

Getting Christmas Right?

Are you one of those Christians who each year looks back at your Christmas, and wonders whether it was *really* how God wanted it to be?

Do you usually feel bullied and swept along by the demands and expectations of family and society – and a bit disappointed?

Would God say to you:

*'Well, done,
you managed to get the spending of your time and of your money,
and the arranging of everything, just as I had planned for you' ?*

If your answer is 'No!', then read on, because such:

after-Christmas blues
may be largely avoided by a
pre-Christmas policy!

It is a sound principle to draw-up some 'Rules of the Game' *before* it takes place – and Christmas is no exception!

The purpose of these Notes is to help you work out the pre-Christmas policy that God has for you.

- *I cannot write your Policy for you, but -*
- *God may highlight certain guidelines of mine, and -*
- *Wish you to use some of them as a basis for your own, or as an addition to them.*

This article could be a particularly useful topic for a Christian discussion or study group meeting early in December.

NOW is the time to do it!
Give this TOP PRIORITY.
Good Guidelines applied too late are useless!

But first, a prayer –

*Dear Lord,
Guide me as I think ahead about Christmas.
Give me both the sensitivity to be gracious
and the courage to be tough.
Keep me close to the Truth of Christmas,
Guide me along your Way through Christmas,
May I radiate your Life in Christmas.
Through Jesus Christ, my Way, my Truth and my Life. Amen.*

Here, then, are six guidelines for you to consider.

1. CHRISTMAS CARDS

Send early CHRISTIAN Cards.

- Don't waste this annual opportunity of spreading the Good News of the Christmas Gospel by sending secular cards. Do not reward a card firm by increasing their financial profits if they ignore Christ at Christmas! Society still allows Christian cards – but for how long? If *all* Christians sent *only* Christian Christmas cards – that would reverse the present trend to phase out 'religious' cards altogether. (A similar principle may be applied to Christmas wrapping paper – since the word 'Christmas' is being dropped as a Politically Incorrect hot-potato!)
- Because of the potential of Christmas cards to proclaim the Gospel to non-Christians and to encourage Christians, be generous in the number of cards you send.
- If your finances restrict this, use the cheapest cards available e.g. those that you can print off this website – which are only a single printed A4 sheet. (They can be found in the *Christmas Resources* article).

2. COSTS

Plan – Budget – Spread

Use cheaper cards (see last section).

Be tough with the assumptions of commercial groups whose only aim is to make profits at your expense. Don't be fooled by their language about what everyone 'needs' and 'must have'!

Be tough with your own assumptions about gifts and any pride that prompts you to 'keep up with the Joneses'.

Budget your giving. Do not let the demands of the season distort your finances.

Don't leave your spending to the last minute. Next year (if not this) spread your Christmas buying over the year. This has a number of advantages –

1. You can use the Sales, and reduce costs.
2. Less rush means that you have the time to select the particularly suitable gift as/when you see it.
3. It spreads the financial outlay.
4. It reduces the demands on you prior to Christmas.

A gift is – believe it or not – a *gift* ! This needs to be said otherwise we can fall into two traps.

- a) That the purpose of a gift is to show-off our prestige or wealth to others.
- b) that Christmas gift-giving must conform to an unwritten code of bartering,
i.e. that the gift given must equal the value of the gift received, and vice-versa.

Keep alert to these traps of thinking that your gifts are either self-advertising or trading!

3. GIFTS

Keep them good.

Avoid anything that, even indirectly, glorifies war; dwells on violence; might stir up hatred; or aggravate division.

St. Paul's check-list for our thoughts is also a good one for our Christmas gifts: *Whatever things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely and of good report.*

Think afresh about what is best for each person – the life both of individuals and society changes. Revise your habits if necessary (see next section).

4. THE RECEIVER

Give in his/her true interests.

Do not encourage bad habits, e.g. smoking.

Do not pander to a person's weakness. E.g. if a person has a weight- or drink-problem, do not make life more difficult for them, however much it would initially please them. (This may require of us real *love*.)

Be sensitive and realistic.

Do not add clutter to people whose lives are already swamped by it.

Be sensitive to people's finances. Do not, for instance, give to the relatively poor a gift that will require money to maintain.

Be sensitive to people's lifestyle. Do not give time-consuming things to very busy people.

Do not give non-readers 'heavy' books!

Be sensitive to people's homes. Do not give large gifts to those who are already short of space!

The relatively poor can find getting life's basic requirements a struggle. Consumables can be a greater blessing to such folk than the ownership of yet another 'thing'. The right selection of groceries can be a good idea?

Some charities have invented a wheeze whereby your 'gift' to a friend or loved-one gets diverted to someone else. This certainly helps the charity and helps the person they select. It is *not*, however, in the interests of your original 'receiver', but against them. The young niece who gets no more presents from you because your gift to her has been diverted to a child in Africa or Asia will experience such a switch only in negative terms. Such a change will inevitably feel to her like rejection and *ill-will* rather than love and *goodwill*. That is no way to help her celebrate the birth of Jesus!

No mention has been made of specifically Christian gifts. The most likely are books or CDs, DVD's, to which magazine subscriptions might be added. Great care and sensitivity is required to get this right, and particularly if any switch is made. A boy who has a space-gun from you one year but a CD of Worship Songs the next, might not warm to Christianity in quite the way you hoped!

Visit your local Christian bookshop. In recent years there has been a revolution in Christian publishing, and on many subjects there are attractive, well-illustrated, easy-to-read and user-friendly books ('Lion Publishing' was among the first). There are also stacks of videos, CD's and DVD's now available – but tastes and needs differ greatly. What suits and 'feeds' you spiritually may not help another.

5. IN FOCUS

Keeping Jesus at the Centre.

- To avoid your plans to celebrate Christmas being scuppered at the last moment by others, work out early what/how/when/where you are going to celebrate Christ's Birth spiritually, i.e. the *religious* bit. It is better to face these issues (if there *are* issues in your particular family) early in the month than to postpone facing them and making a battleground of them on Christmas Day!
- Your situation will vary from every other person's, but in general you'll want to remain true to your Christian calling, while showing love and grace to those who want to celebrate Christmas but who have not yet met the Christ at its centre.
- Many secular Christmas traditions are good in themselves – the gathering of families, the giving of gifts, the sharing of a meal together. There is a lot of *gathering*, *giving* and *sharing* in Scripture: you will not want to appear unnecessarily to attack or undermine them.

- Be as flexible as your conscience will allow, and avoid giving unnecessary offence. If you are a representative of Christ and Christians in a largely non-Christian group and have to make a stance that they do not like, try to ensure that your love and consideration of them in all other ways is exemplary.

6. THE NEEDY

Don't simply by-pass the nearest needs.

- We don't need reminding that Scripture, Christian tradition and the Christmas Season all point us to the needs of the poor.
- It is good that our support of charities eases the lives of the poor and suffering, so we should make sure we support them. But we must be aware that the very existence of good charities may cushion us from, and dull us to, the pain and misery of others. By doing our 'dirty work' for us, charities may desensitize us. (It is important that this does not happen, because we cannot have a true assessment of what God has given us, if we view our life in isolation.)
- People's needs are very wide, and some of the most 'needy' can be those close to us. It can be easier to help a young lad in Africa than the neighbour next door. Be alert to this.
- The need of so many is to matter and to be loved – the very message that God displayed at Bethlehem!
- It may be that our greatest gifts are not those selected with care and purchased wisely, but the gift to others of
ourselves
our time and
our love.

God will, I know, bless you this Christmas.

But I am also sure that if you submit your Christmas period and programme to him, and revise it in the light of what you perceive is his will, that that obedience will reap special rewards – most certainly for others, and probably for you as well.

John Richards