

Regifting: Redeemed and put to work

December 26, 2006

The verb *regift* was not in my vocabulary until this season, but now I see it leaping out from a sheaf of magazine covers. Webster's newest edition includes *regift*: "to give as a gift something one previously received as a gift. Usage: regifts, regifted, regifting, regift, regifter." The last of these, we learn from "manners" columns, is a low-life—yet, most authors say, the regifter is us.

Can regifting be redeemed theologically and put to work practically? Let's gift it a try. Were I a Christian theologian and therefore necessarily engaged in Christology, I would base my theme in a rare and favored text (one that I'll cite in a moment). Were I a spiritual writer, I would plead that Christians ponder the concept of a generous exchange with Jesus Christ. Were I a biblical scholar, I would do my own digging. But since I am *nur ein gewöhnlicher Historiker*, "only an ordinary historian," I will regift the gift brought to me in the curiously titled commentary *2 Corinthians 8 and 9*, written by Hans Dieter Betz (Fortress).

Here's the text: *For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich* (2 Cor. 8:9). The two famous stewardship chapters reveal the philosopher Paul being the practical Paul: he was raising money so he could send gifts of money. Betz is unsure whether Paul wrote those words or was himself regifting a quote as an *exemplum* from someone else. In any case, as Christ is the readers' *exemplum*, the Corinthians are to give in gratitude for the gift that they have received. Theirs will be regifts of divine love.

The following from Betz was news to me: here is the first mention in the letter of the grace of Christ. Paul begins with "You know." Now, you know, he was not a Valley Girl chatterer who dumbs down sentences. As no commas surround his "You know," someone must have already told the believers at Corinth. Betz: "There is . . . no other passage in the New Testament from which [this verse] could have been derived." (But see Philippians 2:6-11, which Betz and I think is a shadow of this verse.)

Betz notes that “Christ’s economic status plays no decisive role in the New Testament” except twice: in 2 Corinthians and in the Infancy Narratives. Only after the New Testament texts were written did the classic doctrine of the poverty of Christ (*paupertas Christi*) develop and eventually get preached. In the Middle Ages and the Reformation it became prominent, but those who preached it did not draw on this Corinthian text, which has to be metaphoric. The key is in this metaphor, where Christ became poor, Paul wrote, “on your account.” The Corinthians were obviously better off economically than the people to whom their gifts were to be given. The key question was: were the Corinthians “spiritually rich,” or could they become so?

The manners columnists remain critical of regifting in normal human-to-human exchanges. Yet in the two biblical texts, Jesus as *exemplum* “by his poverty” made it possible for us to be rich—which means that believers have received him as a gift and that, as Paul makes clear, if we are generous, loving, moved by Christ-mass spirit, we do not have to be, but we get to be, regifters.

In the *Wall Street Journal* (November 27) the politically and economically conservative writer Arthur C. Brooks revisits the evidence that “the relationship of religion and charity is nothing short of extraordinary.” Within the circle of fellow believers, “religious people are more charitable with all sorts of nonreligious causes as well.” Think of them now, at year’s end, as regifters, motivated by the loving Christ of this metaphoric passage and by the Infancy Narrative *exempla*.