



# CHRISTMAS: NO ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

**M**y parents' living room at the old house looked like Rudolph had made a wrong turn and crashed the sleigh right in the middle of our family Christmas. After opening only one gift, Christmas chaos ensued. What madness created the mess?

It was the Cabbage Patch Power-Cycle—a present from my parents, Grandma and Grandpa—one of those low-slung riding toys with a Big Fat Front Wheel. It came in a box. A Big Box. The box—all of its contents—had been emptied on the floor in a flurry of Yuletide exuberance. My four-year-old daughter had opened the gift that her grandparents couldn't wait for her to rip into. The anticipation all through dinner and clean-up had threatened to undue them until finally the moment came.

"Are we all ready? Can we open it now?" said Grandpa B.

"This is going to be wonderful!" said Grandma B.

"What do you think is in the box, April?" asked Grandpa B.

"Don't tease her, Poppa! Just let

her open it up. Can she open ours first?" said Grandma B.

"Oh, you're gonna love this!" said Grandpa B.

"Stan! Get your camera ready!" said Grandma B.

"What's in here?" said little April, tearing away the wrapping paper. She saw the picture of the Big Wheel Cabbage Patch Power-Cycle Riding Toy on the Big Box. That's what she expected inside the box. "Is *that* what's in here?!"

What was in there was soon dumped onto the carpet. All 2,158,523 parts. Along with the stickers to go on them, printed out on dozens of sheets. The pile looked nothing like the picture.

At the bottom of the box, stuck to the cardboard down there, were the instructions. My brother pulled them out and held them. All eyes in the room turned on me. Uncle

was attempting to construct) detailed a 523-step *Easy Assembly Guide* [sic. Really disturbingly sick.] I only needed a screwdriver, pliers, and 38 hours of uninterrupted time. I wish now they'd included patience in the box.

April watched with anticipation. In her mind, I was building Christmas itself; the very joy of the holiday hung in the balance. The pressure was on.

Have you felt the pressure? That weight that comes on your shoulders, your heart, your head this time of year—a squeezing sensation that whispers, "You have to do it better; have to give more, have to celebrate heartier, have to out-Yule last year's Yule." The pile of holiday parts and pieces fills your life, and you are asked to make sense of it all.

The pressure's on to build a bet-

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Bob handed me the booklet that would be my own personal guide to Christmas for the next several hours. April looked up at me and her eyes said, "Please, Daddy?"

The instructions (written by someone without either a firm grasp of English or the toy which I

ter Christmas. We feel the pressure inside, too. We are exhorted to somehow turn the season into a spiritual high—a mountain-top experience with God that we will never forget.

How? Programs. Cantatas. Plays. Candlelight services. Advent obser-



**IF YOU'RE TIRED OF THE DRUDGERY OF ASSEMBLING CHRISTMAS, TRY A NEW APPROACH...—NO ASSEMBLY REQUIRED! THE WHOLE POINT OF THE ACCOUNTS OF JESUS' COMING IS THAT GOD PUT THIS THING TOGETHER. HE DID IT WITHOUT OUR HELP. THIS IS HIS DEAL.**



vances. Daily readings. Holy music. Everyone's got a plan. Everyone's got a clever idea. Everyone's got a way for you to prove to God that you're serious about the birth of Jesus.

The Christmas box is turned over, and there's all your religious stuff, promising that if you can just get it all together, just make it fit into the four weeks from Thanksgiving to December 25, you're going to have the Christmas of a lifetime and, if you're especially spiritual, Jesus will show up.

Does God demand this of us? Do we really need to prove ourselves to God? What if all this stuff on the floor isn't the dream holiday it's made out to be in the picture on the box? What if there is a way to celebrate but not capitulate? What if you could build a better Christmas?

I think there is a way. Here's a new instruction sheet that helps you know where to start:

### **Christmas Involves More Grace Than Performance**

Somehow we've turned the tables. When Jesus was born, people felt no obligation at all to perform. The primary players in the story were not picked because they could put on a good show. We are told that Mary was "highly favored," and "blessed among women," but it wasn't because Mary had earned her way into privilege. Joseph hadn't been voted "Carpenter of the Year" before he



could qualify to be Jesus' earthly father. The shepherds certainly had nothing to brag about. It was grace that found them all, grace that interrupted them, grace that they welcomed in a stable in Bethlehem. It's all about grace.

Many of us, however, typical of our usual bent toward legalism, turn the whole thing around. Using religion, tradition and our high-holiday expectations, we make Christmas into another "really big show" that serves to prove our worth as spiritual people. And if we don't succeed, we bake ourselves a fruitcake of guilt and drown ourselves in the eggnog of shame. When it's over, we vow to build it better next year.

You can, but it's going to mean changing your perspective. To build a better Christmas, view the whole experience as a gift of grace. Thoughtfully shed those things on the to-do list that feel like obligations rather than celebrations. Don't be guilted into hard labor in order to celebrate a day that was designed for grace.

### **Christmas Is NOT Waiting to be Assembled**

My parents found exactly the thing that April desired, but they

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forgot to examine the Big Box for the magic, wonderful, Santa-inspired words: *No Assembly Required*. Just those three little words would have made a world of difference in our celebrations that year. Those words mean somebody has already done the hard stuff; you don't have to.

If you're tired of the drudgery of assembling Christmas, try a new approach. Back away from the Nativity, pull out of the specific prophecies, look at the forest instead of the individual Christmas trees, and this is what you see—*No Assembly Required!*

The whole POINT of Jesus' coming is that God put this thing together. He did it without our help. This is HIS deal. So why are you running yourself ragged trying to make it all happen on your own?

I know—God is probably not going to send a thousand angels to do your shopping for you. It's likely you'll have to decorate the tree without angelic, elf-like cherubs. And the fudge, cookies, hard candy, eggnog—even the divinity!—will not appear on their own. And I'm not suggesting that you abandon all of those things. But I'm asking you to *stop trying to*

build something God has already assembled. Don't beat yourself up for a Christmas that's not "perfect." It's already perfect, thank you very much, and you didn't have to do zippo.

### Christmas Is Best Observed by Relishing Release From Obligation

The way we do Christmas makes adding obligation a necessity. After all, this Christmas has to be better than last Christmas. In the pursuit, Christmas becomes a competition, a fight.

One of the pressures we face (added to our to-do list by well-meaning Christians) is the trumped up battle with the worldliness of the world and the way "they" do Christmas. Pardon the question, but really: What did we think would happen when we gave our holiday away? Did we really believe that Christmas would be esteemed and valued and respected by people who don't share intimacy with Jesus?

I was asked on Facebook to join the group "Keep Christ In Christmas!" I understand the sentiment. But I don't believe the problem is with "those guys over there." Instead, I think it's with "this guy right here."

We don't have to save Jesus from "the world." It is not necessary, nor expedient, to engage in the fight to "keep Christ in Christmas." We are not obligated to march against city hall for removing the nativity scene. That is not where the struggle resides.

It resides in me. And you.

The struggle is to find rest. The fight involves muting the urge to turn the Christmas season into a madhouse. The fight is to keep Christmas and all its tinsel-tinged, snow-flocked *fa-la-la-la-la* from becoming an idol of worship itself, virtually dethroning the real object of our love, and bending the benchmark of our orientation.

None of the characters in the nativity story acted their part out of obligation. They did not see their activity as a battle to be won against the forces of secularism. They responded from joy, as a re-

sult of startling grace. If you're doing Christmas because you have to, or you're striving to make everyone else on your block keep Christmas pure, or if you want this year to be better than ever no matter what it takes, I've got a tip: The most important gift you can give yourself this year is to GIVE IT UP!

### Christmas Is Expressed Best When We Simply "Receive and Believe"

John's version of the story theologizes the action (John 1), describing the real narrative of the Christmas event from God's perspective—"the Word became flesh." With elegant simplicity, he hangs the greens of God's plan, that Jesus Christ would come into the world as very God and very man, and he would save people from their sins. John's version includes no Mary, Joseph, shepherds or Magi (although John the Baptist shows up). John emphasizes the independent work of God in sending his son. People don't have much to do with it.

Except to respond. John describes only one response for us, given in two words—to *receive* and *believe*. No office party, no family feast. No massive church production with a Living Christmas Tree and flying angels and real goats and a real baby Jesus. No obsessive shopping sprees on Black Friday. Not even Handel's Messiah with complete orchestra and paid professionals singing the solos. No big pile of parts and pieces to assemble into the perfect spiritual Christmas. No ponderous tome to instruct us how to assemble the perfect Christmas. Christmas is already perfect. Our part is to receive and believe.

It's no more complicated than that.

I appreciated my parent's excitement in giving their granddaughter something she really wanted.

And as a dad, I was thrilled when I finally attached the wheels to the axels and saw April's face light up. But I missed a whole lot of Christmas.

You miss it, too. Year after year you've missed it. And every year you tell yourself, "Next year, I'm not going to put myself through all this. Next year it's going to be different. Next year I'm going to stop the madness." OK—it's on. Time to make it happen. Or better: time to make sure it doesn't happen again. *Don't lose Christmas in your attempt to build a better one.*

This year, rest in the knowledge

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that God through Jesus has assembled the best possible celebration. *Receive* and *believe* the love and grace that comes through a perfect, unearned gift. Let go of the dream of a Christmas offering you can't afford. Trust God. Only he can build a better Christmas. □

*Ron Benson enjoys Christmas with his family in Freeland, Michigan, where they can be found making Norwegian julekake, krumkake and sanbakkelse. (Ask Ron for recipes on Facebook!) He would gladly assemble any toy or gadget necessary to keep his kids around for awhile. Ron writes about God's grace and serves Grace Christian Fellowship as pastor in nearby Bay City. Read Ron's blog at Grace Clinic (<http://graceclinic.blogspot.com>).*