

“An Invitation to a Different Kind of Christmas”

1 John 2:15-17 ¹

It was a fairly ordinary Wednesday afternoon—except that I was in Chamulandu, Malawi, not at home in Tennessee. We’d been out all morning, walking on foot paths through fields of cassava from one small family cluster of mud and thatch huts to the next, sharing the Good News of Jesus and seeing one person after another come to Christ.

We’d returned to the central village of Chamulandu to eat lunch, and were chatting before heading back out into the fields for the afternoon. I was talking with Age Bota, one of the local pastors with whom we were working, as we stood near the large Toyota pickup in which my South African partner, Wendy, and I traveled the nearly one hundred kilometers from our base camp to Chamulandu every day.

Age spent the whole week with us, away from his family, some fifty kilometers north, and having absolutely nothing with him except for his Bible and the clothes on his back. In the evening, when Wendy and I drove back to our well-equipped camp, Age and his fellow pastors slept on dirt floors in the huts of whatever villagers would take them in. It was a scene that could have come right out of the pages of the Gospels!



I don’t remember his exact question, but as we talked, Age asked me something about how we live in the U.S. You and I enjoy a standard of living that is absolutely incredible from the perspective of one who lives in a barter society where \$1.40 is a really good wage for a full day’s work. As we talked, I told Age, “I know you’re not going to believe me, but there are important ways in which you are far richer here in Malawi than we are in the U.S. Yes, we’ve got lots of nice stuff, and we live very comfortably as far as physical things are concerned, but our lives are so busy and our families are so isolated that I find myself envying you and your people.

“Because your homes aren’t air conditioned and it’s more comfortable outside than inside, you and your neighbors sit together and talk in the evenings. You’re actually good friends who help each other with stuff. And because there’s no electricity to make it possible to work far into the night, you go to bed when it gets dark and rise with the sun. That means you get a lot more sleep than we do.

“Because you have no vehicles and have to walk everywhere you go, your people seem healthier than we Americans—at least you’re not all overweight, as most of us are! Because you don’t have all the sugary sodas and junk food we have, your teeth are absolutely magnificent—and I could go on and on.”

Well, I was right. Age didn’t believe me. But while I’m not ready to give up air conditioning and electricity, I really do find much to like about his way of life. Relationships seemed stronger there, where mutual interdependence is a necessity of survival.

My conversation with Age reminds me of something actor Jim Carrey once said: “I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it’s not the answer.”² Hold that thought and we’ll come back to it.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on November 30, 2014.

² Jim Carrey, “Quotable Quotes,” *Readers Digest* (March 2006).

One of the benefits of living in an electrified world is having personal computers. I'd have a hard time doing all I do without my laptop and iPhone, but they're surely a mixed blessing. Without these electronic assistants, I'd be forced to do less, and I'd probably have more free time, like my friend Age. And as many of you know, computers can be really cantankerous!

Sometimes when I'm working on computers I get a message something like, "Your disk is full. Nothing more can be added. Please delete files or insert a different disk." And when I compare my life with Age's life, sometimes I imagine that I see the message, "Your life is full. Nothing more can be added. Please delete activities or get a different life."

Have you ever felt like that? Can you sense any such feeling now that we've officially entered the pre-Christmas shopping season? Less than a month from today, Christmas 2014 will be behind us. What will the next four weeks be like for you and for your family?

It seems to me that the price of our material prosperity is long hours, crazy schedules, fast food, and lots of clutter . . . while our family relationships are often pretty much a wreck. Sometimes we act as though—and I certainly include myself here—relationship time is an extraneous something that has to be squeezed into our schedules; but God says life is really all about relationships.

According to God's priorities, life isn't about achievement. Life isn't about getting a lot of stuff. Life is about relationships. One of the things I enjoy about the time between Thanksgiving Day and New Year's Day is that the world seems more gentle, more friendly, more kind, more courteous, more patient, and more generous than it usually does. Most of us go out of our way to be nice to each other during these five weeks, and I find myself wishing that in this sense, at least, Christmas could last all year.

As I remember my conversation with Age, I'd like to invite you to join me in considering a different kind of Christmas observance this year. I'll describe a typical American Christmas and then suggest an alternative approach.

According to statistics that are now a decade old—I couldn't find any new ones, but they'd be worse—we Americans spend nearly twenty-four billion dollars every year just on imported toys. That's more money on toys than is spent by the next ten highest toy-importing countries put together! According to *U.S. News*, the average American kid gets seventy new toys every year, magnifying our trade deficit and sending American jobs overseas.³

In 2003, we spent nearly three hundred billion dollars in the fourth quarter, much of which was on Christmas stuff, and which was equal to about three-quarters of our defense budget—even in the middle of a war! But that was really not so much. Our holiday spending this year is expected to be *six hundred billion dollars!*⁴

And it's not as though we needed more stuff. According to the Self-Storage Association, we Americans now have about 2.3 billion square feet (not cubic feet, which would be a truly incredible number!)—of personal storage space outside the home.⁵ There is actually 7.3 square feet of self-storage space for every man, woman, and child in the nation; so it is physically possible that every single American could stand—all at the same time—under the total canopy of self-storage roofing.

³ "Harper's Index," *Harper's Magazine* (December, 2005), p. 13; Katy Kelly and Linda Kulman, "Kid Power," www.usnews.com (September 13, 2004).

⁴ www.adventconspiracy.org

⁵ www.selfstorage.org/ssa/Content/NavigationMenu/AboutSSA/FactSheet/default.htm

Yet while our external storage space has grown, so has the size of our houses. According to the National Association of Homebuilders, the average American house grew from 1,660 square feet in 1973 to 2,598 square feet in 2013. That's a 57% increase in the size of our houses. While our houses have *grown*, the size of the average American household has *declined* from 3.67 persons in 1948 to 2.54 persons in 2012.⁶

So here's the situation: our houses are getting larger, our families are getting smaller, we need well over two billion square feet of external home-related storage to hold the stuff we've already got, and we're about to spend six hundred billion dollars to buy more stuff in the next four weeks that will have to be put somewhere! *What's wrong with this picture?* I'm afraid the evidence is that we have believed the lie that *Veggie Tales* memorably captured in the statement, "*Happiness waits at the Stuff Mart! All you need is lots more stuff!*"

Is Jack Whittaker's name familiar to you? At Christmas, 2002, Jack, already a wealthy contractor, won the largest undivided Powerball jackpot of all time—at least to that point—becoming \$315 million dollars richer. Since that time, though, Jack has been twice arrested for drunk driving. He's gotten in trouble for gambling and carousing, and his only granddaughter died from a drug overdose related to dissipated living. Two years later, Jack's wife, Jewel, said, "I wish I had torn that ticket up."⁷

The Whittakers did just what Jim Carrey described: they got rich and famous and did everything they ever dreamed of, and found out that stuff is not the answer to the emptiness in our souls. Like so many others before them, Jack and Jewel ended up more empty in the end than they'd been in the beginning. As Paul reminded us in 1 Timothy 6:6-7, "*godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.*"

Now that we've entered the pre-Christmas shopping season, the season of Advent begins today. Advent is intended to be a time for spiritual reflection, family time, and friendship. And because that's the real gift that's supposed to come at Christmas, I'd like to invite you to enjoy a different kind of Christmas this year.

In the early eighties, while Jill and I were serving our first church, I remember talking to one of our members who had just returned from taking his car to get the oil changed. In those days, I always did such things myself, because I had more time than I had money. My friend paid somebody to change his oil, saying, "I have more money than I have time." Thirty-five years later, I paid someone to change my oil this week, too.

When I think about the possible uses of time and money at Christmas, it seems to me that Advent has been co-opted by wasteful—and probably, *sinful*—consumerism, and that we could all benefit from another approach to December. After all, the truth is that you and I don't really need any more stuff. We need more time together with the people we love!

The Bible encourages us to "*stop just saying that we love each other, and show our love by our actions*" (1 John 3:18, NLT). Rick Warren has said that "The best use of life is LOVE. The best expression of love is TIME. And the best time to love is NOW."

Now giving time is costly. We can nearly always get more money, but we can never, ever, get any more time. And none of us knows how many days have been allotted to us. The psalmist

⁶ www.marketingcharts.com/traditional/american-households-are-getting-smaller-and-headed-by-older-adults-24981/; www.census.gov/hhes/families/data/cps2013AVG.html

⁷ "Wife Regrets Husband's \$314 million Lottery Windfall," www.msn.com (December 14, 2004).

asked, “LORD, remind me how brief my time on earth will be. Remind me that my days are numbered, and that my life is fleeing away” (Psalm 39:4, NLT).

There are several websites that offer suggestions for alternative ways to celebrate CHRISTmas, but the one I’ll suggest to you is www.adventconspiracy.org. The four emphases that you’ll find there are Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More, and Love All, with short videos and suggestions for each.

Although one of the other sites is www.buynothingchristmas.org, I’m not suggesting that we literally buy nothing for each other at Christmas, but I am suggesting that we change the focus of what we do. The whole idea of Christmas giving has to do with a birthday celebration, yet we frequently fail to take seriously whose birthday we’re celebrating.⁸

So what do you think Jesus would like to have for His birthday? There are many possible answers to that question, but Jesus was very clear that part of His answer has to do with feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and caring for the sick (Matthew 25:31-46). It’s been calculated that \$70-80 billion dollars a year would provide clean water, sanitation, prenatal and infant/maternal care, basic education, immunizations, and long-term development resources for every person in the world. And as I recently pointed out, it has also been calculated that if all the Christians just in these United States tithed their income as the Bible tells us to do, that obedience would generate more than enough money to do all those things.⁹

So here’s my four-step proposal for a different kind of Christmas:

1. Give generously to causes that Jesus cares about. For example, **I encourage you to give no less to missions this month than you will spend on the person on whom you spend the most money for Christmas—including yourself**. Give to Global Missions through the Baptist World Alliance. Give to the Lottie Moon Offering for Foreign Missions through the Southern Baptist Convention. Give to the CBF Well Project for Ghana. Give to Help End Homelessness Howard County. Give to Mark Wakefield’s Youth Ranch in Guatemala. (And remember that according to the Bible, such gifts are to be over and above the tithe.) *Whose birthday is it, anyway?*
2. Do your primary giving to family members on their birthdays, not at Christmas. Focus your family’s Advent experiences more on spiritual things than on consumerism and on toys and gadgets and clothes that will break, won’t work, or won’t fit.
3. Ask yourself whether your Christmas customs and behaviors are heart-felt or custom-driven, and then dump the things that are not genuine expressions of love. Don’t let the world—or other family members—squeeze your family into its or their own molds. Listen to your heart and follow your joy. You’ll be glad you did!
4. Plan significant amounts of non-stressed, special time with people you love this month. To paraphrase Jesus, “Christmas was made to benefit people, and not people to benefit Christmas” (Mark 2:27). At the end of their lives, nobody wants more stuff, but everybody wishes they’d spent more time with the people they love. We can fix that, and we can fix it now!

⁸ Actually, the astronomical evidence is that Jesus was born on June 17, 2 B.C. December 25 was more likely the date that the Magi visited Bethlehem. See www.bethlehemstar.net/starry-dance/the-birth-of-a-king.

⁹ Craig Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Books, 2004), p. 51.

I think this is going to be a GREAT Christmas!