

The Christian Origins of Thanksgiving

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. They were not whiners but chose to maintain an attitude of gratitude even through the most trying times, such as the winter of 1620-21 when sickness ravaged their community and half of them—about 50—were taken away in death.

The first Thanksgiving was celebrated by the Pilgrims after they gathered in their harvest in the fall of 1621, about one year after their landing at Cape Cod. 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.
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 Massosoit, 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 Massosoit, 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 experienced abundant harvests during the summer and fall of 1621.

Englishmen and Native Americans Celebrate Together

The first Thanksgiving was attended by an approximate equal number of English Pilgrims and Native Americans. After Gov. Bradford announced the Day of Thanksgiving, word of the event soon spread to their Native American friends. When the day arrived, not only were there individual natives on hand, but Massosoit 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. 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 up their hearts in praise and thanksgiving to God.

Not only did they enjoy meals together with thankful hearts, but they engaged in shooting matches, foot races and wrestling matches. 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 Gov. Bradford had sent out four men to hunt for "fowl" who returned with enough "fowl" to last them an entire week.

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. Gov. 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. Alone in the New England wilderness, it looked as though hunger would be their lot in the days ahead and maybe starvation. It was a very critical moment in time.

Facing such drought and bleak conditions, Bradford called the

Plymouth settlement to a day of “humiliation and prayer.” By “humiliation” he meant 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**” (emphasis added).*

The Nationalizing of a Day of Thanksgiving

These days of Thanksgiving were observed by succeeding generations, but at various times in different places as deemed appropriate and necessary by the local inhabitants. As the colonists 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, the Continental Congress, which met between 1774

and 1789, issued several calls for days of humiliation, prayer and thanksgiving. The first one was to be observed on Nov. 28, 1782. The proclamation reads in part:

“It being the indispensable duty of all nations, not only to offer up their supplications to Almighty God, the giver of all good, for His gracious assistance in times of distress, but also in a solemn and public manner, to give Him praise for His goodness in general, and especially for great and signal interpositions of His Providence in their behalf.”

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. That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks, for his kind care and protection of the People of this Country ... And also that we

may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech him to pardon our national and other transgressions, to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually, to render our national government a blessing to all the people, by constantly being a Government of wise, just, and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed, to protect and guide all Sovereigns and Nations (especially such as have shown kindness unto us) and to bless them with good government, peace, and concord.

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

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. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances

and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to his tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and Union."

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

Examining the history and development of our "Thanksgiving" holiday makes us realize how far, as a nation, we have removed ourselves from the Christian worldview and faith of our Founders. This Thanksgiving Day our president will go through a silly formality and "pardon a turkey;" but the depth of faith seen in earlier proclamations, such as those by Washington and Lincoln, is glaringly missing. This is why we must pray for another Great Spiritual Awakening in our land.

In spite of the fact that "Thanksgiving" has become secularized and commercialized, we as Christians must never forget that the day is rooted in the commitment of our forefathers and foremothers to maintain a thankful heart even through the most painful and challenging times. So this Thanksgiving, let's count our blessings, "name them one by one and it will surprise you what the Lord has done."