What Forms of Gratitude Expression are Most Appreciated?

Applications for Christian Leaders

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Abstract

Both the emotion of gratitude and the expression of gratitude produce benefits for the person who is thankful and the person being thanked. This study explores the degree to which various forms of gratitude expression are appreciated by those being thanked. In a survey-based study ($N = 361$), costly, private expressions of gratitude were more appreciated by people being thanked than less costly, public expressions. Higher levels of the HEXACO personality traits of Conscientiousness and Emotionality increased the degree to which people appreciated being thanked. Lower Honesty-Humility (e.g., narcissism) predicted a greater appreciation of receiving public expressions of gratitude while higher Honesty-Humility predicted a greater appreciation of receiving private expressions of gratitude. This information can be used by Christian leaders to help equip others for ministry.

Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others.

-Cicero

The biblical writers might not completely agree with this statement, but the Apostle Paul's frequent expression of gratitude for the people to whom he wrote would undoubtedly be appreciated by Cicero. Paul expresses gratitude to God for the Romans (1:8), the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:4), the Ephesians (1:6), the Philippians (1:3), the Colossians (1:3), the Thessalonians (1 Th. 1:2, 2 Th. 1:3), Timothy (2 Tim. 1:3), Titus (2 Cor. 8:16-17), and Philemon (1:4)¹. Although most biblical authors do not express gratitude to the audience whom they were addressing, this Pauline idiosyncrasy can serve as a model for today's Christian leaders. This study presents an

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overview of what we know from psychological research concerning gratitude and gratitude expression and also presents new research examining the effectiveness of various forms of gratitude (public, in a small group, written, and in private), both in general and in light of the personality of the person being thanked.

Gratitude and the Christian Leader

Among the responsibilities given to Christian leaders in the Scriptures are the pastoral duties of prayer (Acts 6:2-3), teaching the Word (Acts 6:2-3, I Tim 5:17, Titus 1:9), caring for the Christian community (I Pet. 5:2-3, I Tim. 3:5, Heb. 13:17), and equipping church members for ministry and building up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-13). Gratitude expression is perhaps most relevant to this last duty, equipping Christ followers for what Christ has called them to do. From the perspective of organizational psychology, εἰς ἔργον διακονίας, “for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:12, NIV) can be considered *performance*, accomplishing the tasks for which one is responsible in an organizational context, such as a church.

A classic conceptual formula (Anderson & Butzin, 1974; Heider, 1958) for modeling performance is:

$$\text{Performance} = \text{Motivation} \times \text{Ability}$$

This indicates that “the work of ministry” that a Christian performs can be roughly described as the product of his or her *motivation* to do ministry and his or her *ability* to do the ministry. If either the motivation or ability is absent, the ministry will not be carried out. The greater the motivation and the greater the ability, the more ministry will be accomplished. Motivation is a psychological phenomenon within an individual which depends on the individual’s personality traits, the beliefs that the individual has about the ministry (such as the value of the likely outcomes), and the social context (Maslow, 1943; Vroom, 1964; Weiner, 1985). Ability is a characteristic of the individual which depends on the individual’s specific capacities (similar to some interpretations of spiritual gifts), but also the opportunities to actually use one’s gifts or abilities in a specific context (Blumberg & Pringle, 1982; Sternberg & Kaufman, 1998).

This model implies that, to equip another Christian for the work of ministry, Christian leaders should seek to increase both a Christian’s motivation and ability to perform the ministry. Expressing gratitude is one means by which a Christian leader can do so. For example, if a person has participated in a ministry for the first time, such as tutoring neighborhood children, and has received thanks for it, especially from someone with status in the church, the person may be more motivated to perform the ministry again.² Similarly, a new Christian who hears a pastor thank the team which carried out a Vacation Bible School will learn of the opportunity to serve the Lord in this way, increasing his or her ability (and motivation) to join this ministry the following year.

Benefits Associated with the Emotion of Gratitude

Gratitude can be defined as “the positive emotion one feels when another person has intentionally given, or attempted to give, one something of value” (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006, p. 319). Among other functions, emotions prepare a person for specific actions (Frijda, Kuipers, & Ter Schure, 1989; Schwarz & Clore, 1996). For example, anger prepares a person to fight or argue, while fear prepares a person to flee or avoid. The emotion of gratitude prepares a person (the beneficiary) to respond favorably to a person (the benefactor) who has provided a benefit to

the beneficiary (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008; Ritzenhöfer, Brosi, Spörrle, & Welp, 2019). Gratitude is often considered a *moral emotion* because it motivates people in ways that affect the well-being of others (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Haidt, 2003). When leaders experience gratitude, they are more likely to treat all people fairer and more respectfully (Ritzenhöfer et al., 2019). Gratitude also generates a sort of “moral memory,” causing us to feel indebted to the benefactor until we respond (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001; Simmel, 1950, p. 338); for benefits that we cannot equitably reciprocate (e.g., to parents and to God), gratitude may create a permanent sense of attachment and obligation.³

The benefits of experiencing the emotion of gratitude, even when it is not expressed to others, include enhanced physical health (McCullough & Emmons, 2003), the acceptance and reframing of negative situations (Lambert, Graham, Fincham, & Stillman, 2009), and increased life satisfaction (Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, & Dean, 2009). Because gratitude creates a sense of indebtedness, reciprocating beneficial behaviors becomes more frequent in relationships where gratitude is expressed (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Ritzenhöfer et al., 2019), including leader-follower relationships (Michie & Gooty, 2005). Not only does the person expressing gratitude want to treat the person being thanked better, but his or her evaluation of the person being thanked increases (Algoe et al., 2008). Positive emotions, including gratitude, generally signal that the environment is safe and, consequently, new solutions to problems and new interpretations of information can be considered with an open mind, a phenomenon known as “broaden and build” (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2005).

All these phenomena and processes associated with the emotion of gratitude, when experienced habitually, work together to create trusting and strengthened relationships between the person experiencing gratitude and the person being thanked. This sets the stage for greater cooperation and goal achievement in both personal relationships and in organizations such as churches (Algoe et al., 2008; Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Lambert, Clark, Durtschi, Fincham, & Graham, 2010).

Benefits Associated with Gratitude Expression

The focus of this study is not on simply experiencing the emotion of gratitude, but on gratitude expression, that is, communicating one’s gratitude to the person for whom one is thankful, typically orally (such as publicly in a meeting or privately with the person) or in writing (such as through a note or, in the case of the Apostle Paul, an extensive letter).

Many of the benefits associated with gratitude expression are described in the “find, remind, and bind” theory of gratitude expression (Algoe, 2012; Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016; Lambert et al., 2010). Three important functions of gratitude expression are to help us find like-minded people who are willing to form a relationship with us and to cooperate in some way (find), to remind us of who is willing to cooperate with us (remind), and to demonstrate that a continued cooperative relationship is likely (bind). There are thus benefits both for the person expressing gratitude and for the person who is being thanked.

For Christian leaders, there are additional benefits associated with gratitude expression. When people in organizations have leaders who express gratitude, they tend to view their leaders as warmer and more caring (Ritzenhöfer et al., 2019; Williams & Bartlett, 2015) and thus more responsive to the followers’ efforts (Algoe, Fredrickson, & Gable, 2013; Algoe et al., 2008). Such leaders make people more satisfied with the organization, less willing to leave the organization, and more willing to cooperate with the leaders (Williams & Bartlett, 2015). In addition, when a leader expresses gratitude, the person being thanked is more likely to repeat

doing whatever generated the gratitude (McCullough et al., 2001). They are even likely to work harder because they feel valued and appreciated (Grant & Gino, 2010). The degree to which people will be motivated to continue or increase their work appears to depend on their personality; those who seek social integration and to develop new relationships seem the most responsive (Deutsch & Lamberti, 1986). However, Christian leaders need to be careful not to exploit this tendency in people by using insincere gratitude expressions or flattery (Wood et al., 2016).

The benefactor, the person being thanked for something, also benefits from a Christian leader's expression of gratitude. Those being thanked receive evidence that their efforts are valued and worthy of approbation by someone with expertise (Ritzenhöfer et al., 2019). Receiving an expression of gratitude also indicates that a Christian leader is likely to reciprocate and provide what is needed to the person who is thanked (Algoe et al., 2008). The person being thanked also receives information that the Christian leader is not selfish, but is willing to share the credit for something, a sign of trustworthiness and humility (Ritzenhöfer et al., 2019). It also signals that the Christian leader trusts and views the person being thanked positively, indicating that a continued relationship is likely and desired by the Christian leader. This phenomenon is especially strong when Christian leaders communicate that they appreciate the person being thanked and not just the act that the person performed (Algoe, Kurtz, & Hilaire, 2016).

In addition, third party observers of gratitude expression also are influenced positively when they see a Christian leader thank someone. It signals information about the leaders' character and values, as well as with whom the leader is motivated to cooperate (Ritzenhöfer et al., 2019). The *witnessing effect* occurs when a member of a group observes an emotional exchange between other members of the group (e.g., gratitude expression) and adjusts his or her behavior to make the group more functional (Algoe, Dwyer, Young, & Oveis, 2019). For example, when a person observes a pastor thanking a church member, the person is more motivated to respond to requests for help from the pastor because the pastor is likely to value and reward such efforts. Similarly the person's opinion of the church member being thanked goes up, because the pastor has communicated that the church member has successfully contributed to something valued by the church.

Research Question

Because there are so many potential benefits from Christian leaders expressing gratitude to others, this study seeks to understand what form of gratitude expression (e.g., public, in a small group setting, through a written note, or private) is most appreciated by people. The first exploratory hypothesis is thus:

H₁: Some forms of gratitude expression will be appreciated by people more than others.

Because people differ in patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, it is likely that personality traits will influence the degree to which people appreciate different forms of gratitude expression (Deutsch & Lamberti, 1986; Dunaetz, Lisk, & Shin, 2015). To better understand the effects of personality on the appreciation of various forms of gratitude expression, the second exploratory hypothesis is:

H₂: Some personality traits will predict appreciation for each of the forms of gratitude expression studied.

Understanding which forms of gratitude expression are most appreciated and by whom should enable Christian leaders to more effectively equip members of their communities “for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:12, NIV).

Method

To test these hypotheses, an online survey was used to collect data from a broad audience since most church leaders are interested in reaching a wide range of people. Recruited participants provided information about the degree to which they appreciated being thanked via various forms of gratitude expression, as well as information measuring personality traits and demographic information.

Participants

Participants were recruited through the second author’s social networks and then through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an internet based crowdsourcing marketplace where requesters post tasks for workers to complete in exchange for compensation. MTurk workers tend to be more demographically diverse than most convenience samples and the data they provide is at least as reliable as data collected using traditional methods (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). For completing this survey, 319 MTurk workers received \$1.00 each. A total of 361 participants provided usable data. Their median age was between 25 and 34 years and 54% of the participants were male.

Measures

Appreciation of Forms of Gratitude Expression. The participants indicated how strongly they would agree with statements concerning feeling appreciated at work via four forms of gratitude expression: public recognition, recognition in a team setting, written communication, and private recognition. For each form of gratitude expression, they indicated on a 5-point Likert scale how appreciated they would feel if it came from a supervisor, from a colleague, and from a new hire. In total there were twelve items (4 forms of gratitude expression by 3 sources). Items included “I would feel very appreciated if my supervisor gave me public recognition, such as at a large awards ceremony” and “I would feel very appreciated if my colleague thanked me through a sincere email, text, handwritten note, or other means of written communication.” For each participant, *appreciation: public thanking*, *appreciation: group thanking*, *appreciation: written thanking*, and *appreciation: private thanking* were calculated by averaging the responses on the three relevant items.

Personality Traits. HEXACO (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Lee & Ashton, 2005) is a model of personality measuring 6 factors, each consisting of a sets of traits, at least one of which is correlated to most, if not all, other personality traits. Participants responded to 60 Likert statements from the HEXACO-PI-R self-report form (Ashton & Lee, 2009).

Honesty-Humility. People high in Honesty-Humility tend to be honest, sincere, faithful, and modest. People low in this trait tend to be arrogant, dishonest, materialistic, narcissistic, and immoral (Lee & Ashton, 2005; Lee et al., 2013). Sample items include “I think I am entitled to more respect than the average person is” (reverse scored) and “I want people to know that I am an important person of high status” (reverse scored).

Emotionality. Emotionality refers to the degree to which a person is fearful, anxious, and dependent. Individuals high in emotionality tend to be highly anxious, worry obsessively, and have strong feelings of emotional attachment. Individuals low in Emotionality tend to be indifferent to family ties and expose themselves to physical risk (Ashton & Lee, 2009; Ashton, Lee, & De Vries, 2014). Sample items include “I would feel afraid if I had to travel in bad weather conditions” and “I remain unemotional even in situations where most people get very sentimental” (reverse scored).

Extraversion. Extraversion measures an individual’s tendency to engage in social interactions, express positive emotions, and develop a wide range of friends (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Sample items measuring extraversion are “I feel that I am an unpopular person” (reverse scored) and “In social situations, I’m usually the one who makes the first move.”

Agreeableness. Agreeableness measure the degree to which an individual is patient, tolerant, and peaceful (Ashton et al., 2014). Items which measure Agreeableness include “I rarely hold a grudge, even against people who have badly wronged me” and “My attitude toward people who have treated me badly is ‘forgive and forget.’”

Conscientiousness. Conscientiousness measures the degree to which a person is organized, self-disciplined, hardworking, and efficient (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Items measuring Conscientiousness include “I often push myself very hard when trying to achieve a goal” and “I do only the minimum amount of work needed to get by” (reverse scored).

Openness. Openness (or Openness to Experience) measures how much a person is inquisitive, innovative, imaginative, and creative (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Items measuring Openness include “People have often told me that I have a good imagination” and “I don’t think of myself as the artistic or creative type” (reverse scored).

Demographics. Age and sex were both measured with one item. Participants indicated their age by choosing one of seven ordinal categories, 1 = “18-25 years” to 7 = “75 or older.” For sex, participants could choose between male, female, and “other/prefer not to state.” The third choice was considered missing data.

Results

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the variables measured are shown in Table 1.

Different Levels of Appreciation of the Forms of Gratitude Expression

The first hypothesis predicted that there would be different levels of appreciation of the four forms of gratitude expression: public, group, written, and private. The difference of the four means was tested with a repeated measures one-way ANOVA. This difference was significant, $F(3, 180) = 75.12, p < .001$. Private thanking was the most appreciated, followed by written thanking, small group thanking, and finally by public thanking. Post-hoc pair-wise comparisons indicated that the differences of appreciation between all four forms were significant, all $t(360) > 3.77$, all $ps < .001$ (two tails), all $ds \geq .18$. The means presented in Table 1 are represented graphically in Figure 1.

Table 1*Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Reliability Coefficients of All Measures*

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
<u>Personality Traits</u>												
1. Honesty-Humility	(.81)											
2. Emotionality	-.11*	(.77)										
3. Extroversion	.10	-.19***	(.83)									
4. Agreeableness	.28***	-.13*	.32***	(.81)								
5. Conscientiousness	.22***	.06	.26***	.12*	(.81)							
6. Openness	.11*	-.03	.07	.13*	.14**	(.79)						
<u>Appreciation</u>												
7. Public Thanking	-.27***	.12*	.08	-.01	.13*	.02	(.90)					
8. Group Thanking	-.14**	.13*	.15**	.04	.24***	.11*	.69***	(.84)				
9. Written Thanking	.20***	.15**	.13*	.15**	.29***	.17**	.11*	.26***	(.81)			
10. Private Thanking	.26***	.13*	.12*	.17**	.32***	.25***	.09	.27***	.74***	(.81)		
<u>Demographics</u>												
11. Age	.27***	-.03	.19***	.15**	.22***	.16**	.05	.06	.16**	.15**	--	
12. Gender	.11*	.37***	-.02	-.04	.13*	.01	-.04	.03	.17**	.10	.12*	--
Mean	3.47	3.14	3.22	3.28	3.88	3.64	3.49	3.89	4.08	4.21		
Standard Deviation	0.74	0.66	0.71	0.67	0.60	0.69	1.09	0.85	0.69	0.64		

Note. $N = 361$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, two tails. For gender, male = 1, female = 2. Coefficients of reliability (Cronbach's alpha) are shown along the main diagonal.

Figure 1*Appreciation of the Four Forms of Gratitude Expression*

Personality Traits as Predictors of Appreciation of the Forms of Gratitude Expression.

The second hypothesis was that the degree to which each of the forms of gratitude expression was appreciated would be predicted by some of the HEXACO personality traits. A multiple regression analysis modeling the appreciation of each form of gratitude expression fully supports this hypothesis (Table 2). Multiple regression is a form of analysis that helps find the variables which predict the phenomenon being modeled while taking into consideration the overlap in variation with other variables. Since most of the variables in the study are significantly correlated with each other (Table 1), multiple regression mathematically removes the overlap of the personality variables to determine which ones predict the appreciation of each of the forms of gratitude expression.

Table 2

Standardized Coefficients Predicting Appreciation of Gratitude Expression from Personality Traits

Personality Trait	Form of Gratitude Expression			
	Public Thanking	Group Thanking	Written Thanking	Private Thanking
Honesty-Humility	-.32***	-.21***	.13*	.18***
Emotionality	.09	.13*	.18**	.16**
Extraversion	.07	.12*	.06	.04
Agreeableness	.05	.04	.07	.08
Conscientiousness	.17***	.22**	.21***	.23***
Openness	.02	.09	.12*	.19***
Total R^2	.12***	.13***	.16***	.20***

Note. $N = 361$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

The results indicate that greater appreciation of public thanking is predicted by lower Honesty-Humility and higher Conscientiousness. Greater appreciation of group thanking is predicted by lower Honesty-Humility, higher Emotionality, higher Extraversion, and higher Conscientiousness. Greater appreciation of both written thanking and private thanking is predicted by higher Honesty-Humility, higher Emotionality, higher Conscientiousness, and higher Openness.

Additional analyses which repeated the above analyses while controlling for gender and age indicate that the same significant relationships emerged for all forms of gratitude expression and that gender and age were not significant predictors for any of them.

Discussion and Application

This study has demonstrated that people appreciate various forms of gratitude expressions differently. Private, individual expressions of gratitude are appreciated the most, followed by written expressions of gratitude, expressions of gratitude in team or small group

settings, and, finally, expressions of gratitude in public or large group settings. Furthermore, the degree to which a person appreciates each form of gratitude expression depends on his or her personality. Conscientiousness and Honesty-Humility have the greatest influence, followed by Openness and Emotionality.

Equipping for the Work of Ministry

For the Christian leader, this information is useful for equipping Christ followers for the ministry that will build up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-13). Gratitude expression increases both the ability and motivation to perform ministry. If a Christian leader expresses gratitude to people for something they did, it informs the people that what they have done is valuable in the eyes of the leader and the Christian organization that he or she represents. This enables people to focus their energies and to persist with greater certainty that such actions are important and valued. Similarly, gratitude expression from a Christian leader motivates the person to continue the ministry. Expressions of gratitude indicate that the Christian leader appreciates the person and is likely to maintain the relationship with the person and offer help if needed. These rewards motivate the person to continue. By focusing their followers' attention on what is most important, Christian leaders can lead their organizations to fulfilling their mission (Dunaetz & Priddy, 2014; Warren, 1995) and improve that which most needs improving (Dunaetz & McGowan, 2019).

Nevertheless, Christian leaders should avoid thanking only people whose ministry is salient (e.g., a worship team on Sunday mornings). Leaders can use opportunities where public gratitude is appropriate to not only thank those whose ministry is clearly visible, but also those who have a less visible ministry (e.g., one week parking attendants can be thanked publicly, another week Sunday School teachers, and so on). This not only encourages the people performing these less visible ministries, but it also informs the broader audience that these ministries exist, and that they are important. Public gratitude can become a motivator to get more people involved in these ministries, especially when there is a shortage of workers and the ministry opportunities are significant. For example, most churches have children's ministries that depend on many volunteers. To motivate greater participation in these ministries, Christian leaders can publicly thank the volunteers in general and specific volunteers who make an especially important contribution. By pointing out exactly the praise-worthy contribution of these individuals, the Christian leaders are also providing information about the behaviors that are especially valued (e.g., listening to children, preparing dynamic lessons, organizing special events, etc.). This contributes to the training and development of both current and potential volunteers.

Costly Gratitude Expressions Are Most Appreciated

This study has indicated that some forms of gratitude expression are more appreciated than others. Although the purpose of the study was not to discover why some forms of gratitude appreciation are more valued, a clear pattern emerged. The least appreciated form of gratitude expression was public and then small group. Gratitude expression received through a written note was more appreciated, but the most appreciated form was individual, private expressions of gratitude.

It appears that the more costly the gratitude expression is, the more it is appreciated. Public expressions of gratitude rarely last more than a few seconds and usually do not involve a personal exchange of dialogue or close interaction. Small group expressions of gratitude tend to

be short in duration and may involve a bit of dialogue, but the dialogue may be formal, ritualistic, or shallow, especially if the person receiving thanks does not want to draw attention to himself or herself. However, a written note of thanks is more costly in terms of time and effort required, especially if handwritten, and likely contains personalized information that the recipient can reflect upon as long as desired. Individual, private expressions of gratitude are the costliest, especially if they involve some sort of intentional displacement to thank a person; such encounters also invite a dialogue and promote growth in relational closeness. It is probably for this reason that individual, private expressions of gratitude are the most appreciated form.

Personality Effects

Three personality factors from the HEXACO model of personality, Conscientiousness, Emotionality, and Honesty-Humility, were the most influential in predicting a person's appreciation of the various forms of gratitude expression.

Conscientiousness. Highly conscientious people appreciated all four forms of gratitude expression more than less conscientious people. Conscientious people tend to be hard working, persistent, and faithful (Barrick & Mount, 1991, 2000). They tend to be the backbones of most organizations, carrying out responsibilities consistently over long periods of time. It is likely that they appreciate gratitude expressions the most because they have made the greatest efforts to give to others and the organization as a whole. Christian leaders need to avoid taking such people for granted and to thank them regularly for their consistent service.

One application for Christian leaders would be to personally thank every volunteer in the church on their fifth, tenth, fifteenth (and so on) anniversary of serving in the specific ministry. As long-term persistence is a sign of conscientiousness, such gratitude is likely to be especially appreciated. Keeping track of long-term ministry involvement may be difficult, but expressing gratitude for such consistent service makes it more likely that such service will be continued and that others will be motivated to serve in the same way.

Emotionality. Emotionality also generally predicted a greater appreciation for all forms of gratitude expression (except for public thanking, perhaps due to concerns of being singled out in a large group). People high in Emotionality tend to be fearful, unsure of themselves, and sentimental (Ashton et al., 2014). Gratitude expressions for people with such doubts and fears can be especially meaningful because it provides assurance that what they are doing is valuable and should be continued. The more personal, costly forms of gratitude expression from a Christian leader may be especially appreciated because they provide assurance that the relationship with the leader is healthy and that the leader is trustworthy. Written notes may be especially effective because of their sentimental and permanent nature.

Honesty-Humility. People high in Honesty-Humility especially appreciated the more private (written and individual) expressions of gratitude expression. However, people low in Honesty-Humility especially appreciated the more publicly visible expressions of gratitude expression, public and small group. People low in Honesty-Humility tend to be arrogant, dishonest, and narcissistic (Ashton et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2013). From a biblical point of view, this is an extremely dangerous set of traits, traits to which God is opposed (James 4:6). These traits may be characteristic of "wolves in sheep's clothing" (Matt. 7:15). When in leadership, such people may severely hurt both the organization and individual members (Dunaetz, Cullum, & Barron, 2018; Dunaetz, Jung, & Lambert, 2018). Efforts to be recognized publicly can provide a warning to Christian leaders who may choose to avoid empowering or putting into positions of leadership people who make such efforts.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, responses to the forms of gratitude expression were measured in terms of appreciation by the person being thanked. Other measures of the value of gratitude expression could have been used such as happiness experienced or personal satisfaction of the person being thanked. These measures could lead to other results concerning the relative importance of the different forms of gratitude expression. In addition, participants were from a broad background, not just Christians or people who attend churches; such a limitation may have had an effect on the results, but it is difficult to say in what ways. Thirdly, this study was correlational in nature and cannot demonstrate causation. For example, the data was interpreted to mean that having a higher level of Conscientiousness causes people to appreciate expressions of gratitude more. However, it is also possible that receiving expressions of gratitude will make a person more conscientious when serving in Christian organizations. Churches and other organizations are complex systems with causation occurring simultaneously in multiple directions.

Conclusion

Expressing gratitude to others in a sincere manner is a natural manifestation of a Christian leader's gratefulness toward God for what he has done in their lives. In addition, expressing gratitude is a powerful way for Christian leaders to equip for ministry those whom they lead by increasing their motivation for service. The forms of gratitude expression are appreciated differently, and these differences partially depend on the personality of the person being thanked. Christian leaders who follow the Apostle Paul's example of gratitude expression make a wise choice by recognizing the work that God is doing in and through those whom they serve and lead.

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Notes

¹In contrast to his normal practice, Paul did not express gratitude for the Galatians in the epistle addressed to them. This is perhaps because their theological deviation was so severe (Gal. 1:6-7) that he did not want to do anything to encourage them to continue on the path they were on.

²Throughout this study, ministry is conceived as specific, discrete actions that are performed and can be performed again. In reality, Christians in many ministries (e.g., teaching Sunday School) are expected to work repeatedly and the ministry is perceived as being continual, rather than composed of discrete actions (e.g., a Sunday School teacher is more likely to say she's been teaching for 4 years rather than to say that she's taught 200 lessons).

³In some cultural contexts, this feeling of obligation that one feels to one's parents or to other important people may express itself as the worship of saints or ancestors. This sentiment can be brought under the lordship of Christ by recognizing God as the ultimate benefactor (the one who has given us something of value) and one's heritage (parents, ancestors, other Christians) as the object of value: We should be thankful *to* God *for* our ancestors, parents, or other Christians.

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