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## Giving Thanks to Whom, Exactly?

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**Wednesday, November 24, 2004**

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Political correctness has entered the picture, with many public schools observing "Turkey Day" festivities while others erroneously explain that the Pilgrims celebrated the first Thanksgiving in order to thank the Indians for sharing agricultural advice and provisions. While most Americans probably have a sufficient historical background to know that the first Thanksgiving was not celebrated as an opportunity to express gratitude to the native Americans, the fact remains that for many, there is no clearly identified referent for their gratitude.

In other words, while most citizens have at least a vestigial understanding of the fact that Thanksgiving Day is intended as a focal opportunity to thank God for His many blessings to us, the God worshipped—and thanked—by millions of people bears little or no resemblance to the God of the Bible. As a matter of fact, conversation about the holiday is likely to reveal that many people have no transcendent referent in mind at all. Just listen to those who speak about their reasons for being "thankful" without revealing to whom their thanks is directed. In some sense, it may be that a good many individuals think of giving thanks as some form of self-therapy, with gratitude identified more in attitudinal than theological terms.

Of course, we should expect something like this level of confusion in a country that includes millions of persons who claim to believe in God without any specific idea of who that God is.

In some sense, thankfulness runs against the American grain in the first place. We are a people marked by exaggerated notions of self-sufficiency and pride. No author has captured the essence of this particular twist in the American character as well as Tom Wolfe. In *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Wolfe introduced us to Sherman McCoy, a Wall Street "Master of the Universe" who thinks himself in absolute control of his destiny, until his entire world starts to fall apart. Similarly, in *A Man in Full*, Wolfe introduced us to Charlie Crocker, a prototypical tycoon of the 1990s, complete with his private jet and customized wife. These characters point to something now pervasive in our national psyche—an exalted sense of confidence in ourselves and the arrogant confidence that we can take care of our own needs, direct our own future, and make the world meet us on our own terms.

This dangerous sense of self-sufficiency is exactly what Jesus condemned in Luke 12:16-21, when He told of the rich man whose astoundingly abundant crops led him to plan to build bigger and bigger barns in order to hold his bounty. Jesus depicts this arrogant man as saying to himself: "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry." That was not the final word, however, for God responded to him, "You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?"

A spirit of thanksgiving is the best antidote to a false sense of self-sufficiency. In giving thanks to our Creator, we admit that we cannot take care of ourselves, protect ourselves, or even direct our own lives in a competent manner. Our

every breath is a divine gift, and “thanksgiving” is not so much a day on the calendar as the honest and urgent expression of a heart shaped by the knowledge of who God is and what He has done for us.

In his Thanksgiving declaration of 1863, President Abraham Lincoln said, “It has seemed to me fit and proper that God should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged, as with one heart and one voice, by the whole American people.”

We have come a long way since 1863, and we must recognize that Americans will not commonly acknowledge the one true and living God “with one heart and one voice.”

Nevertheless, Christians must see this day as a reminder that we must demonstrate, inculcate, and commemorate Thanksgiving in our daily lives. While we are thankful for our families, for material blessings, for national security, and for the abundant gifts God has given us, we must be supremely thankful for the salvation accomplished by our Lord Jesus Christ and for the blessed hope grounded in the one true God.

While that spirit of thanksgiving and gratitude should be a part of our Christian discipleship every day of our lives, there is something good and wholesome about Christian families gathering together to express thankfulness through special observance, celebration, and festivities. Let’s make sure the world knows to whom we are thankful and why. May God grant you and your families a wonderful and blessed Thanksgiving.

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