

Peter J. Leithart. *Gratitude: An Intellectual History*. Baylor University Press, 2014. ISBN 9781602584495 (cloth). Pp. viii + 340. \$49.95 cloth, \$39.95 Kindle.

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Gratitude is difficult to practice, and even more difficult to think about well. If, because I've given you a gift or a favor, you feel bound to thank me for it, is what you're expressing really gratitude? Isn't it more like acknowledging an obligation? If I must thank you because you've given me something, and must return the favor when I can, and if you gifted me just so that I'd be bound to you in these ways, then are 'gift' and 'gratitude' the right concepts? Aren't gifts supposed to be freely given, without expectation of return? Isn't the ideal gift non-economic just in the sense that it lifts both giver and receiver out of the burdensome circle of obligation and into that of mutual delight?

But perhaps non-economic gratitude is an oxymoron like academic clarity or American irony. Perhaps we need to acknowledge that, among humans at least, there aren't any gifts without expectation of return, and therefore none that avoid obligation. Even if the free gift—the one we didn't expect, don't deserve, and don't have to repay—is what we yearn for, and even if there's something deep in us that would like to be able to give thanks without obligation, perhaps we should give it up, and realize that, really, we need to look every gift horse in the mouth.

These questions are, or ought to be, of pressing concern to everyone. Speakers of English use stereotyped verbal expressions of gratitude dozens, perhaps hundreds, of times every day, and no familial, social, or political order can survive without establishing conventions about gifts and gratitude. The first thing newly-elected representatives in a democracy must do is express gratitude to supporters by returning favors to them. And for Christians, the matter is even more central: the name of our essential liturgical act—eucharist—just means 'thanks'; and it is arguably the case that all Christian theology and all Christian life is constituted by the reception and return of God's gifts.

Peter Leithart's fine book treats all these topics, and more. He poses most of the time as an historian of ideas, and the story he tells is that of the depiction and analysis of gratitude by pagans and Jews and Christians in the long history of the West from Homeric Greece to our own century. But really, as he acknowledges, he is a Christian theologian, and the heart of the book is his treatment of the disruption of settled ideas about gift-giving and gratitude produced by Jesus and Paul in the first century and then again in the Reformation, and their partial cancellation in the Enlightenment. Central to his telling of this story is a distinction between lines and circles—between, that is, linear understandings of gratitude and circular ones.

Linear gifts are those given without intent or expectation that gratitude, or any other return, will circle back to the giver. Rather, the gift given moves outward from the giver, having its proliferative effects in distant places and times. There aren't many gifts like this in the human sphere. Perhaps the gift of blood is like this, especially when it's anonymous. Gratitude in that case can't be received by the giver, and if the recipient feels it, she can express it only by

giving what she's been given to someone else. That's about as close as we can get to the linear gift, the one that prevents any explicit bond of gratitude between giver and recipient.

The circular gift is everything that this is not. It's a gift intended to bind giver and recipient together, and so it's essential that the giver's name and identity be known. And it's a gift for which return is expected—immediately, of gratitude-laced obligation, and later, when the time is ripe, of reciprocal favor. The gift-circles of pre-Christian Greece and Rome, in Leithart's telling, are all more or less like this. The munificence of the giver/patron, whether the local godfather or the Caesar in Rome, excessive beyond possibility of repayment as it typically was and was intended to be, bound patron and clients together at least to the extent of creating loyalty, and sometimes also expectation that clients would fight and die for the patron if circumstance required. On this model of gift and gratitude, there's no anonymous giving; but of course it's not essential, and usually not possible, that the giver know the names of all his clients.

Whether local (village, town, province) or almost universal (empire) the structure of reciprocal circular giving and gratitude remains always essentially the same. This is true even when, as in the case of the Stoics, and especially of Seneca, there have been philosophical attempts to reform or purify what might seem to be the crass self-interest of circular gifts. Seneca, in his first-century treatise *On Benefits*, defends an exalted and rather beautiful picture of gifts and gratitude as the principal conditions necessary for the flourishing of a polity. "Ingratitude," writes Leithart expounding Seneca, "is thus *the* great obstacle to social cohesion." It's easy to see what he means, and that there's much truth in it.

It's against this background that Leithart depicts the Christian disruption of gratitude. Jesus, as Leithart depicts him, and Paul after him, is an ingrate because he recommends giving without expectation of return, and even without permitting it to be known that you are the giver. This is not, however, simply to replace the circular gift with the linear one. Reward is promised, but now it doesn't come from a human client. Rather, it comes eventually, and perhaps even immediately to a limited degree, from God. And since earthly gifts don't need to be given with expectation of gratitude or repayment from their recipients—that was guaranteed by God—Christians were able to do something previously uninstanced, which was to make the poor the ideal recipients of gifts exactly because they could not repay. Since God would repay, the human recipient does not need to be able to do so. And in this way the Christian community, drawing here upon its Jewish inheritance, was able to configure anonymous or collective gifts to the poor as the ideal way to express gratitude to God for his gifts. As Leithart puts it, the circle of gratitude was made boundaryless: any and every human creature could now be a proper object of generosity, and God would show his gratitude for all such gifts. It isn't that Seneca was wrong, exactly; it's just that his gratitude-circle was drawn too narrowly.

In Leithart's view, this distinctively Christian understanding of gratitude, fundamentally theological in its commitments and deeply transformative of the socio-political sphere in its effects, is the right way to think about gifts and gratitude. He also thinks that the position was partly obscured during the medieval period, largely recovered during the Reformation, damagingly shorn of its theology to leave only a scorched-earth gratitude-free zone in the Enlightenment, and now ripe for recovery. His narrative is more nuanced and

qualified that that; but that's it, in essentials. It's a high-class and high-gloss Protestant-triumphalist narrative, and, therefore, more sanguine about modernity than typical Catholic (and Jewish) narratives of the same matter.

One reason, I think, for the difference, and perhaps the deepest, is that Leithart is excessively fond of the either / or, the dialectical opposition. For him, either we are grateful *to* others for the gifts they give us, and thereby locked in to an endless chain of reciprocal obligation. Or, we are grateful only *to* God and grateful *for* others for what they do for us. Certainly, this kind of distinction has deep roots in Christianity. Something like it is in Paul, and in Augustine's distinction between use and enjoyment, the former for creatures and the latter for God alone. But Leithart states it too sharply and deploys it too dialectically; we must, I should think, as Christians, be grateful *to*, and bound by gratitude *to*, other people as well as to God (not, of course, in the same way), finding in that gratitude to particular names and faces both pain and delight, but always a deep and (sometimes) delightful bond. Such gratitude does proper honor to our status as creatures. Leithart, in spite of his emphasis on the importance of community and church, does not give sufficient weight to local and particular gifts and gratitudes—the gift of this language, this spouse, these children, these colleagues, these fellow-citizens. They are all God's beloved creatures, of course, and I am grateful to God *for* them as that. But as my language, my spouse, my children, and so on, I am grateful (I hope) not only *for* them but also *to* them, face to face and by name. It isn't clear that Leithart's position allows this kind of gratitude sufficient Christian weight, and because it does not it shows us only something of the fabric of a properly Christian understanding of gratitude. On this, Seneca remains with us, and it's good that he does.

Nevertheless, Leithart's book is a considerable achievement. He surveys and comments upon an enormous range of literature, writes with great lucidity, and provides one of the few recent detailed treatments of a topic of fundamental importance to us all, Christian and otherwise. I'm grateful to him for the gift of this book—a gift he hasn't given anonymously, which suggests that I ought show him exactly that kind of gratitude—and to God for him as a creature capable of having written it. His book deserves wide and careful reading.