

GIFT GIVING / GIFT RECEIVING

I hate shopping, especially if I don't know exactly what I should get. That makes it tough on me when I need to get a gift for someone. I frequently find myself pulling out my hair in frustration...and I don't need to lose any more hair than I've already lost. But as we near Christmas it is natural to be thinking about gifts, giving and givers. Above all, it is important to consider the Gift that Christmas is actually all about. The fact is that our attitude toward this gift can shape the attitude we have toward gifts in general.

One of the reasons I have such problems in selecting gifts for others is that I find it really hard to come up with presents that "fit" the persons for whom I get them. I end up buying something that doesn't entirely fit the bill.

The 19th century American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson saw the problem when he wrote, "Rings and other jewels are not gifts but apologies for gifts. The only gift is a portion of thyself. Thou must bleed for me...this is right when someone's biography is conveyed in his gift...But it is a cold and lifeless business when you go to the shops to buy me something which does not represent your life and talent, but a goldsmith's."

Clearly, the Gift of God that we have in Christ is the perfectly appropriate gift because it fully and truly represents the Giver. This is a "biography" of sacrificial love and determined graciousness. It is a gift that is completely fitting because it is only in Christ that we can truly simultaneously see who God is and who we are so that we might be brought to God in a relationship of love, peace and harmony.

Emerson was also aware of the discomfort that receiving gifts can give to us: "We wish to be self-sustained. We do not quite forgive a giver." Strange insight. But he is pointing to our pride that gets wounded if we end up feeling indebted. We want to believe we are self-sufficient and don't want to admit that we need anything another can give us.

But it is precisely against our pride that the Gift of God comes. If we attempt to deny our need and remain independent, we cut ourselves off from the fullness of life. The fact is that we are in need. We are lacking. We are dependent whether we want to admit it or not. But God has sent into the world exactly what we need so that our life and joy can be complete. Let's humbly receive the greatest Gift ever as we ready ourselves to celebrate Christmas.