Gratitude, by Peter J. Leithart

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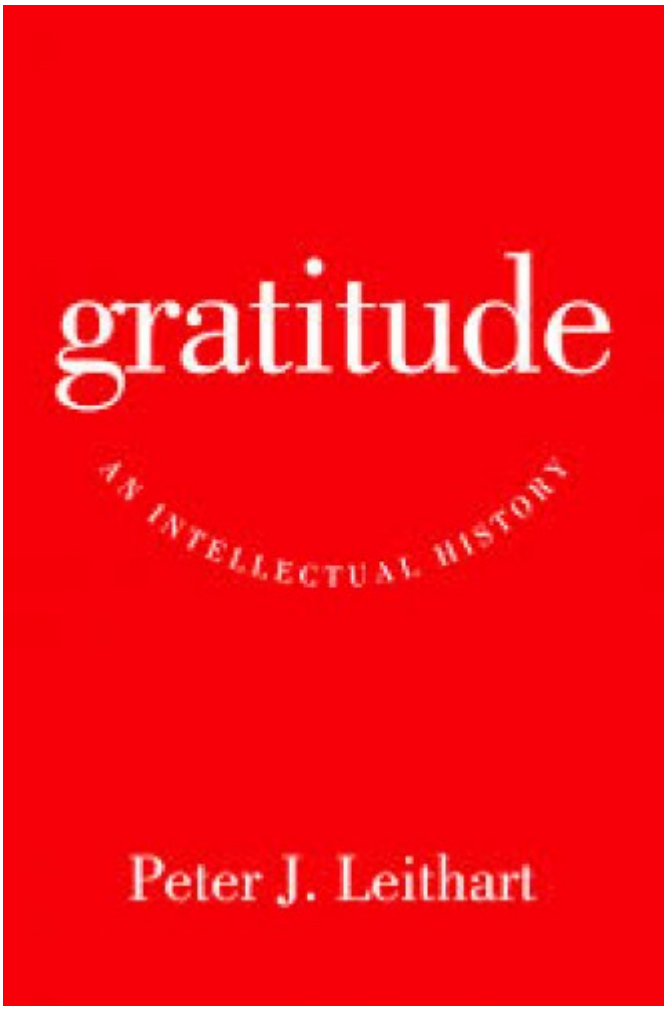
In Review



Gratitude

By Peter J. Leithart
Baylor University Press

Jesus was an ingrate," Peter Leithart writes, and he thinks we should be thankful that he was. So were the Protestant Reformers. Indeed, much of the modern world is

in debt to the revolutionary power of Christian ingratitude. That, in any case, is the counterintuitive thesis of Leithart's provocative new book. Sentimental reflections on the importance of gift giving are a common way to combat modern cynicism, but Leithart will have none of that. In fact, if the power of generosity is often thought to be one of the great heritages of Western history, Leithart's book can be seen as one long act of ingratitude. Sometimes, Leithart seems to be saying, it is more blessed to reject than to receive.

The main characters of Leithart's story are two geometrical elements, circles and lines. In the ancient world, Leithart argues, gifts were circulated with the expectation that they would be returned. In tribal societies, among the ancient Greeks, and in the Roman republic, generosity was a form of political power. Patrons handed out favors in order to put recipients in their debt. Gratitude had to be demonstrated in deed, not just expressed in word. Clients were expected to repay gifts with loyalty and obedience. Gifts thus created closely integrated communities, but at the price of inclusivity. Gifts were the encircling boundary that kept these social groups closed to outsiders.

The modern world threw lines like daggers into the heart of this circular way of thinking. From the perspective of the circle, gifts without strings attached are a wasted opportunity to bond people together. From the perspective of the line, however, the strings wrapping a gift are like the trappings of a spider's web. We are so aware of the burden that gifts can place on others that we are hesitant to get ourselves trapped in other people's needs. That is why we think that gifts should be given without any thought of return. We want our gifts to be a particular kind of line: a ray that has a beginning but keeps going without ever turning back. When linear-minded givers are thanked, they often say "It was nothing" in order to minimize the importance of their action. To insist on gratitude is to make the very basic mathematical mistake of thinking that lines can turn into circles.

We tolerate circles in private, but in public we accept only lines. When circles break into the public realm, we call it bribery. Although much of the rest of the world mixes patronage with commerce, we modernists are purists when it comes to economic exchange. Even in private, among family and friends, we are suspicious of circles. Gifts that anticipate some kind of repayment are better called loans. Trouble will result if you mix the languages of circles and lines.

Gifts once made the world go ’round, but now they seem more moral trouble than they’re worth. How did we get so far from the ancient world’s conviction that gift-giving practices are essential for the common good?

Ancient Athens and Christianity play crucial roles in Leithart’s story. For roughly 150 years, Athens developed the first noncircular political system by replacing personal patronage with democratic equality. Christianity did to religion what Athens did to politics. Athens put the political ruler beyond the influence of gifts. Christianity did the same for the ultimate ruler, God. Athenian leaders were expected to serve the common good without regard to the personal loyalty created by gift giving, just as Christians argued that God’s gifts are unconditional and thus unaffected by our sacrifices and offerings.

Jesus inaugurated a kind of holy ingratitude by “assaulting the gift practices of his contemporaries.” His views were in continuity with much of the Old Testament, but by the time of his ministry, Hebrew culture had assimilated the Greco-Roman connection of giving with honor and prestige. Jesus mocked public displays of generosity and forbade his followers to use gifts “to gain leverage or impose debts.” Paul puts Jesus’ words into practice by exhorting believers to owe nothing to anyone except God. For Paul, to give is to put ourselves into debt to others, a complete reversal of the traditional understanding of generosity. Because the church has only one patron, Jesus, all Christians are equally in his debt, which frees us to give to each other without expecting anything in return.

The Romans were right to call the early Christians atheists because they were ungrateful for all that the gods, not to mention the emperors, had done for them. Medieval Christians lapsed into the old circular ways of thinking, Leithart argues, by turning the mass into an economic exchange, which is why the church needed the Protestant Reformers to be ungrateful, like Jesus, to the priests who preceded them.

Leithart is aware that the modern world has taken linearity to an extreme. We need social circles; lines just don’t always do the trick. Ingratitude’s creative destruction of older traditions can go too far. “Ingratitude is a necessary moment of social and political life, without which there can be no progress, but when it is detached from circularity of every kind,” Leithart admits, “it can only collapse or run aground.” Removing gratitude from public life makes politics more partisan and commerce more callous. In the ancient world, being a receiver was shameful because it meant that you were weak and vulnerable, but today we are ashamed to be in a position of

power, as the opportunity to give seems to require. As a result, it seems easier to delegate giving to others, in the government or the churches.

Nonetheless, Leithart wants to embrace modernity, not reject it. His solution is what he calls the infinite circle of Christian giving. Our sacrifices are rewarded, just not in this life. “Because givers can expect a return from the Father,” he writes, “they can give generously without anxiety about depleting their resources.” By making the circle of giving begin and end with God, Christianity lets us hope that the lines of our giving can loop back into one all-encompassing community.

Leithart is right, I think, to try to show that Christianity allows for circles after all, although it is hard to see how an infinite circle can ever connect with finite lines. Is grace really that far removed from the mutual demands of exchange? What I take away from this book is the need for a non-Euclidean geometry of giving. Giving involves us in all sorts of messy and deformed relations, but God is always ready to turn our gifts into beautiful and unpredictable shapes.