

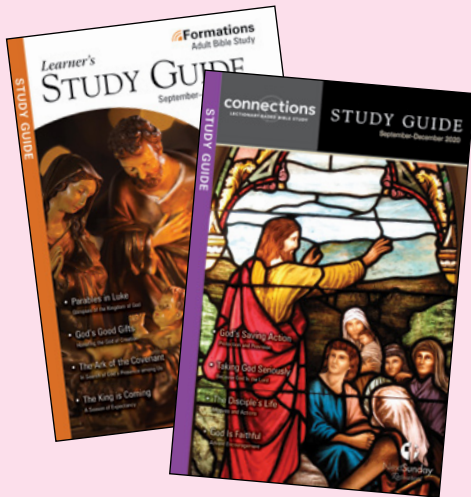
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## Thanksgiving, Advent & Missions

It's a season for thanksgiving and anticipation, but I have a confession to make: celebrating abundance while extending a call to give feels incongruent.

During the very week we sit down to a sumptuous feast, people of faith are challenged to be grateful to God and give so that others may have sustenance. And as the calendar turns over to December and the Christmas shopping frenzy begins in earnest, people of faith are asked to give to support mission work around the world.

I have mixed emotions, and it's hard for me to sort it all out.

Let's start with Thanksgiving. If we are enjoying relative prosperity and have our families with us to celebrate together and fondly recall previous year's celebrations, gratitude flows easily and naturally. For many American Christians, this is our default status. We have everything we need and much we do not, so thanking God isn't a challenge.

But sometimes just uttering the blessing before our Thanksgiving feast takes on a different meaning when we are asked to give from our abundance to feed others. We stumble over the words in thanking God for blessings, which we have done nothing to deserve, while others have little or no food. In light of this, I can't help but rethink how I define God's blessing.

Could it be that true blessing is dependence on God rather than an abundance that creates distance from our Lord? Or, rather than the blessing being the receiving of such a bountiful feast, perhaps the blessing comes from preparing a feast for others.

Once I clear the Thanksgiving hurdle, I can also find Advent and Christmas difficult. This is the time of year when many churches promote special offerings for their mission work around the world. It's the equivalent of ringing a bell with a kettle during the time of year when people are theoretically most generous. But to whom are we being generous?

I remember one year when my wife and I decided to make our mission offering match the highest priced gift we purchased that year, and that felt right. But now, I wonder if we should make our mission giving match our total gift spending. There is a point at which a gift is sacrificial and more meaningful.

Maybe that's the point of promoting giving during the holidays. At the very time when we are tempted to focus on ourselves, the Church reminds us that to be whole, complete, and faithful people, we must have a healthy relationship with our money. For me, this means seriously considering what is an appropriate expression of love for our friends and family and what is an appropriate expression of love for the world.

The holidays are hard in churches. Everyone wants to feel good, relive the glories of the past, rekindle family experiences, and have opportunities to give. Just as long as we aren't challenged to consider too deeply those who aren't feeling so good, must deal with tragic memories, are bereft of family, or are dependent on the generosity of others.

My focus this year and my prayer for your churches is that you would have fewer mixed messages and a clearer sense that Christ's love compels us to give.

*Lance Wallace is a Baptist layperson and member of Parkway Baptist Church in Johns Creek, GA.*

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