

Celebrating an Ethical Christmas

*Karen Hoeft, Canada and Bermuda Territory
Adapted from Revive October-December 2011*

Set-up: Display a decorated Christmas tree and cover tables with Christmas table clothes, however do not go to elaborate with decorating. Keep it simple!

Program:

Welcome:

Carols: *Hark! The herald angels sing* SASB 82

O Little town of Bethlehem SASB 86

Scripture: *James 1:13-17 (NIV); Galatians 5:19-23 (The Message)*

Reading: **Celebrating an Ethical Christmas**

Christmas time is coming and we need to get ready! For many people in Canada Christmas means gift giving and much time and effort is spent in choosing the perfect present for family and friends. Some people will start their Christmas shopping early in the year while others wait until the last minute. In most Western countries gift giving is high on the agenda for the Christmas season. We may talk about the nativity and the real 'Reason for the Season' (the birth of Jesus), but we take this gift giving tradition very seriously!

However, my own family underwent a major change in our gift-giving practice in 2007. In February of that year, I travelled to Mexico with a Women's Ministry Mission Team. There we shared with Salvation Army officers who, with limited resources and at great personal cost, were reaching out to needy children in their neighborhood.

When we returned to Canada I shared my experiences with my husband and my three teenage children. As a family we decided to send the money we would normally spend on Christmas gifts to this ministry in Mexico. We didn't tell them how to spend it; we just wanted to 'gift' it to them with no strings attached.

This decision revolutionized our family Christmas gift giving practices and since then we have continued sharing beyond our family. Now, instead of everyone in the family getting many gifts, we each give and receive one gift. This means that what we would have previously spent on all the other family members we now share with people outside our family.

While this gift giving practice is quite radical for most of us in the developed world, it does mean that we help others who usually would receive very little, or nothing, at Christmas.

However, in coming to this new approach our family has to seriously consider the motivation behind our usual gift giving practices. This journey included discussing our value and why we give gifts.

When we give Christmas gifts what values are we promoting intentionally or unintentionally? Most of us believe our gift giving shows our generosity, thoughtfulness, sacrifice and care. However, we may also subconsciously be promoting selfishness, materialism or even competitiveness.

Gift giving is usually based on family or cultural traditions which most of us would have rarely stopped to analyze. In working this through it is helpful to ask questions such as: 'What is our real motivation to give gifts? Is it because we want to be loved, want to belong or don't want to be excluded? Do we feel obligated to others or want to show off? Do we want to receive a gift in return or do we give because we have always done it, because it is tradition?

When doing this analysis we can also determine what kinds of gifts we want to give. We can choose to give ethical gifts and a search on the internet will result in many websites selling eco-friendly gifts or charities with fair-trade gifts. Nowadays even local charity shops and shopping malls may offer products from fair-trade or income-generating projects.

So when it comes to gifts, what does Scripture say? 'Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows' .

(James 1:16-17, NIV).

What could be deceptive about the art of giving? The previous verses in James 1 talk about temptation that leads to death. The writer explains, 'When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death'. (James 1:13-15, NIV)

This is the greatest deception! Many motivations or desires are all about 'me' and not about 'others'. Christmas, however, is about sacrifice, the Incarnation and the greatest gift ever given. The Creator became the created! The all-powerful one became dependent! He who was without sin came to pay the price of sin! The perfect gift was given-Jesus.

Take time this Christmas season to consider how you celebrate Christmas. Is your Christmas celebration a commercial event? Or is Christmas a time of sharing God's gift, Jesus with

family, friends and the world?

May Jesus, the gift you receive this Christmas change your life forever and may the gifts you share with others come from a heart overflowing with gratitude. Merry Christmas!

Discussion: Talk about the values you want to promote at Christmas time versus those values we often unintentionally endorse.

Reflection: Consider the amazing and perfect gift that was given which we celebrate at Christmas.

Action: How shall we then live? How do we act out the values we want to promote? What will that look like this Christmas? Next Christmas?

Examples of Action:

Denise Walker, Canada and Bermuda Territory

Adapted from Article, We can be like them-Revive October-December 2011

-Make Christmas cards for people serving in other countries.

-Donate canned goods to a local food bank.

-Raise money to purchase a gift such as a goat or chicken or a well for water in another country.

-Give fair-trade gifts such as chocolate and coffee.

-Host a Christmas party for children who are new citizens to your country.

(These actions could be done individually or as a group.)

Carols: *Away in a manger SASB 77*

Joy to the world SASB 84

Refreshments: Christmas sweets and tea.