

Article

The Distinctiveness of Christian Gratitude: A Theological Survey

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Abstract: The positive psychology movement has increased and deepened our understanding of gratitude and its contribution to human well-being. Most of the literature to date has focused on gratitude to human benefactors, and the same has been true of philosophical analyses of gratitude. More recently, scholars of gratitude have turned their attention to gratitude to God, but relatively little work has been done on the relationship between particular theologies and spiritualities on the one hand and the phenomenology and structure of gratitude on the other. This essay makes a contribution to that strand of investigation by surveying the work of six Christian theologians, each of whom make bold, sometimes cryptic, claims about the distinctiveness of Christian gratitude and gratitude to God. The essay challenges universalist assumptions about the structure and phenomenology of gratitude, including gratitude to God.

Keywords: gratitude; gratitude to God; God; Christianity; theism; religion; Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Jonathan Edwards; Søren Kierkegaard



Citation: Dunnington, Kent. 2022. The Distinctiveness of Christian Gratitude: A Theological Survey. *Religions* 13: 889. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100889>

Academic Editor: Hans Zollner

Received: 5 August 2022

Accepted: 20 September 2022

Published: 22 September 2022

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1. Introduction

The question animating this essay is whether Christian gratitude is distinctive. In what way, if any, does Christian belief and practice transform the exercise and experience of gratitude? Let me begin to sharpen the question by setting aside the following obvious affirmative response: “Yes, of course the gratitude of a Christian is distinctive, distinctive at least from the gratitude of an atheist or an agnostic, because Christian gratitude includes gratitude to God whereas atheist or agnostic gratitude does not”. This is not the kind of distinctiveness I want to get at in this essay. Considering why will move us closer to the target question.

Suppose it were true that Christians can be grateful to God whereas agnostics and atheists cannot.¹ All that would suggest about the distinctiveness of Christian gratitude is a distinctiveness of scope. Christians, and other theists, can train their grateful responses on a benefactor, God, who, because unknown by agnostics and atheists, is not a proper object of their gratitude. This difference is not particularly interesting. After all, every person's exercise and experience of gratitude is likely to be distinctive from every other person's by virtue of the scope of possible benefactors it includes. There is a person, *x*, to whom I will never be grateful since I will never know myself to have been benefited by *x*, and my exercise and experience of gratitude will thereby be distinctive from all those others who will have known themselves to be benefited by *x*.

Distinctiveness of scope, all by itself, is not a particularly interesting form of distinctiveness when it comes to gratitude. However, most of the contemporary scholarship on gratitude to God stays at this level of distinctiveness. The psychological literature, for example, is largely concerned with how gratitude to God can be measured and with whether those who are grateful to God experience on average greater well-being than those who aren't.² The philosophical literature is largely concerned with whether nonbelievers can nevertheless be grateful to God and with whether, in lieu of gratitude to God, nonbelievers can rationally be engaged in something like “cosmic gratitude”. Interesting questions, all,

but notice how they tacitly assume that the basic structure, phenomenology, and conditions of possibility for gratitude are unchanged by bringing God within its scope.³

Why think, however, that there would be any distinctiveness to Christian gratitude beyond this relatively uninteresting one of scope? After all, we don't think that your exercise and experience of gratitude will be interestingly different from mine (in terms of overall structure or phenomenology, for example) just because you know person *x* imagined above and I don't. One reason to think that adding God to the picture ought to shake things up is that God—according to Christianity but also many other theistic traditions—is not a person like every other. God is all-powerful and all-good. This much, at least, is acknowledged in the scholarship on gratitude to God. Because God is all-powerful and all-good, the thought goes, theists are more likely to find themselves in a world brimming with blessings. For the theist, *every* good is plausibly interpreted as a divine benefit, whereas for the non-theist much of the good in life is either earned or just blind luck, nothing more. We could answer our original question, then, by saying that Christian gratitude, and theistic gratitude generally, is distinctive in that it is attuned to an additional benefactor, God, and a range of potential benefits that far outstrips what can plausibly be entertained by the non-theist.

This is still not the kind of distinctiveness I want to get at in this essay. Backgrounding most of the psychological and philosophical literature on gratitude to God is a view of God as especially generous and especially powerful, but in other respects just like us. Consider, for example, the following characteristic description from the psychological literature of how adding God to the equation might transform a person's experience of gratitude.

Receiving \$20 from a friend may induce gratitude regardless of one's spiritual persuasion, however finding \$20 on the street can only induce gratitude if it is perceived (explicitly or implicitly) that a non-corporeal agent, such as God, brought about this event. Religion may therefore enhance gratitude through the mechanism of religious gratitude (i.e., by broadening its potential application to all positive life events). (Rosmarin et al. 2011, p. 390)

Notice how God is assumed to be like us, only bigger and better, a cosmic friend who leaves money laying around for us. But God, according to theism and especially according to Christianity, is far stranger than us.

Consider, for example, how different God is from every other human benefactor, according (at least) to Christian belief. God is not human by nature although God became human in the Incarnation. By nature, God is invisible spirit. Beyond this, God is elusive or hidden, so much so that many don't believe God exists and even those who do can find themselves doubting it. God is perfectly good, making it difficult to understand what it would mean for God to go above and beyond, to act supererogatorily toward us. God is all-powerful, making it difficult to understand how God's beneficence could be costly or difficult for God. God gives provisionally, never relinquishing full authority and control over that which is given: "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away" (Job 1:21). God gives constantly: your existence, for example, is not a one-time gift but something you are given by God at every moment. And God is perfectly self-sufficient, which seems to suggest we can never benefit God in return. In each of these ways, God is very much unlike other benefactors to whom we might be grateful. God is a strange benefactor indeed.

God gives strange gifts, too. God gives gifts that explode the tripartite benefactor–benefit–beneficiary structure of gratitude. For example, God gives me my self; I am at one and the same time benefit and beneficiary. God's gifts stretch beyond the typical time-horizon of human gratitude: God saves us from death through Incarnation, cross, and resurrection, promising eternal reward in heaven and full incorporation into the Triune life, whatever that would mean. God's gifts are often opaque, too; what feels like a curse may well be a blessing, and vice versa.

For these reasons and more, we might suspect that gratitude to God would not come naturally or easily to us. Calibrated as they are to typical cases of interpersonal beneficence,

we might suspect that our gratitude detectors, so to speak, would be confounded by this strange giver who gives strange gifts.

Now we can sharpen the question. We want to know whether there is anything about Christian belief or practice that could be expected to significantly transform the Christian exercise and experience of gratitude, beyond simply adding a terrifically powerful and generous benefactor to the mix. Consider two communities, one generically theist (if there is such a thing) and the other specifically Christian. Will the exercise and experience of gratitude, including gratitude to God, be substantively different between these two communities? Would an observant anthropologist notice anything very different about the gratitude displayed in these two communities?

2. Method

I propose to investigate the question by way of theological survey. Given the prominence of thanksgiving in Christian scripture and liturgy, this might seem a daunting task. Most Christian theologians have had something to say about gratitude, and some—Luther and Calvin, for example—have made it central to their theology. However, my question is not about the prominence of gratitude in Christian theology, or even about gratitude as an organizing theological category. I am interested more specifically in theologians who have probed the difference that Christianity makes to the exercise and experience of gratitude, beyond simply increasing it. I can't claim to have read everything, of course, but in what follows I'll sketch the views of six theologians who have dwelt at varying lengths specifically on the *distinctiveness* of Christian gratitude and gratitude to God. Then, in the essay's concluding section, I'll try to organize the results in a way that sheds light on the question more systematically.

For the reader who wonders if the journey is worth the time, let me telegraph some of the conclusions up front. Some theologians argue that Christian gratitude significantly relativizes gratitude to merely human benefactors, in a way that represents a threat to traditional forms of human community. Some theologians argue that the inscrutability of God presents an obstacle to normal human psychology such that the "natural man" is incapable of genuine gratitude to God, making most exercises of gratitude to God delusional or counterfeit. Some theologians think that Jesus Christ transforms the Christian such that she may be grateful for her *self* in a way that makes constant gratitude a reality in the life of the Christian. The details, I think, are more interesting than the organizing typology, so I'll move in chronological order and not try to shape the material to that typology but rather try accurately to unpack what each theologian thought about Christian gratitude.

I'll examine Christian gratitude in the thought of Jonathan Edwards, Søren Kierkegaard, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Arthur McGill, Herbert McCabe, and Peter Leithart.⁴ It is no accident that, with the possible exception of Edwards, each of these theologians is motivated by the larger project of reclaiming the distinctiveness of Christian faith in a post-Enlightenment world that pretends to have left Christian faith behind in the name of reason, progress, science, and liberal order, forgetting all the while that its deepest impulses are, as Leithart puts it, "crumbs from the table of Jesus and Paul" (Leithart 2014, p. 8). Perhaps it is no accident either that, with the exception of Herbert McCabe, each of these theologians is located within the Lutheran or Reformed Protestant tradition, since the core reforming impulse was a retrieval of the grace-gratitude shape of Christian life over against the medieval Catholic assimilation of Greco-Roman client-patron arrangements exemplified most memorably in the purchase of indulgences in exchange for heavenly merit. One final observation: I leave to the side the surge of interest within contemporary theology in the category of the "gift", triggered by the anthropological work of Marcel Mauss and, later, the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. "Gift", and a particular interpretation of the Christian structure of gift-giving, has become central to the theology of John Milbank, Jon Luc Marion, and many others. However, this theological trend has left the category of gratitude virtually untouched, a remarkable oversight given that gratitude is the proper response to a gift.

The thinkers I survey here pay especial attention to gratitude and its distinctively Christian limits and possibilities.

3. Survey

3.1. Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758)

In his treatise on *The Religious Affections*, American Congregationalist theologian Jonathan Edwards draws a clear distinction between what he calls natural gratitude and spiritual gratitude.

There is a certain gratitude that is a mere natural thing. Gratitude is one of the natural affections of the soul of man . . . an affection one has towards another, for loving him, or gratifying him, or for something in him that suits self-love . . . And hence men, from this principle, may be much affected with the wonderful goodness of God to mankind, his great goodness in giving his Son to die for fallen man, and the marvelous love of Christ in suffering such great things for us, and with the great glory they hear God has provided in heaven for us; looking on themselves as persons concerned and interested, as being some of this species of creatures so highly favored: the same principle of natural gratitude may influence men here, as in the case of personal benefits. But these things that I have said do by no means imply, that all gratitude to God is a mere natural thing, and that there is no such thing as a spiritual gratitude, which is a holy and divine affection: they imply no more, than that there is a gratitude which is merely natural, and that when persons have affections towards God only or primarily for benefits received, their affection is only the exercise of a natural gratitude. There is doubtless such a thing as a gracious gratitude, which does greatly differ from all that gratitude which natural men experience. (Edwards 2001, pp. 169–73)

Natural gratitude, Edwards says, is a function of self-love; it is because we want good for ourselves—and have some sense of what counts toward that good—that we experience gratitude when others benefit us. Spiritual gratitude is not like this, Edwards says. For Edwards, the gratitude of the regenerate Christian differs in its motives from natural gratitude. Whereas natural gratitude is motivated by self-love, spiritual or supernatural gratitude is motivated by love for God.

True gratitude, or thankfulness to God for his kindness to us, arises from a foundation, laid before, of love to God for what he is in himself; whereas a natural gratitude has no such antecedent foundation. The gracious stirrings of grateful affection to God, for kindness received, always are from a stock of love already in the heart, established in the first place on other grounds, viz. God's own excellency; and hence the affections are disposed to flow out, on occasions of God's kindness. The saint having seen the glory of God, and his heart overcome by it, and captivated into a supreme love to him on that account, his heart hereby becomes tender, and easily affected with kindness received . . . Self-love is not excluded from a gracious gratitude; the saints love God for his kindness to them, (Ps. 116:1): "I love the Lord, because he hath heard the voice of my supplication". But something else is included; another love prepares the way, and lays the foundation for these grateful affections. In a gracious gratitude, men are affected with the attribute of God's goodness and free grace, not only as they are concerned in it, or as it affects their interest, but as a part of the glory and beauty of God's nature. (Edwards 2001, p. 173)

Edwards offers a helpful analogy. Citing the example of David and Saul, he points out that self-love is enough to generate gratitude even for benefits offered by a rival or enemy. It is because I love myself that I am able to be grateful for a fleeting kindness from someone who is otherwise indifferent or opposed to me. But the gratitude elicited by kindness from a friend is different, substantially heightened. Because I love my friend, his kindness to me is an exalted kind of gratitude. This gratitude does not exclude self-love, of course; it

may be triggered by a gift that he gives me that satisfies some want in me. But nor does my gratitude to my friend depend solely on the way in which my friend gratifies my self-love. Edwards supposes that I can be grateful for my friend simply in virtue of some excellency or beauty in his nature, quite apart from what my friend does for me, and that, furthermore, that gratitude for my friend's intrinsic excellence changes the kind of gratitude I experience toward my friend when specific benefits come from him.

And so it is with the regenerate Christian's gratitude to God, according to Edwards. Christian gratitude is only secondarily interested in the benefits God may bestow on the believer; primarily, Christian gratitude is elicited by God's intrinsic excellence. "That wonderful and unparalleled grace of God which is manifested in the work of redemption, and shines forth in the face of Jesus Christ, is infinitely glorious in itself, and appears so to the angels; it is a great part of the moral perfection and beauty of God's nature. This would be glorious, whether it were exercised towards us or no; and the saint who exercises a gracious thankfulness for it, sees it to be so, and delights in it as such" (Edwards 2001, p. 174).

For Edwards, then Christian gratitude is distinctive because it is motivated by love for God rather than love for self. It does not exclude love for self; this is no form of self-hatred or final self-renunciation. But the self is displaced, as Kyle Strobel suggests, in Edwards's Christian anthropology. Strobel explains that according to Edwards the natural project of human self-formation is pursued through an "I-I" relationship. I, the primal acting agent, pursue a certain projected picture of the self I would like to be. To use the language of psychology, this is how one "forms an identity". This is what Edwards means when he says the natural man is driven by self-love; the love that drives her development is love of a picture that she herself generates. The regenerate Christian, however, finds herself engaged in a different project. "It is no longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20) is the apostle Paul's way of expressing this different way of being a self. Now the self is established through relationship with Christ, rather than through relationship with a projected self-ideal. "On Edwards's view", Strobel says, the second 'I', what we might think of as the 'projected I', needs to be displaced, such that the 'primal I' discovers itself, not in a self-relation first and foremost, but in relation to God" (Strobel 2022, p. 119).

Thus, there is no incoherence in Edwards's claim that the regenerate Christian might be motivated by love of God principally. After all, the regenerate Christian's very identity is constituted by loving relationship with her friend Jesus Christ. Christian gratitude to God has different priorities than merely natural gratitude to God. The latter begins and ends with providential benefits. The former, however, is firstly responsive to God's intrinsic goodness, secondarily to God's gift of Jesus Christ for the establishment of one's own self in Christ, and thirdly and least urgently, for the providential kindnesses that God may bestow on the believer.

3.2. Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855)

In a passage from his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the Danish Lutheran philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard contrasts what he calls "aesthetic" and "religious" gratitude.

In this way the religious talk, too, regresses, e.g., when a man says: 'After many errors, I learned finally to cling to God in earnest, and he has not left me since. My business is flourishing, my projects prosper, I am now happily married and my children are healthy', etc. Here the religious man has returned to the aesthetic dialectic, for even if he is good enough to say that he thanks God for all these blessings, the question is still the way he thanks him, whether he does it directly or first makes the movement of uncertainty that is the mark of the God-relationship. For just as a person in the midst of misfortune has no right to say to God directly that this is misfortune, since in the movement of uncertainty he has to suspend his understanding, so too he may not take all these good things directly as evidence of the God-relationship. The direct relation is an aesthetic one and indicates

that in his thanksgiving he relates not to God but to his own idea of fortune and misfortune. For the fact is that if a human being cannot know for certain whether a misfortune is an evil (the uncertainty of the God-relationship), then he cannot know for certain whether his good fortune is a good. The only evidence of the God-relationship is the relationship itself, everything else is ambiguous, because religiously for every human being, however old he becomes, in regard to the dialectic of the external, it is a matter of being born yesterday and knowing nothing [cf. Job 8:9]. Thus the great actor Seydelmann [Karl Seydelmann, German actor (1795–1845)] (as I see from Røtscher's biography), on the night that he was garlanded in the Opera House 'to applause lasting several minutes', on coming home, fervently thanked God for all of this. The very fervour shows that he did not give thanks to God, for had he been hissed off the stage he would have rebelled against God with the same passion. If he had given thanks religiously and so thanked God, then the Berlin audience and the laurel wreath and the applause lasting several minutes would have become ambiguous in the dialectical uncertainty of the religious. (Kierkegaard 2009, p. 374)

Natural, or what Kierkegaard calls "aesthetic", human gratitude determines gifts with reference to an innate sense of what will make one more obviously fortunate, what will satisfy one's preferences. One can be grateful to God in this way, too: I wanted a spouse, and God has given me a wife; I wanted comfort and God has given me comfort; thanks be to God! Kierkegaard claims, however, that this is not Christian gratitude, or what he calls religious gratitude. After all, we do not ultimately know what is good for us, for the heart is deceitful above all things. The religious person is uncertain about what God may have in store for her, and how to rightly judge the contingencies that come her way, because she recognizes that given her limitations and corruptions, she could not possibly want what God wants for her. Therefore, she takes a position of uncertainty with respect to what is actually a blessing or a curse for her. She disclaims any certain understanding of what is actually a fortune or misfortune for her.

The actor Seydelmann was treating God as a Cosmic Santa Claus and not the Lord of the Universe. When things go badly for Seydelmann, Kierkegaard speculates, he'll curse God just as fervently as he thanks God now. After all, Santa Claus isn't supposed to let you suffer. In another of his books, *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard says that many who "call themselves Christians . . . actually live within pagan conceptions" (Kierkegaard 1998, p. 321). He isn't judging the salvation of such Christians by saying they live "within pagan conceptions". Rather, he is pointing out that the more we get acquainted with God—that is, the more we encounter a God who does not strictly do our bidding—the clearer it becomes that some of our pagan conceptions of the right and the good are inadequate to the bigness of God. This is especially relevant, Kierkegaard says, for the practice of gratitude. If we take our "pagan conception"—which, mind you, works perfectly well for standard interpersonal gratitude—and try to map it onto our relationship with God, the more frustrated we will become. In time, we may become so confused that we simply stop trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. We keep mouthing words of gratitude at the right time, but in reality we experience no gratitude to God.

How, then, is gratitude possible at all? How does the Christian not simply assume a posture of indifference, like a Stoic or a Buddhist, with respect to everything that comes her way? On this question, Kierkegaard is frustratingly obscure. He comes closest, perhaps, to offering an answer in a sermon on Job, entitled "The Lord Gave and the Lord Took Away: Blessed Be the Name of the Lord". There, Kierkegaard contrasts the biblical character Job to a man who, knowing the inscrutability of fate and fortune, has striven to "make his soul indifferent to everything" (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 120) and thereby insulate himself against disappointment. Job is not like this, Kierkegaard observes. Instead, "Job traced everything back to God". "The very moment everything was taken away from him, he knew it was the Lord who had taken it away, and therefore in his loss he remained on good terms with the Lord, in his loss maintained intimacy with the Lord; he saw the Lord, and therefore he did

not see despair” (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 121). Because Job had not mistaken his fortunes as evidence that he was beloved by God, he was not turned against God when tragedy struck. Indeed, Job is able to “bless” the Lord (the closest Hebrew word for “thank”) even in his pain and suffering: “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away: blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21).

Robert C. Roberts offers the following, helpful gloss on Kierkegaard’s conception of religious gratitude, a gloss which nicely summarizes how Kierkegaard would have characterized the distinctiveness of Christian gratitude. According to Roberts, Kierkegaard “is saying that it’s fine to thank God for these mundane blessings, as long as one’s thanks are firmly subject to a proviso: *were these blessings taken from me, my gratitude to you, O God, would continue unabated*—not unchanged, perhaps, but unabated . . . That is, thanks for the God-relationship is *always* proper, takes precedence over thanks for the blessings of this life, and persists through the thick and the thin of the latter blessings” (Roberts 2014, pp. 77–78).

3.3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945)

In a short, unfinished reflection “On Gratitude among Christians”, the German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “Gratitude arises not from the inherent capacities of the human heart but only from the Word of God. Gratitude must therefore be learned and practiced” (Bonhoeffer 2006, p. 489). This appears to be a statement about the distinctive character of Christian gratitude, but what does it mean?

Bonhoeffer’s remarks are bold but cryptic. Is he claiming that all gratitude is, at base, Christian gratitude, no matter what the grateful person believes and no matter her relationship to Jesus Christ? Or, is the claim that only gratitude that is rightly grounded in Jesus Christ, the Word of God, is true gratitude, all else being counterfeit? It is not clear. The closest we come to an answer is in the following lines.

Jesus Christ—and everything established in him—is the first and last ground of all gratitude. He is the gift from heaven, which we were not able to procure for ourselves, in whom the love of God encounters us in the flesh. In Jesus Christ alone are we able to thank God (Rom. 7:25). In Jesus Christ God gives us everything . . . That for which I can thank God is good. That for which I cannot thank God is evil. But the determination whether I can thank God for something is discerned on the basis of Jesus Christ and his word. Jesus Christ is the limit of gratitude. Jesus Christ is also the fullness of gratitude; in him gratitude knows no bounds. It encompasses all the gifts of the created world. It embraces even pain and suffering. It penetrates the deepest darkness until it has found within it the love of God in Jesus Christ. To be thankful means to say yes to all that God gives “at all times and for everything” (Eph. 5:20). Gratitude is even able to encompass past sin and to say yes to it, because in it God’s grace is revealed—o *felix culpa* (Rom. 6:17). (Bonhoeffer 2006, pp. 489–90)

Bonhoeffer claims that Jesus Christ is the ground, limit, and the fullness of gratitude. Operative here is a thoroughly Christian metaphysics with—to quote the title of one of Bonhoeffer’s books—“Christ the center”. It is because Christ truly is the source and end of the created order that only Christian gratitude can adequately respond to the goodness of the world and God.

On Christ as ground of gratitude: “He is the gift from heaven, which we were not able to procure for ourselves, in whom the love of God encounters us in the flesh”. Because gratitude is the recognition of love expressed through gift, and because it is Jesus Christ alone through whom we fully encounter the love of God, “in Jesus Christ alone are we able to thank God (Rom. 7:25). The Christian who knows the love of God in the person of Jesus Christ thereby has the proper basis for gratitude; his knowledge of the love of God in the person of Jesus Christ gives him access to the love behind every good gift from above.

On Christ as limit of gratitude: “the determination whether I can thank God for something is discerned on the basis of Jesus Christ and his word”. The Christian, if I understand Bonhoeffer here, does not simply react gratefully to the goodness of the world

based on the promptings of his own heart. The heart, sinfully inclined to self-glorification, cannot be trusted to rightly discern the goodness in the world. Rather, the Christian judges the world in conversation with Jesus, who is both the origin and goal of the creation. As such, the Christian can find the love of God, and therefore can be grateful, even in pain and suffering, something that the unaided human heart cannot do. Conversely, there may be things toward which the heart inclines that are not worthy of gratitude. Only through conversation with Jesus Christ can such discernments accurately be made.

On Christ as the fullness of gratitude: “In Jesus Christ God gives us everything”. Through Christ the world is created, which is why every good thing in the world is from him and calls out for gratitude to God through him. “Gratitude seeks the giver above and beyond the gift” (Bonhoeffer 2006, p. 489). The Christian cannot fully or adequately give thanks for any good thing without ultimately referring it to Christ. Every last gift—even what we earn or deserve—is from God through Jesus Christ, and therefore “in gratitude every gift is transformed into a thank offering back to God, from whom it came” (Bonhoeffer 2006, p. 490).

Bonhoeffer makes one more interesting claim about Christian gratitude. “It is the accursed thanks of hypocrites when I do not pass on the love of God that I have experienced, and for which I give thanks, to the disadvantaged. This is blasphemy against the Creator of the poor” (Bonhoeffer 2006, p. 491). In other words, for Bonhoeffer, Christian gratitude issues not only in a particular form of thanksgiving to God through Jesus Christ, but also in the disseminating of God’s love to others, the poor and needy especially, through works of mercy. Bonhoeffer makes no mention of whether or not Christian gratitude must issue in a return gift to human benefactors. Even then, we are left to think, the Christian thanks God primarily for the gift and responds in action by loving those who are poor and needy.

In summary, Christian gratitude according to Bonhoeffer is distinctive in three ways. First, Christian gratitude ultimately refers all gifts to God through Jesus Christ. This is not to say that Christian gratitude has no room for gratitude to human benefactors, but rather that such gratitude is never complete until the gift has been referred to God as its ultimate source. As a Christian, I have not been grateful for my mother’s love until I have been thankful to my mother for her love and to God for my mother’s love. Second, Christian gratitude makes unique judgments about blessings and curses. Because the Christian judges the goodness of the world by the standard of Jesus Christ and in conversation with Jesus Christ, the Christian will be grateful where nonbelievers see nothing for which to be grateful (in pain and suffering, for example), and the Christian may withhold gratitude in instances where nonbelievers, responding solely to the exuberance of their hearts, may experience it. Third, Christian gratitude necessarily issues in love for the poor and needy, not necessarily in return gifts to human benefactors.

3.4. Arthur McGill (1926–1980)

In a posthumously published talk entitled “The Positive Meaning of Need: Revolutionary Gratitude”,⁵ American Congregationalist theologian Arthur McGill takes dead aim at the notion that Christian gratitude is simply the expansion of natural human gratitude to include an additional bigger, kinder benefactor.

Too often Christian gratitude is construed as if it were a perfectly normal human activity. Does not God like to give? Do not people like to receive? Is not gratitude that perfectly natural and inevitable attitude which any decent person would adopt in the face of God’s giving? This, I believe, is an illusion, and it is an illusion that must be abolished. God’s giving is not like ordinary giving, and receiving from God is not at all like ordinary receiving. In fact, it is just the opposite. (McGill 2013, p. 39)

McGill develops this provocative statement by contrasting “normal gratitude” and “Christian gratitude”. Normal gratitude, McGill claims, is characterized by a specific form of giving and receiving. Consider a case in which your family is in crisis and a benefactor generously delivers a meal so that you don’t have to cook. You are immensely grateful.

Consider, McGill asks, the kind of giving and receiving involved here. Crucial to the kind of giving that triggered your gratitude is that the giver really handed the meal over to you. The giver fully conferred this gift of a meal into your possession, relinquishing entirely his claim to it. “No strings attached”, we say, indicating that the kind of giving that triggers our gratitude is that which doesn’t trap us in a never-ending cycle of debt. So the giving is punctual, we might say; it doesn’t drag out forever. Similarly, the receiving at issue here is a punctual affair. For a moment I acknowledged my neediness, my friend swooped in with his gift, I expressed thanks, and now my neediness is removed. “This is the familiar process”, writes McGill.

Because receiving removes my neediness, because it confers upon my existence that which I require, I do all myself to acknowledge that I am needy—but only for a moment. Understand this clearly: I acknowledge myself to be needy before another and let myself receive from that other, only because I expect that this receiving will remove me from needing that other anymore. The food for my hunger is now effectively mine . . . If I went to another to receive food and then couldn’t be sure that I had enough control over it to eat it whenever I wanted, I wouldn’t call that giving or receiving. And if I thought that would happen, I certainly would not go through the unpleasantness of acknowledging my neediness. So it is with normal receiving, and with the gratitude aroused in someone by normal giving. So it is with Thanksgiving Day. (McGill 2013, pp. 40–41)

McGill points out that nothing prevents the religious person from adopting exactly this posture toward God: treating God as the punctual giver who delivers me from my need. He considers the “bronzed person” who “owns what he needs”. “He is grateful—of course, he is grateful. He is grateful, because he has received in a way which he finds reassuring. That is, he has received in a way which frees him from needing others. If he is religious, he probably feels this same kind of gratitude to God. He probably believes that God has been responsible for liberating him from need for others and even for God” (McGill 2013, p. 45).

This customary form of gratitude to God is a lie, according to McGill. Christian gratitude is different.

It is precisely in this way that God does not give and we do not receive through Jesus Christ. Giving and receiving between God and humanity in Jesus Christ is not the transfer of some third item, some “what” which passes from the possession of God into the possession of humans. God gives us a new self by which we belong to him and reflect his will—his loving, his knowing, his serving. He never delivers this new self into our control and our disposal. This new self is never ours; it is his. It remains his and not ours . . . All that we are is being received from God, and never established or owned for one instant by ourselves. Certainly this can be a source of unlimited gratitude, as Paul insists . . . But this human destitution can also be a source of uncontrollable fear. To have nothing, to receive nothing into our possession, to be able to put our names on nothing: to be only receivers—isn’t that threatening and dismaying? I do not want God to give me myself. I want to make myself, I want to be my own achievement . . . Christian gratitude is not like secular, worldly gratitude at all. (McGill 2013, pp. 41–42)

McGill alludes here to the words of the Apostle Paul in Colossians 3, where, after urging the Christians in Colossae to “put on the new nature” and no longer strive to be Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, Barbarian or Scythian, slave or freeman, Paul exhorts them: “whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him” (Col. 3:17). McGill finds here the most forceful expression of the distinctiveness of Christian gratitude. “This fundamental way of existing, where a person looks to Jesus for the fundamental shape and final meaning of his or life—this attitude is identified by Paul in this passage with our attitude of *gratitude*

... Thanksgiving pervades every corner, every dimension of this way of existing" (McGill 2013, p. 35). For McGill, the distinctiveness of Christian gratitude begins with the gift of a new self in Jesus Christ, a self that one never possesses but at every moment receives. Such radical contingency aggressively undercuts the human penchant to lay claim, transmuting the normal practice of gratitude—which dabbles in dependency and neediness but continuously escapes back to independence and sufficiency—into a “revolutionary” kind of gratitude that rejoices in neediness.

3.5. Herbert McCabe (1926–2001)

In a sermon entitled “Self-Love”, the British Dominican philosopher Herbert McCabe claims that a special kind of gratitude, and especially gratitude for oneself, is underwritten by the Christian conviction that God is love—that God creates us from love, for love.

The greatest gift of God to you is not just that he made you, but that you love him. The greatest gift of God to you is that you can speak with him and say ‘thank you’ to him as to a friend—that you are on intimate speaking terms with God. God has made us not just his creatures but his lovers; he has given us not just our existence, our life, but a share in *his* life. We converse familiarly with God on equal terms as the Son does with the Father. We love God with the same love that Jesus had for him, the love we call the Holy Spirit. And we love ourselves not only because we came forth from God but because our life is God’s life, the life of the Spirit. (McCabe 2003, pp. 73–74)

The sermon is short and suggestive, and one wishes that McCabe would have developed his argument more fully elsewhere. Nonetheless, what stands out is a sense that the Christian doctrine of Trinity and Creation are playing a distinctive role in McCabe’s understanding of gratitude, specifically gratitude for oneself.

“The words ‘thank’ and ‘think’ come from the same root”, McCabe observes (channeling Heidegger). “To say ‘thank you’ is to say ‘I *think* of you in this gift; I see it as also a gift of yourself to me, as a communication of yourself to me” (McCabe 2003, p. 72). To explain the difference between Christian and what we might call merely theistic gratitude to God, McCabe asks the listener to think about the difference between gratitude for a bottle of wine from one’s friend and gratitude for a letter from one’s friend. One can certainly be thankful for the bottle of wine; one can “value it precisely as a gift, as coming from the giver, as an expression of his or her love and friendship”. However, there are other ways of accurately valuing the wine. For example, you could value it for the price it will fetch or just for its own excellence, “for its own sake, without considering either its price or who gave it to you” (McCabe 2003, p. 72). The letter is different. It is really not possible to value the letter for its price (unless, I suppose, it’s from a famous person), nor can you abstract away from its giver and value it in itself as just a letter with its own intrinsic excellence. No, McCabe says, to value the letter is one and the same as being grateful for it, to say ‘thank you’ for it, to think of your friend through it. And, McCabe says, in the Christian way of thinking, “you are really rather more like a letter than a bottle of wine” (McCabe 2003, p. 72).

Why would McCabe say this? Is there no room in the Christian outlook for valuing oneself for one’s own sake, as an excellent and wonderful thing abstracted from the kindness of a generous Benefactor? McCabe thinks this is a theological mistake. Within the Christian understanding, it is not as though God creates a world including human persons and, in addition, gives them benefits. The creation itself is the first act of love, the commencement of an eternal friendship. Thus, McCabe says, the Christian knows that any effort to love oneself as anything other than a gift from God is bound to collapse into smugness or complacency. Either one will end up loving oneself for some extrinsic excellence—an achievement, some power over another, or perhaps some impressive possession—which is not, after all, loving oneself for one’s own sake. Or, fearing that there is nothing truly lovable in oneself apart from the masks one wears to impress oneself or others, one will sink into some distracting pleasure in order to avoid the emptiness. This is

because, according to the Christian doctrine of creation, we are not like a bottle of wine with intrinsic excellence. Rather, we are like a letter whose excellence is nothing more or less than the expression of love from a friend.

For McCabe, then, Christian gratitude is distinctive for the way in which it rescues us from the hopeless project of establishing our own independent worth. Christians believe that God is love, an eternal relationship of friendship between the members of the Trinity, and that creation is simply the invitation and incorporation of the whole world, ourselves included, into that eternal exchange of love. For Christians, gratitude is not something we exercise or experience after we have seen the goodness of ourselves, others, and the world around us. Gratitude is what allows us to see the goodness of ourselves, others, and the world around us.

How, then, to state more precisely the Christian distinctiveness of gratitude for McCabe? He does not give us a formulation, exactly, but he comes close when he says, “It is our faith that God loves us that makes us able to love ourselves and, through that, to be grateful for the gift of ourselves” (McCabe 2003, p. 71). In other words, Christian gratitude foregrounds gratitude for self as the basis of all other genuine gratitude: “It is only if you love yourself because you take yourself as a gift from God, because you see yourself as given, granted, by God, that you can ‘take yourself for granted.’ And then you can see others and other things in their own right and not just as part of your plans, as material to be manipulated” (McCabe 2003, pp. 71–72).⁶

3.6. Peter Leithart (1959–Present)

The American Presbyterian theologian Peter Leithart has written more than anyone else on the Christian theology of gratitude to God. His book, *Gratitude: An Intellectual History*, traces the shifting character of gratitude from Socrates to John Milbank. His is not an unbiased intellectual history, since he treats the “disruption” of Christian gratitude as the focal point of the story. It is Christian gratitude that gets things right, Leithart alleges, and only the social revolution inaugurated by Christian gratitude “is capable of preserving the political, scientific, economic, and social advances of modernity, while restoring a personal and human world” (Leithart 2014, p. 15).

Leithart begins his account of Christian gratitude with a startling statement: “Jesus was an ingrate” (Leithart 2014, p. 68). The Greco-Roman world in Jesus’ day was obsessed with gratitude, understood as the perpetual cycle of benefit exchanges that held together the social world and maintained pacific relations with the gods. There were two independent circles of reciprocal relations: on the one hand, the people offered sacrifices to the gods in gratitude for divine benefits, on the other hand, clients offered return gifts to their patrons in exchange for protection, promotion, and any number of other favors. Two features were essential to the smooth functioning of the two-circle system. First, the two circles of reciprocal exchange were entirely independent: the circle of familial/civic/political reciprocity did not impinge in any way on the circle of divine-human reciprocity. Second, one did not give a gift without justified expectation of return, nor could one receive a benefit without inheriting a debt of reciprocation; to err in either direction was to introduce chaos into the airtight gift-gratitude schema that governed all of social life. The Jews of Jesus’ day—Pharisees most of all—had left behind a rather different schema envisioned in the Old Testament and assimilated dramatically to the governing Roman ideology of gift and gratitude. And in such a world, Jesus could only appear an ingrate.

He attacked the tradition of the elders. He encouraged disciples to leave, even to ‘hate’, parents in order to follow him . . . He criticized the reciprocities of Jewish social life . . . Jesus aimed to detach giving and gratitude from the honor system in which it was embedded in Roman society and in Jewish life. He instructed his disciples to give generously and to receive with thanks but without participating in any honor competition. They are not to give in order to gain leverage or impose debts. Jesus assaulted the gift practices of his contemporaries. (Leithart 2014, p. 68)

If Jesus rejected Greco-Roman and Pharisaical gratitude, what did he put in its place? It is a commonplace of popular Christian theology that Jesus replaced the cycles of Roman and Jewish reciprocity with a straight line of selfless altruism: “Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return” (Luke 6:35). In fact, Jesus does no such thing, for whenever he speaks like this, he immediately adds that his disciples can hope for a reward from the Father in heaven. From the perspective of modern altruism, the New Testament is embarrassingly replete with promises of eternal reward. A gratitude circle remains in play, but it is one that violates the strictures of Jesus’ social world. For Jesus, the Father is both the beginning and end of the gift-gratitude circle. Benefactors may give generously and recklessly, trusting that they will be repaid with eternal reward. And beneficiaries may receive gladly without being pulled into endless debt cycles. In this way, Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament vision. “In the Torah, the relationship between wealthy benefactor and poor recipient is always a triangular one: Yahweh, as it were, secures both loan and repayment” (Leithart 2014, p. 68). Thus:

Jesus frees benefactors to give generously without anxiety about depleting resources or failing to get repaid honorably. The Father will take care of all that, Jesus says. The gospel likewise frees the recipient. Because givers look to the Father and not to the recipients for repayment, recipients are free from debt burdens. They have repaid their debt when they give thanks to the Father who was the ultimate source of the gift in the first place. (Leithart 2014, p. 71)

What is striking in Leithart’s account is that Christian gratitude reorients not only gratitude to God but interpersonal gratitude as well. Before Jesus it would have been inconceivable and treacherous to suppose that one could properly respond to a benefactor without entering into his or her debt. After Jesus, this is not only possible but standard among the followers of Jesus. Nowhere is this more evident than in the writings of the apostle Paul, who

urges the Romans to “owe nothing to anyone but to love one another” (Rom. 13:8). That is as much as to say, “Do not allow yourself to be put in a condition of debt to anyone”. That does not mean, as it might seem, “Do not become a recipient of benefits”. Paul knows that everyone is needy, dependent on God and on others for almost anything. “No debts” means that benefits are always finally referred to a single divine patron. In the community of Jesus, the only debt is the debt of love. Thanks is owed, but it is owed *for* rather than *to* benefactors”. (Leithart 2014, p. 74)

Leithart observes that Paul rarely (once) thanks his human benefactors directly at all. For example, when the Philippians assisted Paul financially in his ministry, he writes to them: “I thank my God for your remembrance of me” (Phil 1:3). By Greco-Roman standards this is a colossal failure of gratitude. Christian gratitude is so singularly focused on God that it relativizes interpersonal gratitude in a way that can offend any culture in which gratitude is the chief mechanism for social cohesion.

It is interesting, as well, to note the kinds of things for which Paul thanked God. Drawing on the work of David (Pao 2002), Leithart notes how Christian gratitude as exemplified by Paul “expands beyond personal benefits” (Leithart 2014, p. 73). Indeed, Paul rarely thanks God for personal benefits at all. Paul mainly thanks God for what God is doing in and through the lives of others: for the response of believers to the gospel, for the proclamation of the gospel throughout the world, for others’ growth in Christian maturity, and so on. Paul encourages general thanksgiving to God more than thanksgiving that is triggered by the awareness of specific benefits. And Paul thanks God just as often for what God will do in the future as for what God has done in the past. In all these ways, Paul’s display of Christian gratitude upsets the standard structure of interpersonal gratitude.

One final feature of Leithart’s account deserves comment. In the Greco-Roman world, gratitude comprised three movements of varying importance. Most important by far was the return of a gift to the benefactor. Of secondary importance was the expression of thanks,

preferably publicly. And of least importance, bordering on irrelevancy, was the internal experience of an emotion of gratitude. Christian gratitude is different. Christian gratitude begins with the expression of thanks to God, in private prayer and in public prayers of thanksgiving, especially the Eucharist. But equally important is the return gift, not to the divine Benefactor, who after all is in no need of material benefit, nor even to the human benefactor who may have acted as God's agent of generosity. Rather, the proper material expression of Christian gratitude is works of love to the disadvantaged, quintessentially the giving of alms and the provision of hospitality to the poor and needy. Little is said about the affective dimension of Christian gratitude beyond Paul's expectation that Christian gratitude be heartfelt.

For Leithart, then, Christian gratitude is distinctive in several important ways. It resists and undermines the deployment of gratitude to cement bonds of social and political obligation. It invites God into the circle of reciprocity in a way that frees benefactors from fear of non-reimbursement and frees beneficiaries from the burdens of debt. It refers every good gift to God, relativizing to a dramatic degree the importance of standard interpersonal thanksgiving. And it reorients the material dimension of gratitude away from a reciprocal gift to a benefactor toward the sharing of God's love with the neighbor, especially the neighbor in need of care.

4. Summary

We are now in a position to answer our original question about the distinctiveness of Christian gratitude. Return to our initial thought experiment in which an observant anthropologist is studying the different gratitude practices of two communities, one Christian and the other generically theist. This is a problematic thought experiment since it is unclear whether there is such a thing as generic theism and, even if there is, there can be no doubt that generic theism, even if relieved of the dogmas of the Abrahamic religions, retains many of the moral and spiritual impulses of the Abrahamic religions from which it is descended. Nevertheless, I think the theologians we have surveyed have helped us envision how a community of persons deeply shaped by Christian thought and practice might have a distinctive way of practicing gratitude. The survey has yielded at least five distinctives.

First: Edwards, McGill, and McCabe each claimed that Christian gratitude is characterized by a new relation to the self. Christians are given a new self in Jesus Christ and thereby freed from the dogged but ultimately fruitless project of establishing their own worth so as to merit love. Christians, we might say, are those who have recognized that they are loved into being, so to speak, and therefore have only to receive themselves in gratitude. Such a community would be characterized by a striking diversity, we might suspect, since its denizens would feel no pressure to establish themselves in some recognizably respectable identity or persona. And such persons would be freer to attend to the world around them, others especially, since they would not be continually burdened by the quest for their own significance.

Second: Leithart claimed that Christian gratitude is characterized by a posture toward human beneficiaries that, absent Christian faith in a divine Benefactor who "secures both loan and repayment" (Leithart 2014, p. 68) would seem irresponsible and reckless. A community of Christians shaped deeply by this dimension of Christian gratitude would be strange indeed. They would not be obsessively concerned with the social obligations of returning favors. They would not stress over when they should offer a return gift and exactly how it should be proportioned to the original kindness, nor would they stress if they gave a gift and received no return. They might not even write thank you cards! Of course, neither would they be devoted to *not* returning favors. Rather, they would be characterized by a sense of complete freedom about such matters, trusting that their generosity, such as it is, will be appropriately rewarded in heaven.

Third: Bonhoeffer and Leithart claimed that Christian gratitude is distinctive in that, for the Christian, the required material response to a benefit—whether directly from God or indirectly by means of a human intermediary—is neither a material return to God or the

human intermediary but rather the material expression of love for those in the community who are in need. A community so shaped would excel in works of mercy, and this would be not something in addition to their being grateful but the very expression of their gratitude.

Fourth: Edwards, Kierkegaard, and Leithart claimed that Christian gratitude is distinctive in its prioritization of the kinds of benefits most demanding of gratitude. It is not that the Christian is ungrateful for the daily, mundane providences that may come: good weather, a bonus, a win by the home team. But Christian gratitude is trained to look elsewhere: to the intrinsic goodness of God, to God's gracious plan of reconciliation and its outworking in the lives of oneself and others, and to the extraordinary gift of relationship with God. A community characterized by Christian gratitude will therefore see benefits where others do not and rejoice in developments that to outsiders may seem odd, dubious, or uncomfortably "religious". Although they will not act especially pious (remember that they do not need to establish their own significance) they will openly celebrate the workings of God in their own lives and the lives of those they love.

Fifth, and relatedly: Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer, and McGill each claim that Christian gratitude is distinctive in its posture toward mundane "blessings". There's nothing wrong with thanking God for such blessings, of course, but the Christian knows that the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, and that, moreover, we aren't even in a position rightly to judge whether something is a blessing at all. As Bonhoeffer claimed, Christians will try to form such judgments with reference to and in conversation with Jesus Christ. Even so, as Kierkegaard reminded us, Christian gratitude for the fleeting blessings of this life comes with a proviso: even should this blessing turn to tragedy, still I will thank you, O God, for being my God and friend.

5. Conclusions

Would a community characterized in these five ways be interestingly distinctive in its practice of gratitude? The theologians surveyed here provide ample reason to think that gratitude within a community deeply shaped by Christian belief and practice would indeed be exercised and expressed in ways that would set it apart from any other imaginable community. The structure of gratitude will be different. Christian gratitude for self challenges the standard tripartite benefactor–benefit–beneficiary schema. And the inclusion of the God in the "circle of reciprocity" means that expressions of thanks will be directed not primarily to human benefactors but to God, and material returns of generosity will be directed not primarily to human benefactors but to the neighboring needy. The phenomenology of gratitude will be different. Christians will not fear the neediness that gratitude implies, perpetually attempting to counterbalance gratitude with assertions of independence. And Christians will not prioritize the affective dimension of gratitude in the way that is common in contemporary practice. Finally, the conditions of possibility of gratitude will be different. Gratitude is not simply a reflex exercise of the preference-satisfying self. Indeed, Christian gratitude may take an ambivalent stance towards certain blessings that strike the natural person as unquestionably good. By contrast, in ongoing conversation with God through Jesus Christ, Christians find it possible to be grateful for circumstances that, absent Christian convictions, would more likely occasion terror or despair.

Of course, being "interestingly distinctive" is not a virtue. What matters is that persons and communities be grateful in the right ways, in ways that properly respond to the gifts that are truly given. But I hope this essay has displayed how Christians, because they have a distinctive view about the gifts that surround us, indeed the gifts that *are* us, will exercise and experience gratitude in a distinctive way.

Funding: This research was funded by the Templeton Foundation, grant number 59916.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interests.

Notes

- ¹ It is an important question whether atheists or agnostics can be grateful to God, but it isn't relevant to my purposes in this essay.
- ² Most of the questionnaires used to test gratitude to God simply insert "God" into a questionnaire formerly used to test standard interpersonal gratitude. For example, in their several studies on gratitude to God, Krause and colleagues adapt the GQ-6 of McCullough et al. (2002).
- ³ There are exceptions. For instance, there is psychological literature on how one's "God concept" modulates one's exercise and experience of gratitude to God; see, e.g., Krause et al. (2015). I hope this essay will shed new light on how theology and spiritual practice matters for the exercise and experience of gratitude in general, including gratitude to God.
- ⁴ I have left Karl Barth out of this survey, not because he has nothing to say about the distinctiveness of Christian gratitude, but because I struggle to understand what he is saying. Thankfully, Matthew Lee Anderson explicates Barth on Christian gratitude in a forthcoming (Anderson 2022) paper, "Giving Thanks for the Gift of Life: Karl Barth on Gratitude to God for One's Own Life".
- ⁵ The title of the talk is actually supplied by McGill's editor, David Cain.
- ⁶ I have wondered about the significant parallels between McGill and McCabe, but as far I know they did not engage one another. Both, however, were readers of Karl Barth (especially McGill), and it may be that they were both influenced by some suggestive, but undeveloped, comments that Karl Barth makes in *Ethics*, to the effect that Christian gratitude is first and foremost gratitude for oneself (Barth 1981).

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