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## Gratitude as Worldview: A Review of Eucharistic Reciprocity

Donald Roth

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## Gratitude as Worldview: A Review of Eucharistic Reciprocity

### Abstract

"Properly conceived, gratitude is a lens through which we can perceive all of life. This lens is crucial because it helps us, as near-sighted people, to see with the clarity we were originally created to possess."

Posting about the book *Eucharistic Reciprocity* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/gratitude-as-worldview-a-review-of-eucharistic-reciprocity/>

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### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

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# in things

June 18, 2020

## Gratitude as Worldview: A Review of *Eucharistic Reciprocity*

Donald Roth

**Title:** *Eucharistic Reciprocity: A Practical Theological Inquiry into the Virtue of Gratitude*

**Author:** A. William DeJong

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“North America is home to widespread greed peacefully co-existing with equally widespread gratitude. Though few are inclined to admit greed, many are public about their gratitude. How can a culture that so prominently values gratitude (enjoying what one has) so vigorously succumb to greed (pursuing what one does not have)?” (205).

This observation drives Bill DeJong’s *Eucharistic Reciprocity: A Practical Theological Inquiry into the Virtue of Gratitude*. I’m going to spoil the book a little by saying that the widespread practice of gratitude embodied in things like #blessed does not necessarily demonstrate the Christian *virtue* of gratitude. Still, I commend DeJong’s book as a thorough examination of and call to live out this virtue. Properly conceived, gratitude is a lens through which we can perceive all of life. This lens is crucial because it helps us, as near-sighted people, to see with the clarity we were originally created to possess.

## **Gratitude as a virtue**

Gratitude has been viewed differently throughout history. DeJong adeptly surveys a range of ancient and more contemporary understandings, from Aristotelian ideals of a society held together in hierarchy by the obligation owed to those who give, to post-modern thinkers like Derrida, who considered gratitude as something that eradicates the gift, rendering gratitude virtually immoral. Across the ages, gratitude moved from a foundation for patronage-oriented societies, to part of a commercial exchange, to a feeling or sentiment.

DeJong argues that these perspectives are transcended by a Christian understanding of gratitude. For DeJong, gratitude is a responsive virtue. It is a freely given, joyful response to the receipt of a gift that salutes the giver in order to perpetuate a personal, peaceable relationship. It is an obligation primarily in the sense that a lack of gratitude for a gift suggests a moral failure in the recipient. In fact, DeJong looks favorably on the assertion that ingratitude was at the root of mankind's original sin. Rather than rejoicing in what had been given, Adam and Eve fixed their eyes on what more they might have, rejecting the way that they already bore God's image out of a desire to be more like Him on their own terms.

This first tragic irony is echoed in the comparison that DeJong makes between virtue and vice. Rather than make the first couple more like God, their fool's bargain distorted that likeness, and, in like manner, vice seizes on to good desires and distorts and disorders them so that instead of giving life, they isolate, antagonize, corrupt, depress, enslave, distract, and dehumanize us. One of the strongest features of DeJong's book is where he catalogs how the "seven deadly vices" distort our views of God, ourselves, others, and things. He follows each of these descriptions by arguing how gratitude can help to reorient these distortions, often by pulling us back from the easy temptations of living in the future to appreciate our present and past provision. As a virtue, then, DeJong's recommended ethic of gratitude is about more than restraining evil; it's about embracing a vision of the good that comports with who we really are.

## **Gratitude as a corrective lens**

When Calvin spoke of the Bible as a set of spectacles that help us see the world as it truly is, he named something that would evolve into the concept of worldview. Although worldview came to mean something more like a set of first principles in some settings, this early metaphor is more fitting, and it pairs well with an Augustinian anthropology that sees us as creatures oriented by our desires. DeJong's argument is essentially that gratitude should be a worldview, a disposition that frames and shapes our

perception of our lives in terms of the overflowing generosity of our Creator and the many ways that He provides for us.

Like any set of glasses, gratitude is only a fitting prescription if it is calibrated to who we are and corrects our perception toward what it should be. In this book, DeJong offers ample evidence that gratitude fits the bill on both accounts.

DeJong demonstrates that gratitude fits who we are by developing a theological case for the centrality of this virtue. DeJong argues that our nature is an echo of the Trinitarian interrelation, making humans inextricably beings-in-communion. That is, we are dependent on our environment, society, and, ultimately, our God in a truly fundamental way, and we are naturally tied together in innumerable giving/receiving relationships. This finds its highest expression in Christ, who gave Himself freely so that sinners might be adopted as children of God. The magnitude of this gift is so great that it naturally provokes gratitude. Indeed, the Heidelberg Catechism identifies the primary context for Christian obedience as gratitude. Further, it's reasonable to summarize the Westminster Catechism's identification of the chief purpose of mankind as gratitude, entailing both glorifying God for His gifts and enjoying Him forever.

Beyond fitting us, DeJong provides compelling arguments that the lens of gratitude helps to restore our sight to what it should be. As I mentioned above, DeJong demonstrates this through an extended reflection on vice and how gratitude can redirect those disordered desires; however, he also explores practices and mechanisms that flesh out the positive formative effect of gratitude. To do so, DeJong finds support in the field of positive psychology, a branch of the discipline that purports to focus on what is good for humanity, rather than treating things that go wrong. According to the research of psychologists in this field, a disposition toward gratitude frames our lives in a way that is inversely correlated with things like depression, envy, and narcissism, while being positively correlated with prosocial behaviors like altruism and faithfulness in relationships. In short, psychology confirms the theological assertion that gratitude is good for us.

### **Gratitude in practice**

DeJong closes his book by speaking about practical ways to embody a spirit of gratitude. His primary emphasis explains the title for the book (one that I had wondered at, since it doesn't seem calibrated to make volumes fly off the shelves). That is, DeJong identifies the sacrament of the eucharist itself as a central practice that shapes us toward a proper worldview of gratitude. In the sacrament, believers are united to the Trinity through Christ, reminded of His incredible sacrifice for us, and given a foretaste of the bridal feast of the Lamb. In partaking, we act out the truths of our being-in-communion—our

dependence on God and His abundant provision for us. It is an embodied practice that captures the deep truths of who we are and orients us toward gratitude for what has been given to us. DeJong makes compelling arguments that we should be celebrating this sacrament more frequently and that we should recognize this as a central practice for those looking to frame their lives through the lens of gratitude.

A short section at the end of the book also addresses practices of prayer, hospitality, and community that similarly reinforce our connection to God and others in a context of gratitude. These descriptions are quite brief, and it is one aspect of the book that I wish was more developed. Overall, this book has the depth and systematic structure of a dissertation (which is what it started as), which means there are sections that are more accessible than others. I will confess that I devoured the theology and psychology aspects eagerly, while I was scratching my head at some of the philosophical engagement once the author moved past the classical period. I think there could be another book in here (perhaps with a different title) that fleshes out the practical guidance to a more general audience, but until DeJong decides to pen such a book, I heartily recommend what he presents in this one.