

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

11-30-2015

Taking the Gift out of Christmas

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Recommended Citation

DeRoo, N. (2015). Taking the Gift out of Christmas. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/389

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Taking the Gift out of Christmas

Abstract

"If we look to the Bible, the overwhelming thing we are supposed to do with the gifts God has given us is not to be grateful or obedient - it is simply to use them."

Posting about giving and receiving gifts from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/taking-the-gift-out-of-christmas/>

Keywords

In All Things, gifts, exchange, grace, gratitude

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Taking the Gift out of Christmas

 [all in allthings.org/taking-the-gift-out-of-christmas/](https://allthings.org/taking-the-gift-out-of-christmas/)

Neal DeRoo

I think we have forgotten what a ‘gift’ really is. I think this every year when the Christmas season rolls around and we all find ourselves somehow entered into a series of informal contracts: “I’ll buy you something, if you buy me something.”

Though we often call these contracts ‘gift exchanges,’ these are not gifts. They are negotiated exchanges of goods and services: I agree to get you something on the understanding that you will also get me something. I buy something for you (that I hope you will like) and I know that (or, perhaps, *because* I know that) you will buy something for me (that I hope I will like). Gift exchanges are a complicated, roundabout — and risky — way to get something that we want. But they are not gifts.

Gifts are freely given, without concern for receiving something in return. Genuine gifts do not create obligations. The French theorist, Jacques Derrida, went so far as to say that a pure gift (if there is such a thing) would have to be given without the giver or the receiver realizing something had been given.¹ While there may be some hyperbole in this discussion, his overall point is that as soon as either party realizes a gift has been given, the gift becomes entered into an economy of exchange, where the giver expects something in return (even if it’s just a ‘Thank you’ or some other sign of gratitude) and the receiver feels obligated to give something in return (to use the gift in sight of the giver, for example, to make the giver happy). As long as I know a gift has been given, I can’t help but begin to expect something to be given in exchange — the ‘gift’ always creates an obligation, which in turn means the ‘gift’ is not a gift, but a contract, an economic exchange of goods and services.

This is my worry with what has happened to Christmas. It’s not so much that we’ve let the trappings of the holiday overwhelm our sense of the holy day. It’s not that we are so interested in our Christmas gifts that we neglect to remember the ‘greatest gift of all’. My biggest worry is not that we’ve lost the true meaning of Christmas — it’s that we’ve lost the true sense of gift-giving needed for Christian living. It’s not so much that we’ve ruined Christmas, as that we’ve let (consumer) Christmas ruin Christianity.

As Christians, we’ve come to see God more and more as a stakeholder in an (admittedly very one-sided) contract: God gives us Jesus, who can save us all if we will but put our faith in him. This huge gift of grace requires nothing in return. Except gratitude. And obedience. Which means faithful church attendance. And daily devotions. And abstaining from drunkenness, debauchery, sexual immorality, impurity, greed, covetousness, theft, murder, hate, homosexuality, abortion, swearing, gossip, slander, unkind words and unkind actions, and instead engaging actively in forgiveness, social justice, compassion, encouragement, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control, faith, hope and love.

But we can never do all these things, so we live our lives constantly aware of our own failure. We have been given a great gift, we think, but have not received it with gratitude. As a result, every day we fall further and further behind, creating a deeper and deeper debt. God, being a gracious Father, has agreed to overlook our ingratitude and extend us forgiveness. We are forgiven, even though we do not deserve it. This, too, is a gift we are given, a gift we are to be thankful for. And live lives of obedience in response to. Which means the gift obligates us to church attendance, daily devotions, abstaining from... And the cycle of sin and shame continues.

We have turned God’s freely-given gifts into objects of exchange. We think God is keeping score, asking

something of us in return. We are embarrassed that the gratitude we give in exchange for the gift pales in comparison to the value of the gift. We have given something back that is so worthless in comparison to the gift that we might as well have given nothing at all. And we feel bad. God's gifts end up making us feel ashamed of our very humanity, sinful creatures that we are.

But what if we were to abandon the 'gift-exchange' model of gifts that we have learned from the Christmas season? What if we stop trying to give anything back to God in response to what God has given us? Not even obedience. Or gratitude. Or recognition. What if we respond to God's gifts simply by continuing to live as if nothing has been given at all, as if we are just what we were always made to be?

If we look to the Bible, the overwhelming thing we are supposed to do with the gifts God has given us is not to be grateful or obedient — it is simply to use them (Romans 12:6). And we use them, not as a sign of gratefulness or to somehow please God, but for the common good of creation (1 Peter 4:10; 1 Cor 12:7).

Using these gifts for the good of the world is not an obligation visited upon us by some unique and special 'gift' God has given us. It is part of God's good plan and design for the whole of creation. The more we think it is some 'extra' obligation visited upon us by some special 'gift' we have been given, the more we are able to think that doing things for the good of creation is a task we have been given as Christians, rather than the very identity of what we are as human beings. And so we start to think that only Christians can do good things (since only they have received the special 'gift' from God). Then, since non-Christians obviously do a lot of seemingly "good" things in the world, the *real* good that we are called to do, as Christians, must be the things unique to Christians: going to church, praying, reading the Bible, and avoiding certain hot-button things like homosexuality, abortion, and sex outside of marriage. Christianity slowly comes to be about what we do as Christians, rather than what God has done for us. And we thereby lose the power of the gospel, the power of grace.

Perhaps thinking of spiritual gifts as something special we are given that requires a response from us conspires to give us a skewed vision of Christian living. It can cause us to spend too much time trying to do something, rather than merely living out of what God has created, redeemed, and transformed us to be.

Is it time to stop trying to 'pay God back for all he's done'? To stop feeling obligated to gratitude or obedience, and instead trust in the creative will of God and the transforming power of Christ's redemption, to let the Holy Spirit flow through us into the world?

Perhaps when the secular world increasingly removes Christ from Christmas and insists on saying "Happy Holidays" instead, we should see this as a blessing. Given what the holiday season has become — the urgent exchange of goods and services covered by a thin veneer of schmaltzy feel-good-ism — perhaps we ought to desire that it be separated from Christ. If we let Christ be associated with that understanding of gifts, our Christianity will soon devolve into the same kind of exchange of goods and services (grace and obedience?) beneath a veneer of feel-good-ism. Perhaps it already has.

Footnotes

1. See, for example, his discussions of the gift in [Given Time](http://www.amazon.com/Second-Edition-Literature-Religion-Postmodernism/dp/0226142779) and [The Gift of Death](http://www.amazon.com/Second-Edition-Literature-Religion-Postmodernism/dp/0226142779). ↩