

## Praise for *The Book of Giving*

“Pierce Hibbs is a friend. He loves the Lord, and he understands well the English language. He is adept in the many ways in which we can communicate the gospel to one another. The present book treats ‘giving’ as a perspective from which we can view all of Scripture, for Scripture is the story of the greatest gift of all, the Father’s gift of the Son to save us from sin and to fill us with his own gifts in the Spirit. The book is filled with great learning aids: Bible references, poetry, charts, reflection questions. Pierce wants us to take Scripture into our hearts and allow it to examine our lives in detail. This is a great devotional guide for believers, families, and couples.”

– **John M. Frame**, author of *Systematic Theology* and the Theology of Lordship series

“An absolutely delightful, beautiful, and profound book, written simply and poetically. Receive the gift and rejoice.”

– **Vern S. Poythress**, author of *The Mystery of the Trinity* and *In the Beginning Was the Word*

“A passing glance at this book’s title, *The Book of Giving*, may suggest, ‘Oh, another manual on giving...’ But that is what this book most certainly is not! Rather, it is a thoughtful, biblical, and intentionally lyrical call to enter the divine circle of giving because, as the author notes, ‘sometimes we need the truth to be lyrical for it to sink into our souls.’ And because it is soul-penetrating, it is more practical than the erstwhile manuals because it invites us into the trinitarian orb of giving and the ongoing stewardship of all that we have. The book’s practicality is enhanced by the (yes!) lyrical poem-prayers that conclude each section and the recommended exercises to promote growth in giving. Do you want to become a giver after God’s heart? Spend time in the remarkable pages of this book.”

– **R. Kent Hughes**, Senior Pastor Emeritus of College Church in Wheaton. Former Visiting Professor of Pastoral Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

“I have read many books on giving. Even the best of them exhausted me, as they generally *take* more than they give. Enter Pierce Hibbs’s *The Book of Giving*. What a gift! As in all his writing, Hibbs captures you with fresh and lively word-craft, illustrative wizardry, and heart-warming metaphor. But the deeper beauty of this book lies not in its artfulness, but in its burden-lifting, life-giving expression of biblical truth. Page after page unwraps profound theological insights, offering soul-nourishing delicacies with grace-filled usefulness. With one jaw-dropping glimpse after another at the practical relevance (yes!) of the Trinity, Hibbs exposes how and why the self-giving

Triune God ‘makes us givers by drawing us into his circle.’ To read *The Book of Giving* is to get swept into this vivifying circle! But let me warn you. Don’t read this book if you’d rather abide in your prison cell of self-interest and clutch your shackles of remorse. *The Book of Giving* may well demolish the chains, and ignite your soul with such a newfound grasp of Trinitarian self-giving, you will soar to new heights of giving and plummet new depths of joy.”

– **Dr. David B. Garner**, Academic Dean and Vice President of Global Ministries, Westminster Theological Seminary



## Other Books by the Author

- *The Trinity, Language, and Human Behavior: A Reformed Exposition of the Language Theory of Kenneth L. Pike*
- *In Divine Company: Growing Closer to the God Who Speaks*
- *Theological English: An Advanced ESL Text for Students of Theology*
- *Finding God in the Ordinary*
- *The Speaking Trinity & His Worded World: Why Language Is at the Center of Everything*
- *Struck Down but Not Destroyed: Living Faithfully with Anxiety*
- *Still, Silent, and Strong: Meditations for the Anxious Heart, V. 1*
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# THE BOOK OF GIVING

*How the God Who Gives Can Make Us Givers*

by

PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS



THE BOOK OF GIVING  
How the God Who Gives Can Make Us Givers

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-7363411-2-4

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-7363411-3-1

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Cover art by Jessica Hiatt

*For Christina, who always gives and so seldom takes.*



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Giving is what we do best. It is the air into which we are born. It is the action that was designed into us before our birth. Giving is the way the world is. God gives himself. He also gives away everything that is. He makes no exceptions for any of us. We are given away to our families, to our neighbors, to our friends, to our enemies—to the nations. Our life is for others. That is the way creation works. Some of us try desperately to hold on to ourselves, to live for ourselves. We look so bedraggled and pathetic doing it, hanging on to the dead branch of a bank account for dear life, afraid to risk ourselves on the untried wings of giving. We don't think we can live generously because we have never tried. But the sooner we start the better, for we are going to have to give up our lives finally, and the longer we wait the less time we have for the soaring and swooping life of grace.

– **Eugene Peterson**, *Run with the Horses*

# Introduction

*“What do you have that you did not receive?” 1 Corinthians 4:7*



I sit open-palmed at my desk in the morning dark. I am waiting. Waiting for God to give me words. Does that sound strange to you? It *is* strange—not in some weird cultic sense but in the Christmas sense. What right do I have to come tumbling down the stairs at a thousand gifts? Small gifts. Beautiful gifts. Things I tear open and receive without even a whisper of recognition. These words I write are each wrapped and labeled, ribboned and taped. I did not, do not, and will not ever possess them. They are not my property. They are not yours, either. They are the possessions of a God richer and nobler than a million kings of a million countries.<sup>1</sup>

And yet here we are, you and I, holding them with our eyes, turning over the letters and phrases, lifting them up to the light, tasting them.

You can say the same about your fingers and forearms, your lips and lungs, your chair, your room, the ground beneath you, the oxygen drifting in through your nose and down into your blood stream. We swim in gifts, in things

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1. I'm committed to Reformed orthodoxy, but in this book I'm exploring the kinds of connections that God invites us to make with the world he's created.

given freely by a God so prodigal that his spending spills well beyond thought.

*We swim in gifts, in things given freely  
by a God so prodigal that his spending  
spills well beyond thought.*

You don't feel this very often though, do you? Neither do I. The greatest irony of being alive is that we treat gifts as possessions, generosity as commonplace, grace as summer grass—something to be stepped on and forgotten with every lifting muscle.

This is a book that assaults that habit. You will need to revisit it again and again (and in a sense, I will need to write it again and again) because we have spiritual amnesia. We habitually forget grace. We unwrap so many gifts every moment that we forget it's Christmas morning, that God is watching every opening, every spark of joy, and every shrug of the shoulders.

He knows we can't thank him every second. And somehow it's okay. Somehow he keeps giving.

But we know also that being ungrateful darkens our lives, that it removes the color from the photo of each day. We *want* to say thank you. And we want to give, too. That's why you're holding this book. This is *The Book of Giving*.

Such a book can only be about God. It's God who gives constantly, prodigally, incessantly. It's in his nature, coursing through his divine Spirit-blood with a golden glow. He gives

- himself to himself;
- himself to us;
- his creation to us;
- us to each other.

God is the grand Giver. All of life, in a sense, is turning us to this truth and conforming us to it. Everything we experience draws us closer to God's *giving circle*, where Giver, Gift, and Recipient dance and exchange, constantly giving, constantly receiving, constantly being a gift.

God gives. Your father dies of cancer and you mourn him. You question. You beg. You pray. But your father was a gift. How will *you* give now? That's the giving circle.

God gives. Your anxiety disorder cripples your body and mind.<sup>2</sup> You question. You beg. You pray again. It's been over twelve years. You've watched the anxiety burn the fat off your soul. And so this, too, was a gift. How will *you* give now? That's the giving circle.

God gives. So this is a book about him. But he's made us to be givers in his shadow, so this is a book about you, too. Take it and keep it as a reminder of who God is and who you are. *We are givers.*

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2. I've written extensively about this in *Struck Down but Not Destroyed: Living Faithfully with Anxiety* and in *Finding Hope in Hard Things: A Positive Take on Suffering*.

I've ordered the book into three large sections.

- The Triune Giver
- Gifts
- Giving

After laying the groundwork for what a gift is, we'll dive into the first section, backstroking on the expansive beauty of who God is as the triune Giver and who we are as creatures made in his giving image. The second section marvels at the gifts God gives. And the third stares at how we can give in response to God's gifts. But throughout the whole book there is one central idea, a thesis, visited over and over again. It's quite simple, but very profound. **Giving is circular, and God makes us givers by drawing us into his giving circle.**

I should say at the outset that this is a book of water. It should spill into your thoughts and behaviors. To that end, each chapter offers a prayer and reflection questions. Think of them as cups you can use to carry the water of this book wherever you will.

Now, let the giving begin.

# Groundwork: What Is a Gift?



**W**hat is a gift? Definitions are fuzzier and more mysterious than we often think. That's not to say words don't have clear meanings, only that the meaning given to words is rooted in God.<sup>1</sup> And since God is ultimately mysterious and not able to be controlled, there's a sense in which the meanings of words are mysterious and beyond our full grasp. But I've found it helpful, following the linguist I studied (Kenneth L. Pike), to look at three components to word meanings: (1) what sets the word apart; (2) what variations the word can take on while still retaining its basic meaning; and (3) what contexts the word appears in. Kenneth Pike called this *contrast, variation, and distribution*.<sup>2</sup> That sounds a bit technical for most of us, but it's not hard to grasp after you consider an example.

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1. For more on the nature of language and the mystery of God, see Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009) and Pierce Taylor Hibbs, *The Speaking Trinity & His Worded World: Why Language Is at the Center of Everything* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018). On the mystery of the Trinity and word meanings, also see Vern S. Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2020), 112–116.

2. Kenneth L. Pike, *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982).

1. *What sets the word apart?* We identify something both by what it is and what it isn't. A gift, in our experience, *is* something offered freely, not out of compulsion. It's a benevolent, open-palmed gesture, made in good will, not demanded by another. At the same time, we would say that a gift *isn't* a bribe or a payback. A bribe isn't benevolent; it's deceptive. A payback is demanded by another, and it's not always made in good will.

2. *What variations can the word take on while still retaining its basic meaning?* A gift can be a package wrapped in paper and ribbons, but it can also be a cup of coffee, a selfless act, and even the eternal salvation of the soul. The language that the Apostle Paul uses for "gift" and "grace" is sometimes identical (especially the Greek word *charis*). The range of what a gift can be runs all the way from a new dress shirt to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Quite a span, isn't it?

3. *What contexts does the word appear in?* As noted already, a gift can appear in the form of something concrete and tangible, such as an object or money, and also in the form of something abstract—an action in the past or present (Jesus's life, death, and resurrection; the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives). But what's critical for us—and we'll keep our eyes on this for the remainder of the book—is that *gifts always occur in the context of relationships*. There's no such thing as a gift that has no giver or recipient. There's always a relationship in which the gift is given. And the gift is meant to do something in that relationship.

## The Perfect Gift

What we've noted above aligns in certain ways with what New Testament scholars have learned about the nature of gifts in biblical culture (and how that differs greatly from our twenty-first century Western context). In John Barclay's book *Paul and the Power of Grace*, he delves into a study of what Paul meant by the word *gift*, especially in its relationship to the concept of *grace*, and how this is both familiar and foreign to us today.<sup>3</sup> He lists six ways in which a gift can be "perfected." It's always helpful to look at what the ideal is before talking about specifics, so this is a good place to start. These ways are summarized in the diagram below.



3. John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2020).

Each facet touches on either the gift, the giver, or the recipient—the triad of any giving act. First, a *superabundant* gift “is perfected in scale, significance, or duration: it is huge, lavish, unceasing, long-lasting, etc.”<sup>4</sup> This focuses on the gift itself. Surely, God’s gift of salvation in Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit come to mind. Second, in terms of *singularity*, we focus on the giver. Barclay writes that singularity means that “benevolence or goodness is the giver’s *sole* or *exclusive* mode of operation.”<sup>5</sup> This is related to what we said about good will and benevolence in our initial discussion of what a gift is. Third is the *priority* of the gift, which deals with time; priority “concerns the timing of the gift, which is given before any initiative taken by the recipient. The prior gift is not a response to a request, and is thus spontaneous in its generosity; it is not obliged by a previous gift.”<sup>6</sup> As we noted, a gift isn’t demanded or required in any way. Fourth, we have the *incongruity* of the gift, and this is especially important. “Incongruity concerns the relationship between the giver and the recipient, and maximizes the mismatch between the gift and the worth or merit of its recipient. To give lavishly and in advance is one thing, but it is quite another to give to unworthy or unfitting recipients.”<sup>7</sup> It’s certainly easy to see how something like this applies to the gift of Jesus Christ. None of us was worthy to receive him. In fact, we raged against the gift *as it was given* (Rom. 5:8)! Fifth is the gift’s

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4. Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace*, 29, Kindle edition.

5. Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace*, 29, Kindle edition.

6. Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace*, 30, Kindle edition.

7. Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace*, 30, Kindle edition.

*efficacy*. “Gifts that achieve something, that change things for the better, might be regarded as better than gifts with limited positive effect.”<sup>8</sup> Giving someone the change in my pocket is one thing; the person may go and spend it on a bag of chips. Giving students a second chance to take an exam on which they cheated is another. The students may have a change of heart that affects their future behavior. Sixth is *noncircularity*, and this is the element that Barclay argues we’ve taken up in the modern west. “Western modernity,” he writes, “is inclined to perfect the gift as ‘pure’ only when there is no reciprocity, no return or exchange.”<sup>9</sup> He goes on to show that this is a very recent development in the understanding of gifts, since gifts in antiquity were always given in relationships, where some reciprocity was expected to show appreciation, and thus to further or sustain that relationship.

These are all “perfections” of gifts. They’re ways in which gifts might be made “better,” but we all know that most of our giving falls well short of these standards. Our motives are often mixed. We give to those whom we think deserve it, and we seldom give lavishly. Still, keeping these facets of “the perfect gift” in mind will help us in the pages ahead, as we examine who God is, what he’s done, and how he makes us into givers who reflect him.

In alignment with these perfections, Barclay’s simplified definition of a gift is “the sphere of voluntary, personal relations characterized by goodwill in the giving of a benefit

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8. Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace*, 31, Kindle edition.

9. Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace*, 31, Kindle edition.

or favor, which generally elicits some form of reciprocal return that is necessary for the continuation of the relationship.”<sup>10</sup>

With this groundwork laid, let’s move into our discussion of God as the grand Giver and the circular nature of giving.

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10. Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace*, 17, Kindle edition.

# The Triune Giver



*“For he whom God has sent utters the words of God,  
for he gives the Spirit without measure.” John 3:34*



# Chapter 1



**T**he candlelight flickers on the wall. It's not yet dawn. September is the time of the crickets, when they make their leg-songs in the humble dark. In a few months, it will be the time of silence, when the cold of winter hushes the world to a whisper. In the cricket calls and the silence, God is there. He is *here*, with you as you read. And he is giving.

He is giving the crickets. He is giving the dark and the light as the earth turns its hunched shoulders towards and then away from the sun. He is giving the silence. And he is giving me these words. God is an incessant and prodigal Giver. But this goes beyond what God *does*. It's who he *is*.

## Before Time

There's a traditional teaching on the Trinity from Saint Augustine that depicts the Father as giver, the Spirit as gift, and the Son as recipient.<sup>1</sup> The Holy Spirit is a *person* and a *gift*, given to the Son by the Father. And yet this "gift" imagery can also extend to the Father and Son. There's a sense in which the Father gives himself to the Son, showing him all that he does (John 5:20), and a sense in which the Son gives

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1. Saint Augustine, *De Trinitate* 15.33–36.

himself to the Spirit and to the Father. The Son did, after all, wander into the desert in the power of the Spirit (Matt. 4), according to the will of his Father. Does that strike you as strange, that a person can give himself to another person? If it does, it's probably because we overlook the profound truth that giving *oneself* in love is the greatest gift—the handing over of all, in fullness, to another. Keeping nothing protected. Leaving nothing behind. Offering all in sweet, almost levitating abandon. This is so rare in the world that it sounds like holy fiction, an ideal no one can really practice.

But not so with God. God is a Giver. He gives himself to himself, which would be strange if there weren't three persons in the Godhead. Thank goodness there are: Father, Son, and Spirit. Each gives to each and each to all.

Abraham Kuyper wrote beautifully of this love and mutual self-giving. He called it God's "love-life."<sup>2</sup>

The Love-life whereby these three mutually love each other is the eternal being Himself. This alone is the true and real life of love. The entire Scripture teaches that nothing is more precious and glorious than the Love of the Father for the Son, and of the Son for the Father, and of the Holy Spirit for both.<sup>3</sup>

He says that this truth is a deep and ancient song. "We

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2. John Frame also talks of the mutual love in the Godhead in his *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 480–81. I have also written about this in *The Speaking Trinity & His Worded World: Why Language Is at the Center of Everything* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 24–29.

3. Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (Chattanooga, TN: AMG, 1995), 542.

listen to its music and adore it.”<sup>4</sup>

Love is the greatest act of giving. It holds nothing back. All other gifts seem to let the giver retain something. Love requires open-armed abandon, complete vulnerability. For us, that’s terrifying at times, but not so with God. Within that timeless triune community of love, there is unbroken and unhindered acceptance. This is only possible because God has one will. The Father, Son, and Spirit all want the same thing. They want each other, with love fiercer than fire, greater than any lover’s gaze. I have not even the words to reach that place. But I know it’s there, because God has told us it’s there. It’s who he is (1 John 4:8).

### *Love is the greatest act of giving.*

God’s self-love burns bright and glorious, like a great star set in a navy night sky. Jesus tells us this. “Father, glorify me with the glory I had with you before the world began” (John 17:5). Before the world began, in the stillness and the silence, there was the burning and beautiful glory of love, the illuminating hearth of self-giving. Jesus seems to allude to this when he says, “For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he [the Father] gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand” (John 3:34–35). God gives the Spirit to the Son without measure, and because of the Father’s great love, he even gives “all things” to him. He puts them *into his*

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4. Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 542.

*hand*. What a portrait of reception: the Father giving all to the Son in the Spirit.

And because elsewhere in Scripture we see that the love among the persons of the Trinity is reciprocal (John 14:31; Rom. 5:5; 1 John 4:8), we can say that the persons of the Trinity are always giving themselves to each other in love.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Jesus says that *it is because of his self-giving* that the Father loves him: “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again” (John 10:17). In the giving, the Father loves the Son, for giving is simply who God is. This is God’s *giving circle*.

Radiant, the glory of giving,  
Father, Son, and Spirit each to each.  
A love unuttered by the living,  
A giving that God would bend and teach.

This feels so far from us, doesn’t it? In order to even glimpse it, we have to hear a perfect high note on a violin or a holy pause between piano keys—and then we can follow that beauty like a tightrope. If we balance long enough, then maybe we see a glow on the dark horizon. Maybe. But it’s there. It must be. As the Romanian theologian Dumitru Stăniloae once wrote, “The Holy Trinity is the supreme mystery of existence. It explains everything, and nothing can be explained without it.”<sup>6</sup> Only the holy and eternal

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5. Vern S. Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2020), 564–65.

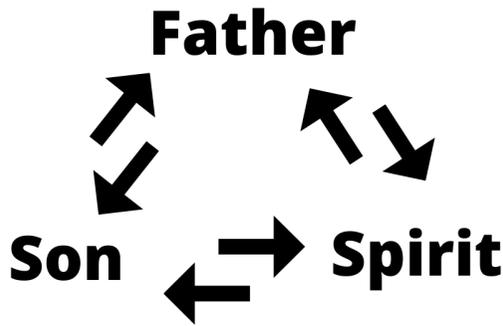
6. Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Holy Trinity: In the Beginning There Was Love*, trans. Roland Clark (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2012), xi.

giving of God could explain the great power of giving—the way something inside us releases when we give to others, the way clouds clear in the sky of the soul when we see that it's not about us. It's never been. Givers at heart are never concerned for themselves. They trust the great power of God to care for them, to receive them, and to carry them home.

Why? Because they know that giving is circular, that givers are also receivers and gifts, and that God has invited us into his circle of self-giving. In that circle, no one is ultimately left uncared for; everyone is given, gives, and receives.

This, dear friends, is *The Book of Giving*, and so it must begin with the God who gives. And it must end there, too.

## ***The Self-Giving God***



## PRAYER

God, you are the great Giver.  
You know giving not just with us,  
But with yourself.  
When we give, we image you.  
But we long to grasp things in the world.  
Help us to see what we can release.  
Help us to watch the world  
With open hands, ready to hold out  
Whatever you have given us.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How does the truth of God as a giver change the way you see him and the gospel?
2. How does God as the Great Giver change the way you see yourself in relation to him?
3. This emphasis on God as giver reveals certain things about him. But God is more than a giver. He's also just, wise, omnipotent, and so on. How do these other facets of God's character interact with the truth of God as giver?

## Reader Resource: The Giving Checklist

God gives himself to himself, but we'll soon see how much God gives of himself to us. We often forget these gifts of God; we may not even perceive them as gifts. But there are gifts of knowledge, the great gift of salvation, the gift of relationships, and so on. Let's start by taking stock of the gifts you possess right now from the self-giving God. How many gifts can you express in the categories below? Think about how you possess them uniquely. Then write out a prayer of thanks for each one. I offer an example in the first row.<sup>7</sup> For additional discussion, consider how each gift reflects the six “perfections” of gifts that Barclay presents in *Paul and the Power of Grace* (superabundance, singularity, priority, noncircularity, efficacy, and incongruity).

The Gifts of God	Your Unique Possession	Your Prayer of Thanks
Knowledge of who God is	<i>I know that God is three persons in one, and he calls me into communion with him so that I can forever speak with the Father, Son, and Spirit.</i>	<i>God, thank you for revealing who you are to me, so that I can know you personally and long to be in fellowship with you each and every day.</i>
Knowledge of who you are		
The salvation of your soul		

7. To get a printable version of this, go to <http://piercetaylorhibbs.com/the-book-of-giving-reader-resources/>.

<b>The Gifts of God</b>	<b>Your Unique Possession</b>	<b>Your Prayer of Thanks</b>
Your family relationships		
Your friends		
Your possessions		
Your shelter		
Your food		
Your body		
Your memory		