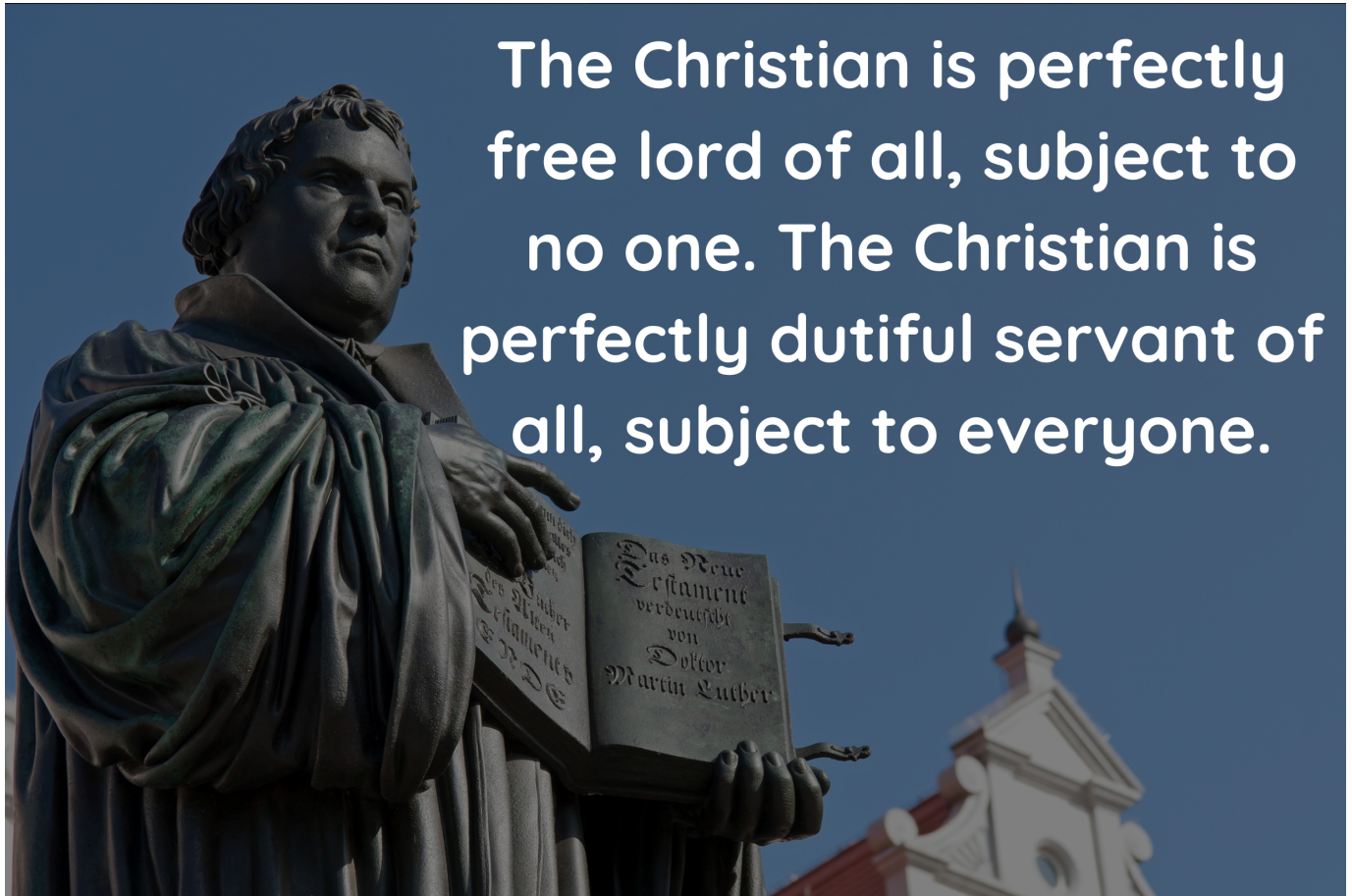


In Praise of Thanks



Martin Luther Christian Servant (from Canva)

Co-missioners,

What, you may ask, is the best gift Christianity can bring to American public life, or to the mood of the world, for that matter? Marcus Felde has an intriguing response to that question today. He'll draw on some deep cross-cultural experience as he makes the case for it. Along the way he'll also show us why "thank you" is very thing we'll need and want and get to say when our reading is done.

We add that you'll have a chance to discuss this essay with Marcus at the November 15 session of Crossings' Table Talk. Drop

a note to [Cathy Lessmann](#) if you'd like to join that conversation. She'll send you a Zoom invitation.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

In Praise of Thanks

by the Rev. Marcus Felde, Ph.D.

Preliminary Remarks

I was taught not to share personal feelings of this sort in a paper. I will anyway, because if I don't say this now, the very argument of my paper might undermine my thesis.

I have tinkered for decades with the ideas contained in this essay. I think the topic of what we dismiss as "manners" or "politeness" is a fruitful one for reflection. As a pragmatic law/Gospel theologian and a preacher who has lived a fifth of my life overseas, I am happiest when I am uncovering the theological dimension of everyday life and culture so that others may share the joy and peace I have in Christ. From the time I was invited to write something for Table Talk, I have been eager to write down these thoughts about thanks one more time, perhaps more exactly and clearly than before.

But I stumbled and grumbled while writing draft after draft of this essay. I would come up with the right words, then discard them. Why?

Mainly, I think, because I was not comfortable with my goal: to compel you to think like me. On one hand, I want to make as strong an appeal as possible so you will agree with my thesis,

which I think is correct. On the other hand, I don't wish to be aggressive. I do want to persuade you. I want to choose winsome words, sparkling illustrations, well-chosen Bible verses, and impeccable logic so that you will have no option but to agree with me. And maybe even share my essay with others. So that many will come to agree with me.

Ironically, that desire goes against my thesis: that in our relations with others we ought to be continually elevating one another rather than vying for advantage over each other—even when writing an essay! The word “compel” comes from “push.” The word “convince” comes from “conquer.” I don't want to conquer you. I want you to share my pleasure

So. Please read my essay and ask yourself whether you see what I mean, and whether you see what I see. Thank you for giving me your time and attention. Peace be with you.

1—“If . . . ?”

I mainly want to talk to you about thanks, but it will be helpful to approach the topic by addressing its flip side: “Please.

Too many years ago, a friend from New Zealand told a joke which I didn't “get” at first. Then I did. It went like this

A family were eating dinner. A child said to the father at the other end of the table, “Pass the potatoes.” The father lifted the bowl but did not pass it. Instead, he looked at the child and said, suggestively, “If . . . ?” The child was silent, as if thinking how to reply. When the father said again, “If . . . ?”, the child said, “If there are any!” (Everybody laughed except me.

The father was trying to teach his child to say, "If you please." And not only to say it but mean it. By his not saying it, a request inadvertently turned into a command; the child was elevating himself above his father and relegating his father to the role of his servant

2–Thesis

The mutuality of Christian love does not come about by force or training but by the action of transformed hearts which find no contradiction between freedom and service. I believe that in the expressions "If you please" and "I thank you" we find the precise language to enable, support, and express our mutual caring. By saying "If you please . . ." we subordinate our expressed wishes to those of another; and by saying "Thank you" we impute grace to one who has helped us; thereby acknowledging the equality before God of people who serve and those whom they serve. And all of us are both.

3–Proper thanks

This thesis depends upon making a sharp distinction between proper thanks and ersatz thanks. When thanks are given properly, they are not merely a polite varnish. They bring a distinct counterbalancing action into any occasion where people do good to people. By expressing thanks, the person who has been served affirms the worth of one who by serving has "reduced" himself or herself to a servant. [1] Thanks are a restorative. They give back to the "servant" that bit of dignity which is ostensibly given up when anyone stoops to serve.

In speaking this way, I am relying on a paradox Martin Luther set forth at the beginning of his essay on Christian freedom (which is also an essay on Christian service):

The Christian is perfectly free lord of all, subject to no

one. The Christian is perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to everyone.

The terms “servant” and “lord” are quaint, but he means them only as labels for the relationship between anyone who is served and the one who serves. All day long, every one of us lives in relationship with others, helping and being helped. Helping (serving) relationships are usually corrupted into unequal relationships of servility/slavery and domination/abuse. But Luther says we can have our cake and eat it, too: we can *paradoxically* be “helped” and “helper” all at once when we serve others not slavishly [2] but freely, from our heart; and when we receive the gifts of others with humility, not as though we are entitled.

Thanks accomplish their true purpose when they perceive, acknowledge, and affirm the worth, freedom, dignity, grace, or initiative of people who do things for us. Wherever this soothing restorative element is missing, the essential mutuality of human community (founded in our equal worth) is jeopardized. But when thanks are sincere and heartfelt, they constitute a generous and powerful imagining of our helper as our equal.

Of course, thanks must be sincere. They are no good if they are inconsistent with our thoughts and actions. If we say “Thank you” when we mean “Get lost,” or “That will do for now,” we are liars and hypocrites. If we misuse the vocabulary of thanks we are not just technically wrong but hypocritical.

To sum up: Thanks are the right response to gracious kindness. They are the verbal accompaniment to mutual love. They do not serve that purpose when 1) we fail to express them; 2) what we mean is only that someone has pleased us adequately; or 3) when words of thanks are inconsistent with our thoughts or actions.

4-In the absence of thanks



Photo by [Asso Myron](#) on [Unsplash](#)

What would we do without thanks?

The language of gratitude is ubiquitous in our own culture, even if most of the time thanks are insincere. “Thank you” means nothing painted on the green light at a tollbooth, for example. But there are cultures from which thanks are absent, and it may be instructive to consider what difference it makes.

Writing about the Penan people of Indonesia in National Geographic, Wade Davis observed (and I think he meant this positively) that “they do not have a word for thanks”; they do not need one “because sharing is an obligation.” [3]

I knew what he was talking about. I was a missionary in the 1970’s in Papua New Guinea, the most linguistically and culturally diverse nation in the world. [4]Less than twenty

years after their first contact with white people, I lived and worked among the Duna people in the remote highlands of PNG. [5] I mostly used Melanesian Pidgin to communicate through local interpreters. I learned what Duna I could, but in six years I never became fluent.

My observations about their language may be taken with a grain of salt. But it seemed to me that the Duna language, and therefore Duna culture, was lacking something important. Every day I had reason to be grateful to them for their generosity and kindness [6] to me, and I would have loved to express my thanks in their own language. However, the words were not there. I learned to say either "*Turuda geinia*," meaning I was happy or pleased; or "*Beli gone*," meaning that what they had done for me or given to me was "very good."

But for me to say either "I am pleased" or "That is good" felt self-important. It did not express the humble thanks I felt. For me, a white missionary with money and a jeep and a house with glass windows, to tell poor but proud black Melanesian people living a primitive subsistence lifestyle that I was pleased with what they had done for me by guiding me on a difficult path, or giving me one of their few chickens, did not work. My thanks to them fell short! They did nothing to lessen the obvious inequalities in our relationship. [7]

Years later, teaching at a seminary on the PNG coast and studying Garry Trompf's book [8] on Melanesian religion, I realized a possible explanation for the absence from their language of an equivalent to "Thank you." I saw why the word "*dange*" had been imported from German into local church languages on the coast of New Guinea in the early years of mission. Since Melanesian cultures are rooted in a fundamental law of reciprocity [9], thanks are superfluous. Rather than thanking, one incurs the obligation to return the favor. A

seminary student, for example, complained to me about how all the other students were bringing food to help him while his wife was sick. They were overwhelming him with obligations he would have a hard time repaying. In Melanesian cultures one does not have the linguistic wherewithal to interpret the actions of others as simple generosity; only as belonging to a web of necessity which is essential—not merely for propriety but for survival. To act without expectation of a return is alien to that web. Therefore thanks—which acknowledge grace—are out of place. Nothing is free; and where nothing is free, no one is free.

This perspective has been reinforced over the years. And it is not only true about other cultures. I hear people in my culture abuse the language of thanks. Someone might say “I am thankful,” for example, and mean nothing more than “I feel lucky” or “Life is good.” They might as well say “*Turuda geinia*” (I am pleased) or “*Beli gone*” (Well done). Others are faithful about saying “thank you” even though their conversation reveals that they feel “cheated” or “robbed.” They wish their life was better.

The wonderful people of Kopiago did not need to learn about morality from us. But they did need freedom and peace and joy that can never be attained within the boundaries of a culture in which every word and every action is imbued with obligation. What they did need, as do we all, is a freedom and peace which come from somewhere else, preferably on divine authority.

5—Praise and thanksgiving

People will settle for praise. From the time we make our first poo in a potty stool until we are fawned over during a “celebration of life,” we want others to praise us. We worry what will happen to someone who doesn’t receive sufficient positive reinforcement. But it is not praise but thanks which

makes us persons whose worth is independent of our performance. We need others to see us [10], to hear us, to know that we are not just cogs in a world machine but real actors who are making a difference because we want to. It is not enough for our product to be praised, whatever it may be. We want it to be known that we have been here.

But praise evaluates. It is never unconditional if it is true. Praise is a judgment. If it is faint, it damns. It is always criticism; the awarding of "1 to 5 stars." Praise "appreciates," which means etymologically that it "puts a price tag" on something. Praise therefore implies that the one who is doing the praising is a judge whose opinion is worth knowing, which also does nothing to raise up the serving one.

Thanks, by contrast, do not evaluate something the other has done, but affirm the value of the person's self. They are given force only by the humility of the one who expresses them. For instead of acting like "I had it coming" or "I should have been able to expect" a kindness, thanks make clear that it was *not* deserved. That says something important about the relationship between the two parties. Thanks are essential to maintaining good relationships where there might otherwise be misunderstandings about who is dominant. And when is that not true?

Our culture specializes in praise of excellence. No matter what people do, we want to compare how well people do it, and praise the one who does it best. This is cruel to those who do not excel. "Thanks" are a breath of fresh air in such a stultifying atmosphere. They lead us away from criticism in the direction of mutual love.

6—Thank God!

Thanksgiving transforms and defines a Christian's relationship

to God. “Praise and thanksgiving” are so often yoked in liturgy and hymns that we might think they are almost the same. Our thanksgiving of God is indeed a form of praise or doxology, but it *specifically* acknowledges the grace, initiative, and freedom of God’s action, not just in creating us but also in redeeming and sanctifying us. God has not done any of this out of necessity, but because it pleases God to do so.

People praise God for things that amaze or astonish us, or when we feel fortunate. We are like Dunas saying “I’m pleased with this” or “That is very good!” And there is nothing wrong with that. God’s works are indeed terrific, all the time. Far beyond our imagination. Beyond the reach of any spacecraft or microscope. But without the element of thanksgiving, all our praise of God falls pathetically short. Does God seek only admiration? Does God just want a pat on the head, for all of this? The Word we have from God is that the desire of God *for us* is that we be God’s children, God’s holy people, living in him. God desires a people. One flock, with God the shepherd.



Giving Thanks Always (from Canva)

We become God’s children, we come to God, when *through faith in*

Christ we perceive, acknowledge, and affirm God's undeserved graciousness towards us. Undeserved not because the alternative was nonexistence (like unicorns); but because although we *have* our being, the world would be perfect without us. We are not good. Not in the way creation was judged in Genesis 1, in which God saw everything and said it was. Humanity is simply not good for the world. We are not good for God. *Despite which*. While we were yet ugly old sinners; of his own volition; not because of our deserving; God dispatched his only-begotten Son to salvage us.

Only "Thanks be to God!" and not "Praise the Lord!" can express the content of the relationship we have with God which results from our salvation, in which we humbly acknowledge God's continual, undeserved goodness to us. If Christianity were a religion of rules and law, everything would be necessary and praise would suffice. But Christian faith is not a religion. It is the effect in people's hearts of our hearing and knowing by faith that God loves us and will keep us to eternal life. Knowing this, the *charis* (grace) of God in Jesus Christ produces *eucharistia* (thanksgiving) in our hearts.

For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. **But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.** [*I.e., we perceive God's freedom in what God does to and for us.*] We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair...." Yes, everything [*i.e., our ministry of the Gospel to you*] is for your sake, **so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God**" (2 Corinthians 4).

7–Conclusion: A very broad generalization

We hear that Christianity is in decline in America. What would be lost if it went away? Not morality. Morality is always in the ascendant; it merely changes shape. No, what would be lost is thanksgiving. For where nothing is free, there is no reason for thanks, and no one is free. And the freedom of Christians arises not from a decrease in morality but from the increase of grace. And grace grows not through scientific knowledge [11] but through the welling up in us of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,

who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

Endnotes

[1] Picture Jesus: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45). Also, obviously, Philippians 2.

[2] Slavery is a worst-case scenario. The slaveholder gives no thanks to the slaves, who then lead “thankless lives”— Picture Jesus: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45). Also, obviously, Philippians 2. at least in their work.

[3] Wade Davis, “Vanishing Cultures,” *National Geographic* (July 1999), 70. Mr. Davis is not an ethnographer but an ethnobotanist. Oddly, a few pages later in the article he shares

the morning reflection of a local Penan man and has him saying "Thank you" to the spirits.

[4] At last count, its nine million people employ 839 distinct languages to communicate.

[5] My wife Christine and I were missionaries of the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches serving under the Gutnius Lutheran Church–Papua New Guinea from 1975-81 at Lake Kopiago in what was then the Southern Highlands Province; and from 1981-82 at Birip in the Enga Province. From 1990-96 we represented the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as missionaries serving the Evangelical Lutheran Church–Papua New Guinea at Martin Luther Seminary in Lae.

[6] Let me be clear: They were wonderful people. We did not go as missionaries to the Duna to teach them to be good. Good deeds help the neighbor, whether or not they are accompanied with thanks. I felt sorry for them not when I saw how they lived, but when I perceived that for them there was no escaping the tyranny of reciprocity. Gifts, like murders, must be repaid.

[7] Perhaps I did manage to get the idea across. In a recent Facebook chat with a young man at Kopiago, he told me that his grandparents remember me being "tall" and "humble."

[8] Garry Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

[9] The term "norm of reciprocity" was coined by Alvin Gouldner in "The Norm of Reciprocity," *American Sociological Review*, 25:2 (April 1960), 161-178.

[10] Oswald Bayer is brilliant on this topic in chapter one of *Living by Faith*, Augsburg Fortress.

[11] The motto of the University of Chicago (my alma mater) is

“Crescat scientia vita excolatur.” (Where knowledge increases, life flourishes). That is a poor substitute for the truth in 2 Corinthians 4, that as grace extends to more and more people thanksgiving increases, to the glory of God.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
A publication of the Crossings Community