

One-way giving: The magi didn't give gifts to each other

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [December 27, 2003](#) issue

If you are like me, you dread one essential part of Christmas celebrations: gift-giving. My problems start with shopping. To give, you have to shop, but for me shopping is disturbingly disorienting, especially at Christmas. With all the glitzy stuff staring at me from everywhere I can't figure out what I like (let alone what I like and can also afford). But the ordeal of shopping itself is nothing compared to the challenge of finding the right kind of gift. Too expensive a gift is—well, too expensive. Too cheap a gift is insulting. The list of difficulties goes on. Christmas gift-giving becomes almost painful. And when the actual exchange of gifts takes place, it often turns into a protracted exercise in reciprocal dissimulation: phony delight, fake praise, feigned gratitude.

We all can imagine Christmas gift-giving at its best, however. Shopping is over, decent gifts are wrapped and waiting under the Christmas tree, and the long-awaited ritual begins. Each person gives and each receives. No one gives first so that others must feel obliged to return; all give and all receive at the same time (or rather each receives in his or her turn so that all can rejoice about each gift). Each person is grateful, each person is generous, and all are rejoicing. The gifts themselves are not simply things that people like, need or desire; they are sacraments of a relationship. By giving things, givers have given their own selves.

This kind of gift-giving turns the whole ritual into a feast of delight—delight in things given, delight in acts of giving and receiving, delight in persons giving and receiving, delight in community constituted by mutual gift-giving. When we have engaged in such gift-giving, we have tasted the advent of God's new world in which love reigns. What better expression of the spirit of Christmas could there be than an enactment of a community of joyful givers and grateful receivers?

And yet there is something wrong with this account of Christmas gift-giving. I don't mean that it leaves out the most important thing about Christmas, namely that Christmas is first of all about receiving the indescribable gift of God—God himself who came in human form—and only secondarily about the creation of a community of true mutual givers. Even if that is granted—as it should be—something is still wrong about celebrating Christmas only by ritually enacting a community of joyous giving and receiving. Though such a community is an earthly good beyond all others because it is a community of love, in a world of uneven distribution of wealth it is positively sinful for such communities to remain turned only toward themselves. The gifts may not just circle through the community to the delight of its members; they must also reach outsiders in need.

Consider two instances of gift-giving associated with Christmas in the New Testament. First, the wise men from the East, who brought their gifts to a holy stranger to whom the star had led them. They did not huddle together around a warm fire and give gifts to each other and delight in each other's generosity. Second, the Son of God from heaven. Here is how the apostle Paul tells the story of Christmas: "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

The Son of God did not just come to reveal to humans the circle of blissful exchanges within the Holy Trinity as the model for gift giving between humans; he divested himself of heavenly wealth and became a Holy Child so that the fragile flesh of humanity could be taken up into the embrace of the eternal God. In both of these cases, the circle of intimates opened up and gifts left that circle to reach those in need. Gifts did not travel on a two-way street so that only givers and receivers could delight in their exchanges; gifts traveled on a one-way street so that the needy could be satisfied.

Christmas celebration is about two kinds of gift-giving, not just one. It is about reciprocal giving in a circle of intimates, an enactment of a provisional advent of God's future world of love. It is also about unidirectional giving to those outside the circle of intimates, a small contribution to aligning the world of sin and need with God's coming world of love. Mostly at Christmas, we practice the first kind of giving (that is, we practice it if we succeed in resisting the temptation to make Christmas into a large festival not of mutual delight but of common greed, a season in which we use faith to justify our desire to get all we can).

We might fill a shoe box with toys and other imperishable goods and send them to a destitute child across the ocean (as Samaritan's Purse, for instance, is encouraging us to do through its project Operation Christian Child). But the lion's share of our gifts remains within the circle. Our priorities are wrong, even sinfully wrong. For Christmas is not the goal, the realization of the world of perfect love. Christmas is the *movement* toward that goal, the endeavor of God to draw all people into the world of love.

Here is a modest proposal for Christmas: let's give as much to those outside the circle of our intimates as we give to those who are inside.