

## *Christmas Gifts—LDS Style*

HUGH W. PINNOCK

When Elder F. Enzo Busche was attempting to make a telephone call from Frankfurt, Germany, on December 5, 1995, he accidentally pushed the wrong button and was connected to Elder Dean L. Larsen at 7:00 a.m. Elder Larsen asked how things were going. Elder Busche replied by saying, “It is hard to imagine how much we are learning from our experiences in Russia.” Recently he had visited in Moscow with the mission president there, who had several branches under his direction. He had written to each branch, wanting to know what they were going to do to celebrate Christmas. Each branch president replied except one. Several additional requests to the one were made without results. Finally the mission president contacted the branch president directly about the project and was startled to hear the response, “What is Christmas?”

Each of you knows what Christmas is, but today let us explore the holiday of holidays even more deeply.

I have never before been in a position to deliver an early Christmas gift to so many in one place. That is what I hope to do this morning. If there is a group of young adults anywhere in the world more deserving of a special Christmas gift, I cannot imagine where.

A number of years ago someone began delivering gifts to us by night, leaving them on our front porch about two weeks before Christmas. We didn’t know who it was. When the first gift was discovered, I asked our children to look around the driveway and our front-porch area to see if the card had simply dropped out of the package. They couldn’t find the name of the person who had brought the gift to us. The same thing happened the next day. Within another day or two we figured someone had made our family the focus of the 12 days of Christmas tradition. For almost two weeks prior to Christmas that year, a wonderful young woman dropped off gifts and, in an important way, changed the lives of our children. They were so touched by her generosity and her desire to *secretly* do such a nice thing that they each have participated in the 12 days of Christmas for others since that time. The holiday season brings memories of her kindness.

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*Hugh W. Pinnock was a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at BYU on 9 December 1997.*

I would like to address my remarks this day focusing on 12 presents that I would like to give you. I would prefer to deliver them in person, but that is impossible. If carefully thought about and used, they will keep you on the path of peace and joy today, tomorrow, and perhaps forever. Make this your happiest Christmas!

### First Present

**Let the gospel of Jesus Christ be your guide, your personal philosophy, and the main determinate of your decision making.**

Several years ago a man I had known for 30 years asked if he could come and spend time with me in my office.

I said, “Yes, of course,” and eagerly anticipated his visit.

When we sat down he said something that surprised me. He mentioned that there were several of us who seemed to have things figured out when we were in school many years ago. I asked him who, and he named several of our mutual friends. In each instance they had been people who, at around your age, had determined to live the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Savior made an interesting statement that only John recorded. We are all familiar with the words “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). But in that same chapter, a few verses later, the Lord said, “If a man love me, he will keep my words” (John 14:23). Then he went on to reiterate the most amazing promise for someone like you he had ever made. He said, “And my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him” (John 14:23). Having the Savior move into your apartment or dorm would, I suppose, somewhat alter your daily behavior. Think for a moment: Could there ever be a greater reward than to be that close to the Father and Son?

Incidentally, my friend has gone on to live the gospel more deeply and thoroughly than ever before and is presently living a somewhat

remarkable life because he decided to accept the gift of Jesus Christ in his life.

A lovely lady wrote:

*You never know when someone  
Might catch a dream from you  
Some little thing you say  
Or some little thing you do.  
Might open up the windows  
Of a mind that seeks the light.*

*A certain way you live might not matter,  
But, you never really know. It might!*

[Jenny Jones Fredericks Belliston, “Christmas Message,” 1997]

### Second Present

**Select good friends.**

Already many of you have as friends some of the finest individuals you will ever know. They love you, they appreciate you, they are happy in your presence and you in theirs. After your college years you will make more friends, of course, but as the years quickly come and go, you will learn that some of your closest friends are those men and women with whom you are already acquainted. Select your friends almost as carefully as you select your eternal companion. Choose friends of different backgrounds and cultures. Many of your special friends are to be different from you, and from that comes great strength. Continue to earn their friendship. My wife and I, as we mail Christmas cards each year, realize that some of these wonderful school friends remain the backbone of those we love today.

Friends are the bargains of life. Treat them as a precious treasure.

### Third Present

**Guard your name and do your best.**

I have a friend that I met in the seventh grade. His name is George Suvall. He has been a very successful basketball coach and trainer. He is also a homespun philosopher. Periodically I see him out walking near where

we live. We stop to chat. George reported his family had come from Greece when he was very young. At first, because they didn't speak English in the home, George did not know how to read or write English very well. He was able to keep most of it a secret. An insightful teacher, because she cared and noticed that he was always trying to do his best, rescued him. One day his father was attempting to explain the importance of doing the best you can to George and said, "Hey, George, if you gonna be anything, you be the best anything you can be." His father knew that in America if you do the best you can, you will succeed.

Then his father said, "Georgie, there are two-a-things you cannot-a buy. It's a your-a-name and your-a-health. Take-a-care of them both." Those few words provided a personal philosophy George still follows.

First: Do the best you can.

Second: Protect your name.

Third: Guard your health.

If I notice a single characteristic about the men and women I serve with, it is their commitment to go the extra mile, often tirelessly working through the hours that sometimes an individual 40 years younger will not do. The *respect* that you earn so often comes when you are *trusted* to do extra things as needed. Your good name comes from what you do and the things you say.

#### Fourth Present

##### **Live a covenant-making life.**

Are you willing to make a contract between yourself and God? Let us talk about dating, as an example. What is a date? Well, social interaction, going to the game, attending a college activity, studying together, watching a video or movie, going for a walk. It is a time to covenant with God that we will behave.

But what if we define a date as an opportunity for each of you to get to know someone better by promising yourself that at the end of the evening, the person you have been with is

a better person than when you began the date? Can you say at the end of the evening, "Thank you for being such a kind person? It has been wonderful being with you tonight." Or maybe a date is a time to visit someone in need. Is it possible that your best dates are when you *lift* and *teach* and *help* and *bless* another? Could a date be a time to discuss the gospel of Jesus Christ in all of its magnificence? How about sharing a secret thought, an eternal dream, a future hope? Shouldn't a date be a frustration-free, guilt-free experience? Covenant with the Lord, promising him you will leave circumstances better than you find them.

#### Fifth Present

##### **Give the Savior a chance to build you to your full potential.**

The Lord will push you right to the brink, if you allow him to. It was Jesus who stated, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Plead with the Lord to give you more challenges. If you study 20 hours each week, then say, "Lord, I am going for more." Let his example give you power to ask, "In addition to what I am doing, what else?"

*The heights by great men reached and kept  
Were not attained by sudden flight,  
But they, while their companions slept,  
Were toiling upward in the night.*

[Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Ladder of St. Augustine* (1858), st. 10]

Elder Neal A. Maxwell received a very low grade on a high school English essay he wrote. He went to Miss Mason and said, "This is not fair. This is good work. I deserve a higher grade."

She said, "Sorry, but I grade students by potential. You are capable of much better work."

Elder Maxwell has often stated, "She made the difference in my life." Why? Because he wanted to meet her expectations. He wanted to

be the best he could, and because of that he has continued to be one of the most verbal and clear-thinking people in the Church.

Are we meeting the Lord's expectations for us? Never, ever forget: He has great plans for each of us!

### Sixth Present

#### Speak and seek the truth.

In John 4:23 we read, "But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in *truth*: for the Father seeketh such to worship him" (emphasis added).

The Prophet Joseph Smith defined the gospel as all truth by stating, "Truth is 'Mormonism'" (*Teachings*, p. 139).

John also stated, "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

Seneca wrote, "Time discovers truth" (*Moral Essays*, "On Anger," 2, 22).

"What is truth?" asked Pilate, but he would not even stay for an answer (John 18:38).

Whether you are a scientist or not, make pure truth an eternal objective. It is only when you are honest that you are safe.

### Seventh Present

#### Seek to retain or reobtain the heart of a child, especially at Christmastime.

*Backward, turn backward, O Time, in your flight,  
Make me a child again just for tonight!*  
[Elizabeth Akers Allen, *Rock Me To Sleep* (1860), st. 1]

In the *Daily Mail*, a British newspaper, dated December 21, 1995, an article was printed reporting that Laura Goffin, six years old, had been told that she was naughty during the stressful time many families go through while decorating for Christmas. In a few hasty words she was informed that Santa wouldn't

be coming down the chimney because of something she had done to aggravate her parents.

Now six-year-old Laura had a nagging fear—would Santa overlook her little brother and sister, too?

*She decided to plead the cases of Abigail, four, and two-year-old Alfie in a personal letter to Father Christmas. She wrote: "Dear Santa, Don't come to me as I have been very naughty and I told my mummy I don't want any toys for Christmas and I don't want Christmas.*

*"Please come to Abigail and Alfie, but not me. Laura."*

She dropped her note into Santa's letter box outside the town hall in Milford Haven, touching the heart of the mayor's secretary when she read it as a yule season assignment.

The letter's plea caused the secretary to search and finally find the little girl who was prepared to "miss out on the festive fun" of Christmas but didn't want her little brother and sister ignored—a *sweet little girl whom the world had not yet polluted*.

The mayor gave her a new doll. Her parents were startled at the way she had responded, to which she said, "I'm sorry I was naughty and I promise Father Christmas I will be a good girl from now on." ("The Girl Who Told Santa She Was Too Naughty to Be on His List," *Daily Mail*, 21 December 1995, p. 28.)

Let me tell you of another example of Christmastime giving.

*During a drive to amass warm clothing to ship to suffering Saints, Elder Harold B. Lee and Elder Marion G. Romney took President George Albert Smith to Welfare Square in Salt Lake City. They were impressed by the generous response of the membership of the Church to the clothing drive and the preparations for sending the goods overseas. They watched President Smith observing the workers as they packaged this great volume of donated*

clothing and shoes. They saw tears running down his face. After a few moments, President Smith removed a new overcoat that he had on and said, "Please ship this also."

The Brethren said to him, "No, President, no; don't send that; it's cold and you need your coat."

But President Smith would not take it back. [Thomas S. Monson, "My Brother's Keeper," *Ensign*, November 1994, p. 45; see also Glen L. Rudd, *Pure Religion* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995), p. 248]

May we be childlike, not childish. (See the ninth present to understand the difference.)

### **Eighth Present**

#### **Seek the world of "reality."**

Are you seeking the world of reality? Periodically I will hear some less-than-thoughtful person criticize our lifestyle or demean that which we may be doing by saying, "Hey, get real. Join the real world." May I communicate with each of you that the real world is that which our prophet, Church leaders, and scriptures define. It is President Gordon B. Hinckley who is walking in the real world. How blessed we are to have him!

A number of years ago, as I was leaving the Church Office Building a day or two before Christmas, I found myself walking next to Elder Bruce R. McConkie. We wished each other a merry Christmas. I drove home and surmised he did the same. The day after Christmas the telephone rang. It was David Wirthlin, the administrator of the LDS Hospital.

"Guess what happened just before Christmas?" he asked.

"I don't know," I replied.

"Elder Bruce R. McConkie came to the hospital. He asked if he could give a few blessings. With permission granted, he went from room to room placing his hands on the heads of several dozen patients."

That is the real world, isn't it?

### **Ninth Present**

#### **Be an effective giver.**

There is a line that all must step over. It marks the place where an individual goes from receiving more pleasure from giving than from receiving gifts.

As seniors in high school, several of us had decided to sub for Santa. We had been given the name of a single mother who had three little children. They lived in a rather dismal apartment house with dirty walls, steps, and hallways. The whole building needed a coat of paint and a scrubbing. The doors didn't fit very well.

We gathered food, toys, and clothes. Excitedly we ascended a rickety staircase to the door with the number on it that we had been given.

A tired woman invited us in. There were no warm lights or even a tree to greet us. Her little children seemed too frightened to speak. As we placed the gifts around a tree we had bought and did some decorating, we observed a large, quite new television set. Our gifts were soon distributed, signaling that it was time for us to leave. The little family said very little as we slipped out of that dark place to go home. Father greeted me as I arrived home.

"How did it go?" he asked.

"Fine, Dad, except," I sputtered, "they had this large TV set." That was a time when many families could not afford a big television or even a small one.

My father said something like, "What does that have to do with it?"

I stammered, "Well, why didn't the lady buy Christmas toys, decorations, and food for her family instead of the big TV?"

"Maybe that is all they have for any happiness in their lives," Dad said.

I realized that what he said was true. We had observed how little else they had. Suddenly my whole immature attitude spun around. We had blessed four people and that was all that mattered. We are never quite the same after an experience like that. Some of my own pettiness

evaporated that night as I realized how much we had enjoyed giving those gifts.

President Howard W. Hunter said:

*Let us look backward for just a moment to our childhood and analyze that which gave us the greatest happiness when we were children. I am inclined to believe that the things we enjoyed most and those that gave us the greatest happiness when we were children, were the things that were given to us. When our parents went away and returned, we always looked for some little token they would bring back to us. We looked forward to Christmas because of the things we were going to receive. Our whole life was built around receiving. At that time we did not understand the other side of giving. Sometime during our progress through this life, we came to that point when we suddenly realized it was not receiving that brings us happiness. To some this comes early in life; to others it comes later; and I am inclined to believe that there are some who never have this awakening during the daytime of their lives. They miss one of the great principles that brings happiness to us. [Howard W. Hunter, *Gifts That Money Cannot Buy*, Brigham Young University Speeches of the Year (Provo, 26 April 1961), p. 2]*

Yes, hopefully we will all be able to completely leave those years of childhood when our thoughts are more self-focused than they should be. Victor Herbert captured that truth when he wrote:

*Toyland, Toyland,  
Little girl and boy land,  
While you dwell within it  
You are ever happy then.  
Childhood's joyland,  
Mystic, merry Toyland!  
Once you pass its borders,  
You can ne'er return again.*

["Toyland," words by Glen MacDonough and music by Victor Herbert, Ardee Music Publishing, Inc., 1981]

## Tenth Present

### **Bless others with your hands.**

Look at your hands. Are they busy lifting the burdens of others? Are they used in happy greeting as you shake another's hand? Marriage vows are taken while holding hands. Will the diploma you receive from this institution be received with a hand outstretched? Hands give blessings when placed on another's head. It is with our hands that we write a term paper, paint a painting, play the piano, or wave to a friend in parting. What about the hands of your professors as they write upon a chalkboard or help you utilize a test tube, a computer, or a scientific measuring device more effectively?

Hands symbolize so much. Whom do your hands applaud? How do you use your hands? By wrapping a gift? By helping a friend with a complex mathematical problem? Each of you is learning to become more self-sustaining and more skilled in your life's pursuits. Yet each of us needs a hand to lift us at one time or another in our lives. A couple falling in love as they hold each other's hands are saying, "It's you I love." Those same hands could be saying, "I will protect you. I will strive to be a good servant of the Master. I will play with a child, help a colleague move—or help a merry Christmas to happen as we speak those holiday words."

President Gordon B. Hinckley reported a pioneer Christmas he had learned about. He quoted a story he had read in which the author wrote:

*I remember the Christmas of 1862. All of us children hung up our stockings. We jumped up early in the morning to see what Santa had brought, but there was not a thing in them. Mother wept bitterly. She went to her box and got a little apple and cut it in little tiny pieces and that was our Christmas, but I have never forgotten to this day how I loved her dear little hands as she was cutting that apple.*

[Hannah Daphne Smith Dalton, quoted by Gordon B. Hinckley, *CR*, April 1959, p. 119]

Incidentally, this year President Gordon B. Hinckley has been in 20 countries and has had 137 speaking assignments with 731,671 in attendance (information provided by the Office of the First Presidency, 6 December 1997). This does not include general conference nor so many other engagements he attends as he represents the Savior and each of us.

### Eleventh Present

#### Offer the gift of generosity.

The level of our sharing with others is the level of our love for others combined with large doses of self-forgetting. Generosity, in part, symbolizes our maturity level.

On the birthdays of our children and grandchildren, my wife and I distribute a dollar for each year they have lived. I am 63 years old. An eight-year-old granddaughter had been worrying about the fact that I had just sent her \$8 for her birthday but that she couldn't afford to send me 63 one-dollar bills for my birthday.

Finally she hit upon a solution to her frustration. She said to our daughter, Annette, "Mom, I know how I can do for Grandfather what he does for us. I will send him one dollar for every 10 years he has lived. That's six dollars and another three for the three of 63." She sent me back her eight birthday dollars plus one extra, never caring she had lost a dollar in the transaction.

Beginning a number of years ago, a young woman, Kathy Conwell, collected angels to put on a special Christmas tree she had at home. Kathy was a lovely young woman, a college student who learned that she had a very violent aggressive form of cancer. She had been told that she would not live long but that medical science would do everything it could to assist her, and she also received several blessings. Her collection eventually grew to 156 angels, covering a six-foot tree with lights and

these special decorations. Kathy and her mother, Joy Conwell, would go to yard sales, post-Christmas sales, and anywhere little angels could be located. At her untimely death in October 1996, she asked her mother to distribute these angels to her friends. I was blessed to receive one of them. I have kept it in my office now for more than 400 days. She is now an angel herself. Her generosity goes on blessing us all.

### Twelfth Present

#### Understand the supreme Christmas.

The scriptures remind us

*that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.*

*(And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)*

*And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.*

*And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; . . .*

*To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.*

*And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.*

*And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. [Luke 2:1-7]*

The greatest person ever to live on this planet was born.

*What can I give Him,*

*Poor as I am?*

*If I were a shepherd*

*I would bring a lamb,*

*If I were a wise man*

*I would do my part,—*

*Yet what I can I give Him,*

*Give my heart.*

[Christina Georgina Rossetti, “A Christmas Carol,” also called “Mid-Winter”]

Which brings us to you and the gifts you can give Jesus. Christina Rossetti essentially penned, “I give him my heart.” What does that mean, “Give him my heart?”

James, the Lord’s half-brother (see Galatians 1:19), thoughtfully wrote, “Every good gift and every perfect gift [the Atonement] is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning” (James 1:17). This being true then, we must help others to grasp the true meaning of the Atonement and Christmas, which is *Christ*.

Think of the influence you students can have on parents, siblings, friends, and relatives by helping them to think about Jesus even more this year than perhaps they have on earlier occasions. You will never forget this Christmas if you do.

A while ago I read of a survey of more than 6,000 teenagers (not members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) pertaining to their feelings about the scriptures. Only 14 percent said they considered reading the scriptures “very important.” Perhaps that would be true of some of us.

When the students were asked about the importance they place on a variety of activities, from their relationships with God to helping others, reading the Bible ranked lowest.

Surely Christmastime is the best time of all to read the scriptures! Think how the circumstances surrounding the birth of the baby Jesus come alive when we read Luke, who had learned so much from Mary because he wrote the things that only she could have told him. Then include with those beautiful verses those found in 3 Nephi 12 and nearby sections of the Book of Mormon. It will add tinsel to your Christmas this year, and that is a promise!

It follows then that you introduce a sacred spirit to all that goes on.

Merchants of things have invaded the minds of most people, disregarding the “holy day” characteristics of the Christmas holiday. Commercialism has turned it into a day of *feasting, foolishness, and football* instead of *friends, family, faith, and following Jesus*.

There are exceptions, thank goodness, that each of you know about. But now, let us take you and transplant you wherever you will be on Christmas Day. Your responding with gracious enthusiasm, kindly expressing your love of the Savior and of those of your family and others with whom you come in contact will make this Christmas the best ever. Isn’t that the spirit of Christmas?

Perhaps Johnny Hart, the great Christian cartoonist, said it as well as anyone. He wrote a Christmas poem that appeared in his comic strip *B.C.* four years ago. It read:

*Follow the star  
and you shall see,  
His gift of grace  
to you and me.  
Follow the star  
that followed the youth,  
Who gave us love  
and taught us truth.  
Follow the star  
that follows the man  
Who takes us  
where none other can,  
To where our hopes  
and treasures are.  
Follow, O follow the star.*

[Johnny Hart, *B.C.*, 26 December 1993]

Yes, the supreme Christmas gift is Jesus. A loving Father let him hang on the cross, even after he had cried, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

Why did Jesus need to suffer so? Because the Father loves us so much that we have this greatest of gifts, becoming purified through his atonement. Thanks to a loving Heavenly



Father who provided his Firstborn Son to give us examples of how to live and in what to believe. Resolve to give yourself to him as your supreme gift. And if you do, next year and all

the years to follow will be lived in concert with what our Father and Jesus hope you will become. To these simple truths I testify, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Master. Amen.