

Remembering the Radical Christian Roots of Our Thanksgiving Holiday

America's national "Thanksgiving" holiday is rooted in the nation's radical Christian origins and the custom of its first immigrants to set aside special days for giving thanks to God for His goodness and blessings. This custom was carried on by succeeding generations and eventually found its way into the national consciousness and calendar.

The Pilgrims Were Not Whiners and Complainers

The Pilgrims who landed on Cape Cod in November 1620 were devout followers of Christ who had left the comforts of home, family and friends to pursue their vision of a renewed and reformed Christianity. Although facing insurmountable challenges and much suffering, they maintained an attitude of gratitude through every trial.

They were a thankful people. They never wavered in their faith even during their first winter in the New World (1620-21) when sickness ravaged their community and half of them, about 50 in number, were taken away in death.

The first Thanksgiving was celebrated by the Pilgrims the following fall of 1621 after they had gathered in their fall harvest. Although their hearts were still heavy from the losses suffered the previous winter, there were at least three areas for which they felt particularly grateful to God.

1. With the arrival of spring the sickness that had immobilized the community and taken many of them in death had lifted. Their health returned, and although sad from their losses, they were able to apply themselves to carving out a home in the New England wilderness.

2. With the arrival of spring God providentially sent to them an English speaking Native American, Squanto, who became their interpreter and guide, helping them establish friendly relations with Massasoit, chief of the Wampanoag, the nearest and most powerful tribe in the region. In March 1621 they had signed an agreement of peace and mutual aid with Massasoit, which resulted in both peoples moving freely back and forth in friendship and trade.

3. Through hard work and Squanto's advice about farming and fishing (they were mostly townspeople and craftsmen) they experienced abundant harvests during the summer and fall of 1621.

After gathering in their fall harvest, which was abundant, Gov. William Bradford designated a Day of Thanksgiving during which they would pause to offer up thanks to God for His mercy and blessings. They were not whiners. They were not complainers. They were the ultimate optimists because of their faith in God and their firm belief that He had called them to this New World.

Pilgrims and Native Americans Celebrate Together

The first Thanksgiving was attended by an approximate equal number of English Pilgrims and Native Americans. After Bradford announced the Day of Thanksgiving, word of the event soon spread to their Native American friends. So when the day arrived, not only were there individual natives on hand, but Massasoit arrived with 90 of his people, and five dressed deer to add to the meals the Pilgrims had prepared.

The Pilgrims did not seek to force their faith on the Indians but neither did they hide their faith. After all, in the Mayflower Compact they had stated that they had come to the New World "for the glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith." Their approach was what some modern missiologists would call "friendship evangelism."

One can only imagine the emotions that filled their hearts as, in the presence of their new Native American friends, they joined Elder William Brewster in lifting their hearts in praise and thanksgiving to God.

The day turned out to be more than they could have imagined. Not only did they enjoy meals together with thankful hearts, but they engaged in shooting matches and other friendly forms of competition. It was such an enjoyable time that the one Day of Thanksgiving was extended for three full days.

And yes, it is almost certain that there was turkey at the first Thanksgiving, for Governor Bradford had sent out four men to hunt for “fowl” who returned with enough “fowl” to last them an entire week (Hyatt, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, 34).

Thanksgiving for a Remarkable Answer to Prayer

The next recorded Thanksgiving Day among the Pilgrims was celebrated in the fall of 1623 after a remarkable answer to prayer that saved their harvests, and probably their lives.

Bradford tells how the summer of 1623 was unusually hot with no rain whatsoever. As the blazing sun beat down day after day, the land became parched and the corn, their primary staple, began to dry up along with other vegetables they had planted. It was a very critical moment in time.

Facing such bleak conditions, Bradford called the Plymouth settlement to a day of “humiliation and prayer.” By “humiliation” he did not mean a groveling or self-flagellation, but a recognition and repentance for the human tendency to trust in one’s own human strength and ability rather than in God.

Their day of humiliation and prayer began like the many preceding days, very hot with not a single cloud in the sky. But before the day was over, God gave them, Bradford said, “a gracious and speedy answer, both to their own and the Indians’

admiration that lived amongst them.” Bradford goes on to say;

For all the morning and the greatest part of the day, it was clear weather and very hot, and not a cloud or any sign of rain to be seen; yet toward evening it began to overcast, and shortly after to rain with such sweet and gentle showers as gave them cause of rejoicing and blessing God. It came without wind or thunder or any violence, and by degrees in that abundance as that the earth was thoroughly wet and soaked ... which did so apparently revive and quicken the decayed corn and other fruits as was wonderful to see, and made the Indians astonished to behold. And afterwards the Lord sent them such seasonable showers, with interchange of fair weather as, through His blessing, caused a fruitful and liberal harvest, to their no small comfort and rejoicing. For which mercy, in time convenient, they also set apart a day of thanksgiving (Hyatt, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, 35).

The Nationalizing of a Day of Thanksgiving

Special days of Thanksgiving continued to be observed by the Pilgrims and new immigrants, especially those who settled in New England. As the colonies began to form themselves into a nation, these days of Thanksgiving began to be nationalized and made part of the national consciousness and calendar.

For example, during the fall of 1776, when the morale of the Revolutionary Army and American populace had sunk to an all-time low because of poor harvests and hardship on the battlefield, Congress proclaimed Dec. 11, 1776, as a day of prayer, fasting and repentance.

After this National Day of Prayer, there was an amazing change of circumstances with successes on the battlefield and the reaping of abundant harvests. There was, in fact, such a turnaround that in 1779 Congress issued a proclamation setting aside a Day of Thanksgiving because “it hath pleased Almighty God, the father of mercies, remarkably

to assist and support the United States of America in their important struggle for liberty” (Hyatt, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, 124).

The Congress then listed seven different accomplishments of God on the behalf of the nation, including “many instances of prowess and success in our armies” and “so great abundance of the fruits of the earth of every kind, as not only to enable us to easily to supply the wants of the army, but gives comfort and happiness to the whole people” (Hyatt, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, 124).

This Day of Thanksgiving was observed throughout the newly formed nation with people gathering in churches and other public venues to give thanks to God for His mercy and help in their time of need.

George Washington Continues the Tradition

Shortly after being sworn in as president, George Washington issued a proclamation designating Nov. 26, 1789 as a Day of Thanksgiving wherein all citizens should offer gratitude to God for His protection, care and many blessings. It was the first Thanksgiving Day designated by the new national government of the United States. The proclamation reads in part:

Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor, and whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint Committee requested me “to recommend to the People of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness. Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted

by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be.

Given under my hand at the City of New York the third day of October in the year of our Lord 1789.

Abraham Lincoln Proclaims a Day of Thanksgiving

A Day of Thanksgiving to be observed on the last Thursday in November was proclaimed by Abraham Lincoln in 1863 in the midst of the Civil War. In spite of the fact that the nation was at war, Lincoln enumerated the many reasons the inhabitants of America had for being thankful to God. He wrote:

No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy. It has seemed to me fit and proper that these blessings should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and voice by the whole American people. I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens.

The final Thursday in November, set by President Lincoln, continued to be the observed “Thanksgiving” until Dec. 26, 1941, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed a joint resolution of Congress changing the national Thanksgiving Day from the last Thursday in November to the fourth Thursday.

Concluding Thoughts

This national holiday that we know as “Thanksgiving” was

brought forth by people of great faith who knew the importance of nurturing a thankful heart in every situation. They were not whiners and complainers. It was their faith in God that enabled them to be thankful even during the greatest of trials.

This Thanksgiving, let's remember our heritage and determine that we too will be a thankful people, as were the spiritual foremothers and forefathers who brought this nation into existence. Let's follow them and the words of the old hymn that says,

Count your blessings, name them one by one,

And it will surprise you what the Lord has done. {eoa}

This article is derived from Dr. Eddie Hyatt's latest book, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, available from Amazon and his website bookstore. To read about his vision for another Great Awakening in America and the world, visit his website at .