

America's True Thanksgiving Heritage

Thanksgiving is not only a time to express gratefulness to God for His provision but also a time to teach others about America's true heritage. Public acknowledgements of the providence of God have been part of the history and traditions of this nation—from the Pilgrims to the founding era, to the Civil War and today—and it is important to share the true meaning of Thanksgiving.

In fact, George Washington's Thanksgiving Proclamation reveals important information about the meaning of the First Amendment.

On Friday, Sept. 25, 1789, the Bill of Rights was ratified by the Senate. The First Amendment was approved by Congress and sent out to the states for final approval. However, after the framers completed the Bill of Rights, Elias Boudinot, a member of the House of Representatives, said he could not think of letting the session pass without offering an opportunity to all U.S. citizens to return thanks to God for His many blessings. That same day, the U.S. House passed the following resolution:

Resolved, that a joint committee of both Houses be directed to wait upon the President of the United States, to request that he would 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 Constitution of Government for their safety and happiness.

On Saturday, Oct. 3, 1789, President George Washington declared Nov. 26, 1789, a national day of Thanksgiving to

thank God for the Constitution and our new American government:

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.

That same year, the Protestant Episcopal Church, of which President Washington was a member, announced that the first Thursday in November would become the regular day for giving thanks, “unless another day be appointed by the civil authorities.” In fact, by 1815, the various state governments had issued at least 1,400 official prayer proclamations, almost half for times of thanksgiving and prayer and the other half for times of fasting and prayer.

Mrs. Sarah Josepha Hale, the editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, deserves much of the credit for the adoption of Thanksgiving as an annual national holiday. For two decades, Hale contacted presidents trying to promote the idea. Finally, during the darkest days of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln responded in 1863. Lincoln issued a formal proclamation, passed by an act of Congress, that set aside the last Thursday of that November as the first annual National Day of Thanksgiving and Praise.

The Thanksgiving proclamation called Americans to prayer with optimism and genuine thankfulness, noting that: “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 ...”

Three months earlier, the Battle of Gettysburg had occurred, resulting in the loss of approximately 60,000 American lives. And while President Lincoln walked among the thousands of graves there at Gettysburg, he committed his life to Jesus Christ. Lincoln said, “When I left Springfield [to assume the presidency], I asked the people to pray for me. I was not a Christian. When I buried my son, the severest trial of my life, I was not a Christian. But when I went to Gettysburg and saw the graves of thousands of our soldiers, I then and there consecrated myself to Christ.”

Liberty Counsel founder and Chairman Mat Staver said, “It is important that we know and teach others about America’s heritage and biblical foundation in order to reflect upon the true meaning of Thanksgiving. We have so much to be thankful for in America, and the founders wanted to make sure future generations never forget the blessings of freedom.” {eo}

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