

So, you got your child or grandchild a Nintendo Switch or a PlayStation 5 for Christmas, and as they were opening their present you were pretty confident that you would not hear them ask, “Mom, Dad, Grandma, Grandpa, will you help me set this up?” In such an unlikely event, you’d be rushing to the manual, which would probably do you no good whatsoever, because you know that you’d have a better chance of understanding it if it were written in another language. Thankfully your son or daughter, grandson or granddaughter, flesh of your flesh, bone of your bone, has no such problems. They don’t bother to crack the manual. Most likely without too much thinking on their part they can set it up, park themselves in front of the TV, and gradually lapses into a semi comatose state in which they will remain until Christmas vacation is over and school starts.

Of course, if there is a problem getting the thing to work, you’ll be the one to say, “Is it plugged in?” Your child, however, isn’t all that unusual. Few people want to be bothered with weighty manuals or instructions, especially us guys, am I right? While it’s certainly true, as the apostle John says, that “In the beginning was the Word,” in this day and age unless you have a fondness for books or you use your Kindle or Ipad regularly, people are so busy, and their schedules are filled to the brim, that they would rather not take the time to read any words at all, whether it be an instruction manual or the Bible. And if people do take the time for reading, they typically do so for entertainment, or because they are forced to do it for education purposes.

Americans today are buying the most sophisticated and complex items these days. We purchase the fastest computers, the most immersive Virtual reality equipment, the sharpest video game systems, the snazziest automobiles, the most versatile cell phones, and then we forget, or decline, or simply refuse to read the directions. Owner’s manuals, care guides, troubleshooting Web sites, how-to directories; for a lot of people these days they appear to be too much trouble.

A man named Lee Battaglia of Vienna, Virginia, never reads directions for the computer and camera gear he buys. Never. “It’s too time-consuming and I’m impatient,” the retired photographer says. “I’d rather watch someone else doing it, and then I can ask why.” A schoolteacher by the name of Pam Grainer says, “I’m a hands-on person; I learn by doing.” Both would rather pay to take a course to learn how to use their new computers, than do it on their own by studying the detailed manuals that come with their products.

Marketing experts, customer service consultants, and corporate executives agree on the phenomenon. “There’s no question that people are averse to reading the full instruction

manuals,” says a director of technical information at Canon, Inc. “That’s a given these days.” Reading the manual. For many, it’s not gonna happen. And the implications of this trend are disturbing, in both our economic and spiritual lives.

Case in point: our failure to read the instructions makes products more expensive, because manufacturers have to provide toll-free help lines to provide simple answers to simple questions.

Q: Why doesn’t my washing machine start?

A: Because the lid is not closed.

Q: Why won’t my computer printer work?

A: Because the power cord is not plugged in, because you didn’t buy a USB cable to connect it to your computer, because the ink cartridge is not properly installed, because there is no paper in the printer.

And who, we might wonder, is paying for people to sit in corporate call centers and answer these questions? We are. We are also paying, through higher prices, for all the perfectly good products that get returned to manufacturers because purchasers simply cannot figure them out. Ignoring instructions is turning out to be a high-priced habit. For some people, no amount of clearly written instructional material is going to make a bit of difference.

For the rest of us, however, reading the manual is essential - as consumers and as Christians. It is in the manual called the Bible that we can find answers to so many frequently asked questions such as: What should I be doing with my life? How can I make a fresh start? Where’s the guidance I need for happiness in my relationships? What’s the point of the day-to-day grind I’m experiencing? How can I make the best use of the time and money and talents that I have? Is there more to this life than I can see?

The Bible contains stories, and letters, and prophecies, and commandments with answers to these questions, and it rewards our attempts at careful and prayerful study of its 66 books. You might even say that certain lessons are much better learned through Holy Scripture than through personal trial and error. But the Bible is big, let’s face it - it’s an enormous owner’s manual, containing over a thousand pages in most translations. There’s just no way that we can master it in a single sitting. We need a user-friendly version.

Fortunately, St. John tells us that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” This pre-existent Word of God was part of the very creation of

the world and brought both life and light into our midst. Best of all, “the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” The Word of God became human in Jesus Christ and lived among us, so that we could see the perfect grace and truth of God at work in human life. Through his son God revealed God’s self through the person, works, and words, of Jesus. God’s Word is not only 66 books spread out over a thousand-plus pages; it is also a living, breathing, loving, forgiving, healing, teaching, leading, guiding, correcting, consoling, challenging and comforting human being we call Jesus Christ.

John’s story presents us with a very theological vision of the difference the incarnation makes in the life of the world. It is quite different from the typical Christmas tale we are used to hearing of a baby being born, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger. There is an emphasis in John’s Gospel that Jesus existed with God before creation, and yet he came to live among us then, and through the power of his Word, and Spirit he lives among us now. In fact, that theological understanding practically became a confession of faith for the people who witnessed such a wonderful miracle firsthand.

Yet it wasn’t just to “them” back in history with whom Jesus lived, but he also lives with us in our life of faith. It wasn’t just to “them” who beheld his glory and received grace from his fullness, but he offers us his grace and fullness as well. As such, it is also our confession. Christmas can’t be just the historical event of a birth in Bethlehem, but it can and should be a present confession of faith about God’s presence and glory, and grace for us, here and now!

Just as our words reveal to others what is on our hearts and minds, so Jesus Christ is God’s word to reveal God’s heart and mind to us. Jesus is more than a Word we sit down and read. He’s a Word we watch and hear and imitate and follow. No form of instruction could possibly be more user-friendly. To follow this Word-made-flesh is to accept that Jesus is at the heart of our interpretation of Scripture. We need to always ask ourselves: “Does a particular interpretation conform to the teaching, activity, example, life, death and resurrection of Jesus?”

Pick a difficult problem, any difficult problem: capital punishment, immigration, welfare reform. Then plug in a popular Christian solution, and ask yourself, “Does this solution conform to the example of Jesus Christ? Does it support his great commandment to love the Lord with all your heart, soul and mind - and to love your neighbor as yourself? Does it spread the love given

by God, commanded by God and shown by Jesus?” If it fits the life and teaching of Christ, you’ve got a winner.

It is certainly true that there aren’t many people today who are willing to slow down long enough to read the fine print of various owner’s manuals, care guides, troubleshooting Web sites, and how-to directories. And it’s equally true that there aren’t many among us who are going to take the time to do a careful study of the rules and regulations of the Old Testament books of the law. That’s why we need the Word made flesh! That’s why we need someone to come down and pull us out of trouble, save us from our sins, lead us by the hand and inspire us to follow the way of God. In our word-avoiding world, we need a picture, an icon. And thanks to our Incredible and Amazing God we have it in Jesus Christ our Lord.

As Christians we can look to God’s Word as an instruction manual for our lives. With the help of God’s Spirit, we can also be the Lord’s customer service representatives helping others through our words and actions. Perhaps you have heard some Christians described as being “so heavenly minded that they do no earthly good.” For John, the realm of Jesus’ ministry and that of his followers is in the world –that mass of humanity who doesn’t know God and who will hate Jesus and his followers are among us, are all around us!

Jim Strathdee wrote a song –“I Am the Light of the World”-which is based on a poem by Howard Thurman. The first verse goes: “When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and shepherds have found their way home, the work of Christmas is begun.” Christmas is more than a day December; it is the basis of our “work,” which takes place in the world. If we understand Jesus as the Word of God, then we should see ourselves as “Word bearers” called to go into the world as Jesus did proclaiming God’s love, grace, and forgiveness. We can do this through a variety of actions: serving the poor, visiting the sick, fighting against injustice, we can also do this through our Words as we share our faith stories and testimonies with others.

I’d like to share with you a cute email I received from a clergy friend of mine. RECALL NOTICE: The Maker of all human beings is recalling all units manufactured, regardless of make or year, due to a serious defect in the primary and central component of the heart. This is due to a malfunction in the original prototype units code named Adam and Eve, resulting in the reproduction of the same defect in all subsequent units. This defect has been technically termed “Subsequential Internal Non-Morality,” or more commonly known as S.I.N., as it is primarily

expressed. Some other symptoms include: Loss of direction, Amnesia of origin, Fearfulness, Idolatry, Rebellion.

The Manufacturer, who is neither liable or at fault for this defect, is providing factory-authorized repair and service free of charge to correct this SIN defect. The Repair Technician, Jesus, has most generously offered to bear the entire burden of the staggering cost of these repairs. There is NO additional fee required. The number to call for repair in all areas is: P-R-A-Y-E-R. Once connected, please upload your burden of SIN through the REPENTANCE procedure. Next, download ATONEMENT from the Repair Technician, into the heart component. No matter how big or small the SIN defect is, Jesus will replace it with: Love, Joy, Peace, Kindness. Faithfulness, Forgiveness.

Please see the operating manual, the B.I.B.L.E (Believers' Instructions Before Leaving Earth) for further details on the use of these fixes. WARNING: Continuing to operate the human being unit without correction voids any manufacturer warranties, exposing the unit to dangers and problems too numerous to list, and will result in the human unit being permanently impounded. For free emergency service, call on Jesus. Thank you for your attention! GOD

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets,” says the writer of Hebrews. That was the age of instructions, the era of detailed how-to directories. But “in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the world. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word..” In the coming of Christ, we have now been given a far more wonderful and user-friendly guide: the flesh-and-blood Son of God.

To find the answers to life’s questions, we can do no better than looking to God’s Son. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the imprint of God’s being. Heir of all things. Creator of our world. Sustainer of all.

- When we are searching for direction and guidance, he can lead us.
- When we are desperate for forgiveness and new life, he can fill us.
- When we are hungering for meaning and insight, he can satisfy us.
- When we are looking for holiness in the swirling chaos of current events, Jesus can reveal himself to us.

To all who receive him, according to the gospel of John, who believe in his name, he gives power to become children of God. Sure, reading the manual still works with a Nintendo Switch, an Apple Ipad, or for that new Laptop you just purchased; but when the power disappears from day-to-day life, there's only one thing to try. Open up God's instruction manual and plug yourself into Jesus the Word made flesh. Thanks be to God! AMEN