

UPSIDE OF A DOWNSIZED CHRISTMAS

By David B. Crabtree

IN *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens created Ebenezer Scrooge, a miserly moneylender, and placed him amidst the gaslights and soot of Victorian England. Scrooge lives on, as most caricatures do, and has taken up new digs on Wall Street.

There is a new sobriety this Christmas season, and it's not due to a revival of holiness or reverence. Consumers are scared of a big bad recession. A glut of bad news stifles optimism and breeds negativity. The "holly, jolly" Christmas borne of bull markets is muted. The bears are growling. The Christmas bell is silent. Scrooge is smiling like the Grinch who stole the nest egg, and Santa's little elves are all unemployed. Instead of stock dividends, lots of folks are finding a lump of coal in their 401(k)s this Christmas.

In mid-October the National Retail Federation predicted a "cold" shopping season, and they weren't talking about the weather. In the midst of a housing crisis, rising unemployment, bailouts, bloodbaths and a loss of consumer confidence, Christmas expectations were severely downsized. Some were talking of a retail disaster, the dawning of an economic ice age. Some were predicting the leanest Christmas in two decades. Although no one advocated the cancellation of the season or predicted a ban on Christmas lights, one wonders if part-time Santas were advised to

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go a little easy on the ho-ho-ho's!

Yet, there is something good — very good — emerging on this seemingly decimated holiday scene. While the almighty dollar suffers with a bad case of the flu, we might just be left on Christmas morning with the essence of the Almighty. We might just rediscover the reason for it all. Could it be? Could we, in the silence of the cash register, find a treasure more precious than gift cards, more costly than diamonds, more beautiful than a wet winter snow on a fir tree forest?

The greatest loss at Christmas cannot be measured by economic indicators. Our greatest loss came with the intoxication of prosperity. Somewhere, in the mad rush

that lives, and gives and helps. In my lifetime I've opened hundreds of gifts. Most I have welcomed, and some I have loved, but no gift ever loved me back. No gift ever changed my life. No gift held a hint of the miraculous or the hope of enduring beyond my years. All gifts, no matter their monetary value, pale in comparison to the Gift of all gifts: the Savior who is Christ the Lord.

You can keep your grumpy Santas, tired myths and fake snow. I'm dreaming of a right Christmas. It's the kind of Christmas that warms the heart with love. It's the kind of Christmas that fills the soul with awe. It's the kind of Christmas that doesn't need a stimulus package.

blow. Taxes belong only to the temporal. But the story of the Baby in a manger will be celebrated when a million ages have come and gone. Christmas is the ultimate "sure thing." It cannot be cancelled, even if markets are shaken and dollars devalued. Christmas doesn't belong to the retailer, it belongs to the divine Storyteller. It belongs to the captivated worshipper. It belongs to all who believe in the Savior, not the season.

Let's take back Christmas from those who have covered its glory with tinsel and trinkets. We can give more, even as we spend less. Love is the ultimate gift. Giving of yourself with time and help never falls out of season. Encouragement is a rare gift, so easily

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for more, we lost sight of what Christmas truly is. We were conditioned to celebrate the holiday, throwing caution to the winds, while forgetting just who was being honored. People talked about the "Christmas spirit," but ignored the Holy Spirit who brought about the only Virgin Birth in history. People talked of Christmas cheer but neglected its source. Somehow, *the* story was buried under a mountain of mythology and marketing.

But now greed has blown off all the covers, tripped over the plug and killed the lights. And in the ensuing downturn of the holiday rush, if your heart will listen ... you might just hear an angel chorus singing.

Every Christmas, Christians celebrate the Gift that surpasses all measure; the Gift beyond economies; the extravagant Gift

It's the kind of Christmas that doesn't know a bear from a bull. It's the kind of Christmas that opens the ancient text to reveal the always-present Lord.

It's joy in a down market, good news in a bad-news world, hope beyond politics, and certainty in a lost age. It's the kind of Christmas once lost in a blizzard of marketing, now easily found by all who will look to the Bethlehem manger and listen to the greatest story ever told.

Benjamin Franklin is credited with the saying, "Nothing is certain but death and taxes." Ben was wrong. Christmas is forever. Christmas is a celebration of certainties.

The Word became flesh. God came down to man. Eternal hope was born. A new and living way was opened to all who would live eternally. Death was dealt a fatal

given, but so strangely absent in our self-centered days. Grace is a treasured gift that does even more for the giver than for the receiver.

And what about forgiveness? Wouldn't our Christmas celebrations be forever remembered and marked with integrity if we let everybody off the hook? Aren't we celebrating the One who came to wash *our* sins away?

This could be the greatest Christmas we've ever known. The absence of excess might just awaken us to the presence of Majesty. Christmas is the celebration of a King who became poor that we might be made rich. And in Him, no matter what the markets say, we are rich indeed. **tpe**

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