of outcasts were coming together. In a very, very non-public place. There would be no royal proclamation. Pomp and circumstance had been replaced with bleating and whimpering. The juxtaposition of the socio-historical context vis-à-vis the occupied cave could not be more stark. And as I consider our moment right now, this particular Christmas season, I find hope in such a juxtaposition.

STILL, HE CAME.

STILL, HE COMES.

This "God With Us" does not depend on context, does not depend on human acceptance, does not depend on "correct" theology. God. Shows. Up. The lack of preparation for this coming God by His supposed people did not prevent Him from showing up. Still, He came. Still, He comes. We don't have to get it all right for Him to show up. We don't have to line up a system and a ramp and red carpet for His entrance. The intractable of conflict did not stop Him from showing up.

And this is what I absolutely love about Christmas: God Shows Up. Regardless. And yes, of course, with the showing up of God, there can be different responses. Go back to the text: some welcomed, others retreated into the religion they knew, still others garnered political and religious willpower to destroy, even if it meant slaughtering the children a few years later. And these responses I find within me in so many distinct and painful ways. When I don't know, fear of this unknown can lead me to power-up, knowledge-up, quote-up, "post-up" (take to social media) and yes, defend-up. I can, with even greater ease, unwittingly retreat into what I believe I know and never come out from the knowing to venture into the unknowing.



John Grys,
Executive Secretary

An **UNSAFE** Christmas

Here is what I appreciate about those who welcomed. They were just living their ordinary lives and yet, amidst that ordinariness, they were open to what they did not know and that "unknowingness." And this condition placed them into an eligible space where they could pursue with curiosity the unknown. Amidst all the political and social and national differences, led, unknowingly, to an ordinary sacred space; they did not allow the crisis of the day to deter their pursuit of this unknown nightlight. And they came together. In a cave. And they found, amazingly, unpredictably, unknowingly and yet, joyfully, and with hearts filled with gratitude, a commonality despite the crisis. They found the Christ. And in the presence of a diapered Divinity, they worshipped. Awe. Amazement. Uncertainty. Hope.

When God shows up in caves rather than palaces...no place is safe. When God shows up amid civil, political and social unrest...no place is safe. When God shows up and those supposed to be watching for Him are going about their daily maintenance of the machine while those crushed and lost by the machine abandon what they know to pursue their curiosity...no place is safe. I love the Christ of Christmas because curiosity is awakened. Are you ready?

SPIRIT OF GIVING



Doug Reeves,
Treasurer

As December 25th approaches, I am reminded of the many reasons we celebrate Christmas. During this time, our focus is usually on getting together with family and friends to exchange gifts and have fun. Children are always excited about the gifts they receive and are generally happy that these gifts are items that they have requested. Stores use the excitement of exchanging gifts to market the idea that their products are a must-have. In all the hustle and bustle, time for reflection on the real reason for Christmas is almost nonexistent, even for Christians.

What is the real reason we celebrate Christmas? As Christians, we know that Jesus coming to earth 2,000 years ago is one reason that the Christian world celebrates Christmas. The God of the universe gave Jesus to humanity. Jesus gave of Himself to the human race. Jesus giving Himself to humanity is the example that Jesus is calling His children to emulate. Jesus shows, by His example, that He cared for all people in every society and all status' of society. He healed the sick and broken-hearted. He restored the mind of the mentally ill. He loved and cared for children that were not considered important members of society. Jesus especially focused on those despised by society

and, instead, became their friend. Jesus came to this world to show humanity a new way to live in service for others.

Do we follow Jesus by giving to people in our sphere of influence? Some examples of giving to others may include giving by simply being a true friend by spending time with others; giving by sitting with someone hurting and listening to them or comforting them; giving by providing financial resources to those in financial hardship; giving by donating money to help the mission of God's church; giving by helping to assist a neighbor with projects; giving by befriending strangers desiring friendship; or giving by telling others about the love of Jesus. The list of ways we can give to others is abundant.

“**...WE CAN PARTICIPATE WITH HIM IN GIVING...**”

The Bible states in John 3:16 NIV, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” This is the ultimate gift! God exemplifies the true spirit of giving. He shows us His love that He wants to give each of us, so that we can participate with Him in giving to our fellow humans. The spirit of giving is more than just about money or finances. It is about our whole being.

This Christmas season let's think about what Jesus has given to us. Acts 20:35 NIV says, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Sister Ellen G. White says in *Unlikely Leaders*, page 126, “He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” Let us decide in our hearts to participate with Jesus in giving to others. Jesus wants us to give of ourselves totally by focusing on Him first and then on others and their needs all year, not just during the Christmas season. Jesus wants us each to experience the joy that comes in giving to Him and others.





EL ESPÍRITU DE LA NAVIDAD

Pastor Juan Daniel Villegas

“Ya llega la Navidad,” es la nota que resuena por el mundo, del este al oeste y del norte al sur. Para los jóvenes, para los de edad madura y aun para los ancianos, es una ocasión de regocijo general. Pero, ¿qué es la Navidad para que requiera tanta atención? ... HC 434.1

La Navidad ha sido por años de inspiración para aflorar sentimientos de paz, gozo, amor, y hoy día en mundo envuelto en diferentes circunstancias difíciles, de confianza y esperanza.

Estas fechas no son solo la celebración de “cómo vino” Jesús al mundo, sino también del conocimiento de quién es Él Nuestro Libertador, “Para esto apareció el Hijo de Dios, para deshacer las obras del diablo.” (1 Juan 3:8). Nuestro Señor y Salvador, “Porque todo aquel que invocare el nombre del Señor, será salvo.” (Romanos 10:13) y de “por qué” vino.

Cuando nos preparamos para la Navidad meditando en su verdadero significado, nos preparamos para vivir a Cristo y vivir Su mensaje. Permítanme sugerir tres cosas que tal vez deseemos estudiar, meditar y aplicar en esta época especial.

Primero, gocémonos en el advenimiento de nuestro Señor

y Salvador. Celebramos el nacimiento del Hijo de Dios, el Creador, Libertador, nuestro Mesías. Nos regocija que el Rey de Reyes viniera a la tierra, naciera en un pesebre dándonos a entender la posibilidad de que tanto los sencillos pastores de Belén como también los príncipes de oriente, tuvieran acceso a ÉL.

Cuando Jesús nació, el gozo en los cielos fue tan grande que no se pudo contener (Lucas 2:10). “Pero el ángel les dijo: No temáis, porque he aquí os doy nuevas de gran gozo, que será para todo el pueblo”.

Segundo, meditemos en Su Poderosa influencia hoy día en nuestra vida. La Navidad es una época para recordar al Hijo de Dios y renovar nuestra determinación de tomar Su nombre sobre nosotros. Es el tiempo para reexaminar nuestra vida y evaluar nuestros pensamientos, sentimientos y hechos. Dejemos que sea un tiempo de recuerdo, de gratitud y un tiempo de perdón. Al hacer eso, lo honramos mucho más de lo que lo haríamos con luces, regalos y fiestas.

Tercero, aguardemos ansiosamente Su venida. Si bien la época navideña suele ser un tiempo para dar una mirada retrospectiva y celebrar

el nacimiento de nuestro Señor, a mí me parece que también debiera ser un tiempo para mirar al futuro. Miremos hacia adelante. Preparémonos para ese día bendito cuando Él venga otra vez. Seamos tan sabios como los de la antigüedad, que velaron por Su venida.

La Navidad nos invita a seguir al Señor, a compartir nuestro amor con el que sufre, con el que llora, con el que está perdido, abandonado y con el que no tiene ninguna posibilidad de esperanza, haciéndola una realidad y compartiéndola con los demás.

La Navidad de Jesús es una fiesta de la confianza y esperanza que supera las inseguridades y el pesimismo de los tiempos que estamos viviendo. Y la razón de nuestra esperanza es esta: Dios está con nosotros y Dios se fía todavía de nosotros para salvarnos y levantarnos de nuestras dificultades. De aquí viene el gran “regalo” del Niño de Belén: una fuerza espiritual que nos ayuda a no dejarnos atrapar y destruir en nuestras fatigas, pesares, dolores, en nuestras desesperaciones, en nuestras tristezas, porque es una fuerza que nos conforta y transforma el corazón.

Pastor Paul Lowe



THE FIVE SENSES OF CHRISTMAS

Luke 2: 10-11, "But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.'"

I was born and raised in South America. I spent my first ten formative years on the jungle coastal plains of the Guianas. The Guianas are located on the northeast tip of South America bordered by Venezuela to the west, Brazil to the Southwest and the Atlantic to the east. They are comprised of three former colonial settlements of the imperial British, Dutch and French empires of the 17th century new world conquests. These include my native Guyana formerly British Guiana, Dutch Suriname and French Guiana. Students of history or anthropology will often marvel at the myriad of sub-cultures, sub-ethnic groups and ethno-linguistic diversity contained in this somewhat unknown area of the new-world. Africans, Indians, Sri-Lankans, Pakistani, Afghan, Indonesians/Javanese, Burmese, Vietnamese, Chinese, Lebanese, Syrian, Japanese, British, Irish, Scottish, Portuguese, French, Dutch, German, Spanish and Native Americans all comprise the populous of the Guianas.

By now you have questioned what does any of this have to do with the experience of Christmas? Well, for me it's primarily the

senses. Yes, the stimulation of the senses. As diverse as the displacement of the Guianas, so is the celebration of Christmas. Christmas was a grand time for me as a child in Guyana. As Christmas approached we saw immediate visible changes to the city; Lights, colors, and crowds. We heard different sounds of music with carols being heralded or played in melody by varied instruments of all nationalities and tongues. We smelled a diversity of foods, pastries, beverages, and spices emanating from the homes of distinct nationalities and their native cuisines. We tasted ginger beers, rum cakes, indigenous cassava pepper pot soups, Irish and British blood sausages or puddings, to name a few. We felt both the physical presence of family and friends as well as the touch of gifts and embrace of a loved one. Such were the stimulating senses of Christmas.

As I reflect, many say it is indeed a marvelous work of colonialism; while others question its moral "goodness," as in, its global displacement it gathered and deposited a presence of all men. Yet, there is a greater global marvel we ponder through our anthropological lens. This global work in gathering and displacing humanity is not a work of men but indeed the work of God. In Luke chapter 2 verse 10, we read of this marvelous global work of gathering and displacement. However, unlike the bliss of

colonialism this work did not involve the capturing or forced possession of lands nor forced displacement and servitude of millions nor the sufferings and death of millions. It would instead come by the giving of a Sovereign God who loved His creation so much that He would cause His only son to, not take, but give up all of His wealth and sovereignty. In the theology, we call this work the "Objective Gospel". Objective because the obedient life of Christ was lived, and His innocent death was received for the salvation of all men (Romans 5:10 and Hebrews 2:9). Objective because it was established from the foundation of creation before we were born. Hence not of our works (Revelation 13:8).

God the father also enjoys the senses of Christmas. Yes! He enjoys seeing the joy of the redeemed. Hearing the cacophony of our praise. Feeling the proximity and warmth of our presence. Tasting and seeing that His work in us was good. Yet, He especially enjoys the smell of incense representing the death of His Son for the redemption of humanity. Revelation 8 verses 3, 4 tells us that our prayers ascend, blended with such aroma, is pleasing unto Him. Remember the true senses of Christmas.

A MESSAGE FROM OUR YOUTH DEPARTMENT

The end of the year is upon us and for many that means their favorite holiday is near. Christmas time is here! Schools will be out and some much needed time to rest and relax with family is in.

These last couple of years have been challenging and our lives have gone through significant change. It's made us reflect on the things that are truly important. I sincerely hope you have thought about the most important people in your life, what they mean to you, and how you can express your love and appreciation to them. Life has helped me realize that it is much more fulfilling to give than to receive. That rather than taking to serve myself, there is a blessing that comes from giving to those around you and seeing their joy be made complete.

So, as you prepare to give to those on your Christmas gift list, take some time to think about the most important person on that list: Jesus. You might be wondering, "What could I give to the One who has it all?" Yet there is one thing that Jesus doesn't have by default, and that is your heart. Jesus entrusted to us our own hearts and we have the choice to give it to whom we desire. I am reminded of the verse in Revelation 3:20, "Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends." (NLT) This verse reminds us that Jesus is a perfect gentleman. He stands at the door of our hearts and knocks. He doesn't force Himself on us or demand that He get His way. He simply knocks and waits for your response. When the apostle John wrote this letter, he was sharing a message from Jesus to His people. They struggled to fully give their hearts to Jesus. It led them to live their lives 'in-between'. I'm sure that we've been there at some point; living in the 'in-between'. Distracted by many things – work, school, social media, relationships, you can fill in the blank for yourself; but this form of living keeps us from fully giving ourselves over to Jesus. So, life becomes a cycle of mediocrity. You don't really enjoy the things the world offers because you know God has something far greater, but you don't really step into the fullness of being in relationship with Him so you're 'in-between' and it's frustrating.

Well, that can change. There is one thing Jesus really wants this season and that is your heart. They say that the most valuable gifts are not the ones with price tags, but the ones that are given from the heart. Give Jesus your heart! He's coming soon and it's the one thing He really wants.

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CONTINUACIÓN DE LA PÁGINA 4

El nacimiento de Jesús, de hecho, nos lleva a la bella noticia de que somos amados inmensamente por Dios y nos enseña a no ponernos por encima de los demás sino ponernos al servicio. Ruego que recibamos ese don y compartamos Su amor y Su evangelio con todo el mundo, en particular durante esta maravillosa época del año; es mi oración en el sagrado nombre de Jesucristo.

- Pastor Juan Daniel Villegas



“

For **to us** a child is **born**, **to us** a son is **given**,
and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called

Wonderful Counselor,

Mighty God,

Everlasting Father,

Prince of Peace.

”

Isaiah 9:6





Wishing you a Merry Christmas
and a New Year **filled** with
peace and joy



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