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Why Thanksgiving Matters

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The holiday police are at it again—looking for violations of the nation’s new policy of separating faith and civic celebrations. The same folks who will soon be trolling courthouse squares looking for manger scenes are now calling on Americans to have a happy Thanksgiving . . . but leave God out of it.

School textbooks filled with revisionist history tell children that the first Thanksgiving was a celebration at which the Pilgrims thanked the Indians for teaching them how to survive the harsh New England climate and plant successful crops. God is simply not part of the picture.

Some educators, worried that even the word “thanksgiving” might be too controversial, have renamed the holiday “Turkey Day.” Of course, this implies that the central thrust of the celebration comes down to poultry.

The revisionist historians want to have it both ways. They present the Pilgrims as wild-eyed religious fanatics—precursors to the Religious Right—and then suggest that the first Thanksgiving was essentially a secular holiday.

The historical basis for the Thanksgiving observance is clear. In 1621, the Pilgrims celebrated “the goodness of God” as they feasted with friendly local Indians. In reality, the Pilgrims had faced far greater adversity than had been expected. The climate was harsh, the crops were sparse, the native peoples were often hostile, and their ranks were thinning. Hunger, disease, discomfort, and discouragement were ever close at hand.

Aiming for Virginia, these Christians—dissenting from the Church of England and determined to establish a truly Christian community—actually landed in New England. That miscalculation meant that disaster was almost certain. Nevertheless, they “fell upon their knees and blessed the God of heaven who had brought them over this vast and furious ocean,” recorded Governor William Bradford.

In 1789, President George Washington declared the first national day of Thanksgiving by asking Americans to “unite in most humbly offering our prayer and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of nations.”

Later presidents followed Washington’s example. Abraham Lincoln issued moving Thanksgiving proclamations during the Civil War. Franklin Roosevelt, who regularized the holiday on the national calendar, called the nation to thankfulness in the middle of World War II: “The Almighty God has blessed our nation in many ways. He has given our people stout hearts and strong arms with which to strike mighty blows for freedom and truth. . . . So we pray to Him now for a vision to see our way clearly—to see the way that leads to a better life for ourselves and for our fellow men—to the achievement of His will, to peace on earth.”

Is all this just a demonstration of civil religion? Do most Americans really follow the example of the Pilgrims in expressing thankfulness to God, or is it just another holiday with emotional overtones—and an orgy of overeating?

Millions of Americans will, no doubt, celebrate an essentially secular festival. For them, it might as well be “Turkey Day” or something equally vacuous. This reveals the most important contrast between the Pilgrims and the current generation. The Pilgrims were driven by a worldview that was centered in the worship of the one true and living God, the Creator of the universe, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. They understood His providential rule over the universe to

explain everything that happened to them—and everything that blessed them. They did not attribute their survival in New England to their own fortitude—nor to the help of the Indians—but to God.

Secularized Americans are driven by no impulse to give thanks, and wouldn't know to whom thanks should be addressed. They think of themselves as self-sufficient, self-directed, and self-reliant. Their horizon of thankfulness is, to say the least, rather low.

The civic holiday may not mean a great deal to many moderns—but that doesn't mean that it is meaningless. At the very least, it implies that we cannot really take care of ourselves. That is just as true today as it was in Pilgrim New England.

Christians understand that the call to thanksgiving is far more urgent than a holiday, and far more important than the calendar. True thanksgiving cannot be limited to a day or a season. We recognize that God has given us everything that we have—and everything that we need. We acknowledge our unconditional dependence upon Him for every second of our lives, every morsel we will eat, and every joy we will ever experience.

Deserving nothing but God's wrath, we were granted forgiveness through the Son. Needing all things, we have been given everything needful for our salvation and eternal life. To these God has added joys, comforts, and provision beyond our imagination—"far more abundantly than all that we ask or think." [Ephesians 3:20]

So, gather together to give thanks to God. While others celebrate "Turkey Day" and ponder poultry, direct your thoughts to the God of Heaven, by whose hand we have been brought near and given more than we can even remember.

The Pilgrims knew to whom they were praying—and why. Let's follow their example and remember that their dependence upon God was no greater than our own.

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