

EXPOSITION

Monthly e-Bulletin from Virginia Beach Theological Seminary



From My Window

There is a well-documented story about a “secret church” in a Soviet city before the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Despite the danger from the secret police, this church began passing the Gospel of Luke among its members. They would memorize as much as they could and then trade passages with one another. One Sunday, the door was pushed open and two police with loaded weapons demanded that all leave who wanted to and the rest face consequences. After several left, the police put their automatics down and said, “We too are believers, and we want to study this Gospel.” Upon settling the small group down, they said, “We have learned by experience that unless people are willing to die for the faith, they cannot be fully trusted.” May this example encourage us to live for Jesus *now*—“to take up his cross, and follow him!”



Alumni Spotlight: Chris and Kristen Lownes

In May 2007, Chris graduated from Bible college as a missions major. He married Kristen, and they moved across country to begin seminary training in the fall at Virginia Beach Theological Seminary. In a short period of time, Chris and Kristen distinguished themselves on campus as a Christ-honoring couple devoted to knowing God and his Word. They soon joined a gospel-centered church plant at the beach, Cornerstone Bible Church. Through God’s direction, Chris was called to be the lead pastor of this church in March 2018, and today it thrives as a model grace church. When asked about his call to the ministry, Chris remarks, “In God’s providence and humor, he has chosen to make this poor man both one of his sheep and one of his shepherds. What a gracious weight and joy to answer for the souls of my brothers and sisters.” We thank God for the Lownes family!

A Pastor's Reflection on Christmas

Chris Lownes, M.Div. 2011 | Pastor, Cornerstone Bible Church, VA Beach

Christmas never comes early at the Lownes house. You won't hear Bing Crosby or Nat King Cole croon the holiday favorites until the fourth Friday of November. Once we've properly celebrated Thanksgiving—complete with food, reflections and board games—then and only then can we get excited about finally spinning some yuletide tunes the next morning. There's no shortage of lights, evergreens, eggnog and all things nostalgic at this time of year, but we know these things aren't the *reason for the season*. When Christmas does come to our house, we're ready. And although we're always excited to sing the songs, eat the foods, and join in the merriment, the season brings a deep sense of gratitude and expectation as we consider the meaning of this wonderful day.

I look at December 25th differently today than I did when I was young. As a boy, Christmas was all about receiving. It meant looking forward to many special things: gifts, parties, family trips, music, and lots of food. It meant I got two whole weeks of vacation from school. It meant I got to stay up late to watch the TV special, *Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer* or *Frosty the Snowman*. It meant I got to see the white paper luminaries lighting the edges of our driveway and enjoy a breakfast feast complete with bacon and cinnamon rolls. Christmas was all about receiving.

But my parents were both *generous* in giving to us and *faithful* in training us. Christmas was also about giving. It was about thinking through each person in the family and deciding how we could either serve them or give something that would bless them. It was a time to give to our neighbors, bringing them mom's famous almond puff and an invitation to our church's Christmas cantata that was all about Jesus. It was about visiting the shut-ins, bringing the message of Christ's saving work to them and singing Christmas carols through the halls of their nursing homes. Christmas was a time of giving.

Now that I have a family of my own and a congregation to shepherd it's clear that Christmas is a time of giving. As adults we give gifts, we share experiences, and we devote time and our very presence to the ones we love. As Christians we give a cold cup of water in Jesus' name, although it might look more like a turkey dinner down at the mission. We give the world the hope of salvation from their sin as we proclaim the good news of the crucified, risen and ascended King who was born in Bethlehem. As a pastor I give my congregation a faithful word about Christmas in an age that celebrates everything but Christ. Christmas is about giving.

Although I've matured, I'm not convinced that I had it *all* wrong as a child when I looked forward to Christmas because of what I received. Afterall, the holiday isn't exclusively or even primarily about giving. Instead, our true blessing lies in what we have received. When I asked my children about the meaning of Christmas, one of my daughters said, "we give gifts like everybody else at Christmas. The difference is, we know why." Our celebration is rooted in God's gift to us, "great joy for all the people...a Savior" (Luke 2:10–11). Christmas is not about what we do for God or for others, but about what He has done for us in Jesus. I think my wife said it best, "it's at Christmas that we celebrate God's promises fulfilled and long for His promises yet unfulfilled." We rejoice at what we've received and look forward to all that we will receive.