

Thankfulness: An Apostolic Afterthought?

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[Printed in Lutheran Woman Today (Sept. 1991) p. 5-8. Reprinted with permission.]

“And—oh yes—be thankful.”

These words, tacked on almost, as an afterthought, are a loose translation of the apostle Paul’s words in Colossians 3:15—his well-known advice about new life in Christ.

Thankfulness an afterthought? For Christians, that can hardly be true. Or can it? Before we answer, let’s examine some New Testament accents on **gratitude**, **thanksgiving**, and **being grateful**—all biblical words that are variations on one “loaded” biblical Greek word, **eucharistia** (meaning “good grace” —more about that later).

Gratitude. First off, let it be said that gratitude is not an attitude in the New Testament. Nor is it something we do because of the way we feel. It is, rather, an action, a public event. The gospel calls us to thankfulness regardless of how we feel about things, including our feelings about ourselves or about those who receive our gratitude.

So, for example, the New Testament Greek term **agape** is not a feeling or attitude of warm fuzzies toward someone. Instead **agape** is the word that describes concrete help given to someone in need, despite how we might feel about that person. The

meaning of **agape** becomes clear when our Lord bids us to love our enemies, to do genuine good for those whom we clearly don't like. Even if people are out to "do us in," we are called to be Christ's agent and do good for them. So it isn't gratitude, but something else, that motivates people to "do love."

Thankfulness. The same is true for thankfulness. Thankfulness is, in fact, an "after-thought" in that it comes *after*, or *second*, in the sequence of Christian living. *Faith* comes first. It is important to get that sequence straight and understand the reason for it. Let me illustrate what I am talking about with an example from my childhood.

At Trinity Lutheran Church in rural Coal Valley, Illinois, where I grew up, we sang an old hymn each year during Lent that had Jesus saying these words to us: "I gave My life for thee; What hast thou giv'n for Me?" That hymn brought shudders to me every time I heard it. It shattered. For no matter how hard I tried, my "gratitude attitude" was trivial when compared to Christ's cross.

Christ had done so much for me, the hymn reverberated, and now it was my turn. And it sure sounded to me as if Christ was asking for equity. When instructed that I should do this or that "out of gratitude," I could only look inside myself and verify that, sure enough, I was "out of" gratitude. Not just fresh out. Constantly out.

Through years of grappling with God's gospel, I now know the missing link in the sequence from that piece of childhood piety: *faith*. I knew Christ had done all that stupendous stuff for me, but somehow it didn't seem to count if I didn't fork over something equally comparable in return. My constant dilemma was that I was out of gratitude. Small wonder—faith was missing!

Thankfulness is not, strictly speaking, a response to the

gospel. Faith is—and the only proper one. The gospel does indeed call for a response. But the response it calls for is this: *Trust me*. The Lutheran confessions hold that the gospel is a promise. But before we can give thanks for promises, we have to trust the promises. Gratitude is a *consequence* of trusting. So the Christian sequence is, rightly: Christ's promise to us, our trusting that promise, then the fruits of faith—a veritable garden of them—one of which is “and—oh, yes— be thankful.”

My move from childhood piety to understanding later in life is the switch from what, in theology, we call *law-imperatives* to *grace-imperatives*. Or, more simply put, from law-commands to grace-commands. Both commands issue from God, so we dare not say that people initiate the law-commands, while God initiates the other kind. No, both come from God. The big difference is that Christ is in the second set, and not in the first set. And what a colossal difference that is! Law-commands have a prior condition to them: “If you do this for God, then God will do that for you.” Remember the lawyer in Luke 10 who wanted something from God—eternal life—but kept trying to justify himself, finally asking, in effect, “Who is this neighbor I am supposed to love?” In the Good Samaritan parable that follows, Jesus is trying to tell him—and all of us who will listen—that God-in-Christ acts first, justifying all of us who are “half-dead” in our sins. Then are we freed, and grace-filled, to see that we are neighbors to all kinds of people. We can perform actions of thankfulness and helpfulness, in faithful response to God and on behalf of others.

For in the grace-commands, Christ is primary and comes first. The commands that follow Christ are the *consequence*—not the *condition*—of the divine action. The grace commands read like this “Since God-in-Christ did such-and-so, therefore you do so-and-such.” Listen to the pattern in this classic grace- command: “...in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself...

[therefore] on behalf of Christ, be reconciled..." (2 Corinthians 5:19-20).

But we are not called upon to do something for Jesus. Jesus is not the beneficiary in the action commanded. Nor are we the beneficiaries. As in the parable of the Good Samaritan, *other people are the beneficiaries of those actions*. (Compare Ephesians 2:13-22.) And all of the action issues out of God's grace-initiative, flowing from folks who trust it.

The law-commands are something we've "got to do;" the grace-commands are something we "get to do." The former involves coercion, the latter has no coercion at all, but rather Christian freedom! The former lays assignments upon us with built-in sanctions; the latter opens new doors for innovative sanctification. We get to choose the good we are eager to do for another! Thanksgiving is one of the grace-commands that no one can really tell us how to do, though conversation within the Christian community can help shape us as we seek to do our faith-filled response.

Perhaps the earlier attack on the "gratitude attitude" was overstated. Attitudes are important for how we live and act. But if our attitudes, even our grateful ones, remain only inside us and are linked to how we feel, then Christian thanksgiving is not yet happening.

The book of Psalms grasps the point well when, in Psalms 106, 107 and others, it repeatedly advises us to "go public" with our faith-filled response: "Oh, give thanks to the Lord." Why? "For God is good." How good? Good enough that "God's mercy endures forever." Thanksgiving really is an afterthought, for it is *after* encountering God's mercy in Christ, and trusting it, that we go public. In biblical thanksgiving, there is always an audience, for someone outside the thanksgiver is on the

receiving end when thanksgiving happens.

Remember the term ***eucharistia*** mentioned earlier? When we unpack the word, we find it means, “good grace,” from ***eu*** (good) and ***charistia*** (grace). When we as sinners begin to trust Christ and see in Christ God’s move toward us in grace, then all is good. And we receive that goodness “with thankfulness,” as Paul says in Colossians 3:16, as a grace gift. And we “go public.”

Even if no one thinks to ask us what is going on, we can tell them anyway. Look what God-in-Christ has done for us! God gives us gifts in our lives. We receive them and we can give them away.

Thanksgiving is one Christian proposal for going public with what has been private experience. It’s no big deal. It’s simply faith in action proceeding from the center of our being to the edges of all the crazy-quilt patchworks that are our lives.

Or as the apostle Paul might have put it, “Oh, yes—by the way—be thankful.”

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