

Of all people, we Americans ought to know what Thanksgiving is about.
Of all Americans, we Christians ought to know what Thanksgiving is about.
Of all Christians, we Congregationalists ought to know what Thanksgiving is about.

We Americans ought to know what Thanksgiving is about. It's not necessarily our own fault that some of us and almost all our children are so alarmingly ignorant about Thanksgiving. Our American history is being ideologically deconstructed and rewritten with such thoroughgoing political correctness and such disregard for the historical truth it's no wonder that some 80% of Americans under the age of 25 harbor either a more or less active animosity toward the Church. [According to the recent presentation of David Schoen, UCC Minister for Evangelism and Church growth; citations available.]

What am I talking about, history being rewritten to erase references to "religion"? For example, a book called *The First Thanksgiving* by Jean George tells that the Pilgrims left Europe "to seek their fortune in the new world." That would come as news to the Pilgrims, whose pillar, William Bradford, recorded in his diary that their voyage was motivated by "a great hope...for advancing the Kingdom of Christ." In this book the religious dimension is excised completely, which is unfortunate since without "the religious dimension" there would be no story and would have been no United States of America as over 300 million of us Americans even today still benefit from it—"government of the people, by the people, for the people." George wants our kids to be sure "This was not a day of Pilgrim thanksgiving"—certainly not thanksgiving to God. Instead, with great confidence, she wants our kids to know "This was pure celebration."

Strange how the Pilgrims themselves, who were there, remembered it so very differently. "The Lord sent them such seasonable showers" that "through His blessing there was a fruitful and liberal harvest...for which mercy...they set apart a day of Thanksgiving." (This, again, from the diary of William Bradford. If you've been paying attention, you will not be surprised to learn that even this primary source document is being compromised; at least one recent version has been abridged, carefully leaving out "irrelevant theological meditations." Even the document is now itself sanitized to be politically correct.)

[So our children, or any future generations of Americans would never learn—unless people like you and I teach them—that generations of American politicians and presidents have gladly offered public Thanksgiving to God. It is what Americans always have done. (For example: the first national Thanksgiving proclamation was issued November 1, 1777 following the Colonists victory at Saratoga, and the Continental Congresses proclaimed yearly Thanksgiving to God every year from 1777 to 1783: they well understood Whose help the Colonies desperately needed were the new nation to win their independence. Samuel Adams, faithful Congregationalist and eventually to become second President, composed that 1777 Thanksgiving Proclamation. It began "Forasmuch as it is the indispensable duty of all men to adore the superintending providence of Almighty God...together with penitent confession of their sins...and their humble and earnest supplications that it may please God through the merits of Jesus Christ, mercifully to forgive...it is therefore recommended...to set apart Thursday the eighteenth day of December next...that with one heart and one voice the good people may...consecrate

themselves to the service of their Divine Benefactor...to prosper the means of religion, for promotion and enlargement of that Kingdom which consists “in righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy [Spirit].”

Not long afterward, both houses of Congress voted eagerly to ask President George Washington to proclaim a national day of Thanksgiving—their wording was, in part, “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 and signal favors of Almighty God...” President Washington gladly set his signature to enshrine this day of giving thanks; “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 implore His protection and favor...and also that we may beseech [Almighty God] to promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue...Given under my hand, at the city of New York, the 3d day of October, AD 1789” (I don’t want to spend all my time quoting these ancient documents—but Washington went on to list with theological precision the reasons it is critical for this or any nation to continue to come, freely penitent before God, relying upon His mercy alone for our wellbeing.)

James Madison, one of the composers of our nation’s Constitution, also called for three national days of fasting and grateful prayers of deliverance to God during the War of 1812. (Interesting then that today the courts have tilted so far so fast in the notion, for example, that non-specific school prayer must be unconstitutional!)

Thomas Jefferson discontinued the practice of proclaiming a national day of religious thanksgiving. Interesting, then, that the essence of Jefferson’s own convictions about the origins of political liberty are etched in the marble of the Jefferson Memorial on the banks of the Potomac: “God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are a gift of God?”

Abraham Lincoln re-instituted this custom of observing a national day of Thanksgiving when again the nation was imperiled by the bleak prospects of the Civil War. President Lincoln declared November 26, 1863 to be a day of Thanksgiving, calling upon every American, free or slave, Dixie or Yankee, to join in prayer and thanksgiving for the nation, saying in part, “[It is] announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations are blessed whose God is the Lord...It has seemed to me fit and proper that [the blessings of Almighty God] should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged, as with one heart and one voice, by the whole American people.”]

These good people—Samuel Adams, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, to name four—were not religious crackpots who tried to subvert the “wall of separation.” They lived as they lived, served as they served, because of their religious convictions. Many such faithful statesmen and politicians and God-fearing patriots and outspoken Christians and leaders—these early Americans—were simply stating what was obvious to most Americans from the earliest days. The indelible truth of our national history has not changed—only the ideology of those who would rewrite it. (Pre-eminent Yale historian George Mardsden sums up this decline by noting that in five short generations, American Universities have gone from Protestant Establishment to established non-belief.)

[I know I may sound like a merely a sore loser, an old curmudgeon railing against new socio-political realities regnant in our public schools, our universities, our editorial pages, our courts, our ruling Congress. This is the risk I am willing to take; you may or may not share my deep sadness at what has overtaken this extraordinary nation, founded by these patriots whose religious faith in God and whose personal allegiance to Jesus Christ as Sovereign Lord, in many cases, is what moved them to bequeath, as most wisely they could, a publicly-acknowledged though always uncoerced “fear of the Lord” and a perpetual invitation to personal and national corporate heartfelt contrition and penitence before Him.]

But my frustration is not with politics or the next election—my frustration is simply the flip side of my bedrock belief that God is sovereign over all the universe. From the ancient Israelites to the Pilgrims in New England; from the Assyrians to the Babylonians to Egyptians to the Greeks to the Romans to the Ottomans to the British to the Germans—no civilization stays at the top of the heap forever. Reality always gets the last laugh; no nation who ignores the living God or flouts His divine principles will long prosper. False gods always fail.

[Put in sociological language, what keeps happening in human history is that the qualities of spirit and sacrifice and character which help one people or nation rise to national prominence and prosperity inevitably get forgotten a generation or two after the prosperity has been won. Then comes the financial inflation and speculation, the social class frictions, the widespread accelerating popular immorality and decadence. In short, (to generalize) disciplined people, over time, turn within two generations (sometimes within two decades or two years) into complacent people, unwilling to “pay the price,” to maintain the vigilance, which gained their ancestors the benefits which made life so comparatively easy for them.]

False gods always fail, be they primitive golden calves, or gods of war who demand to be honored by violence and death to the unbelievers, or modern liberal gods of self-reliance and tolerance and “choice”. “Tolerance” as a god simply insures that what is truly destructive and what is truly beneficial must be accepted and supported impartially as equal, and “choice” as a god likewise insures that there may exist no reliable standard against which to measure this “choice” or that “choice”—every choice must be seen as equally valid once “choice” itself becomes the highest value. (Worshiping such foolish gods may postpone tough decisions for a generation or so, but they only mandate that a people become amoral, unable and unwilling to discern good from evil, in the end. These are no gods! [My frustration is with those of us, all of us, who close our eyes, who remain blind to the signs all around us of the great price we and our children will have to pay as our beloved country turns our back on the living God—a price to be paid by rich and poor, young and old, religious and secular—everyone together.]

The United States of America did not just happen. We did not just get lucky; we will certainly not just stay “lucky” forever.

We Christians ought to know what Thanksgiving is about. You may have noticed it was often in times of war or extreme danger that politicians called upon the nation to offer prayer and public thanksgiving. It has been noted Christ’s Church has been able to prevail in every sort of adversity—it’s just that we can’t handle prosperity.

The apostle Paul, who wrote the letter to his beloved house church at Philippi we heard, knew this same theme. “Rejoice in the Lord always!” “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God...and the peace of God...will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” He knew, as followers of Jesus need to know, that rejoicing and giving thanks are our birthright as Christians—independent of outer circumstance or happenstance. He knew it’s not what happens to us that determines our happiness, but how we choose to understand what happens to us.

We don’t know how Paul might have handled prosperity because from the moment Paul and Jesus met each other, Paul suffered one adversity after another. All Paul knew was that God loved him and God had forgiven him, and that the risen Christ is more intensely real, more enduringly real, more radiantly real than any of that other stuff we think is so real, like home and family and safety and paying the bills and comfort and living or dying.

Paul was in jail, fettered with steel in a dank and vile underground rock cavern—again—as he was reminding that church to keep praying, keep rejoicing, keep singing songs of thanksgiving, keep reminding God of your requests. Most people who didn’t know better might accuse Paul of being a bit of a Pollyanna. How could he be so ignorant of reality as to be rejoicing when he’s being beaten up by the mobs, shipwrecked, lashed, beaten with rods, given up for dead—over and over again. (No wonder maybe he didn’t mind jail—a bit of a break from his usual lifestyle!) People who did not like Jesus did not like Paul!

You who do know Jesus, and who love Him—I hope every one of us, to one degree or other—if you’re not quite there yet, I’d love to talk with you afterward! know Paul’s secret. Deeply to experience the risen Christ is to know, to the core of your being, that the Kingdom of God—the eternal world—brought forth in Jesus is the one that really counts. (A hundred years from now this earthly world isn’t going to do any of us any good!)

Paul reminds us to keep praying in all circumstances, to keep giving thanks because God is God. This is how we keep open our channels to the Real world, the unseen heavenly dimensions, while we still live here in this world. Even if prayer is seldom dramatic or earth-shaking (one sage admitted “90% of prayer is just showing up”) still prayer is the way we stay in touch with God, stay aware of the full Reality. (To live without prayer is like driving while focused on the steering wheel or the inside of the surface of the windshield. Hard to soar into the future, there, if you’re preoccupied on the present, here.)

Paul is not the crazy one; Paul is one who kept experiencing the key to genuine peace and the only kind of prosperity worth devoting your life to. Paul urges us to experience the kind of peace which triumphs even in the midst of the next financial depression, the wildfires licking at our back doors, the next visit to the oncologist, the next substantive conversation with our spouse whom you know is rightly upset with you.

As you pray, you begin to be able to see your own mundane reality shot thru with glimpses of the glory of God. For what are you grateful? I thank God for my cozy study with windows that open into fresh air. For being able to walk down to the ocean (though I seldom take time to do so.) For my wife Trish, and the sense that it’s always good to be coming home to be with her. For the feeling that comes when I see my daughter

Catherine studying late into the night when I go to bed, often unchanged from her crew outfit, the scent from the candle on her desk overflowing her room. From the feeling that comes when I see my son Matthew on his knees in his bedroom praying so earnestly to God. For our 2001 Ford Taurus, which has never yet failed to start on me. For the good honest sweat after running the stairs by the beach, or playing tennis, or trying to practice yoga in Patrice's studio. For the rich memories of my mom and dad and grandmother, who raised us all at such great cost, willingly paid. For cheerful flower beds, and nicely tended front lawns. For the occasional well-struck 9-iron I hit which lofts high and lands softly right near the pin. For that great book which nurtures my faith, my imagination, my mind, my heart, my spirit. For the excitement of packing up our bags for a family vacation. For "March Madness" and college hoops. For all the children who gather up front during worship, or come to Logos. For the heavy blessing of serving God in a way which forces me to pray desperately and regularly. For the privilege of watching glorious brides and their fathers walking up the aisle. For the smell of the first rain on the pavement. For a fire in the fireplace. For the encouragement and the thanks and challenges so many of you continue to offer me. For the harmony we enjoy together. So many, many things to be grateful to God for.

We Congregationalists ought to know what Thanksgiving is about. Those pilgrims who celebrated the first Thanksgiving were our direct spiritual forebears (they became "Congregationalists" shortly after the "Separatists" from the State Church in England who settled in the Plymouth Plantation joined up with the "Puritans" who settled in and around Boston.) They were a covenant people whose dedication to follow their Lord Jesus at all costs led them to into extreme adversity—and out again, victorious, on the other side.

Those Pilgrims who took off for the new world in 1620 had already been hounded from their homes in the Midlands of England because they would not recognize that Queen Elizabeth or James I was head of the Church. There were probably fewer than 1000 in all the land, but they spoke zealously of having enjoyed a personal encounter with Jesus. They recognized Him alone as head of the Church. They were thus suspect.

Having earnestly prayed and fasted, these "Separatists" fled first to Leyden, Holland, in 1608. Before leaving for Holland, Bradford wrote they had, "as the Lord's free people, joined themselves by a covenant of the Lord into a church...to walk in all His ways made known...unto them...whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them." It cost them almost everything. After eleven years of 12-to 15-hour days backbreaking menial labor, failing health and finances, and "a great hope and inward zeal" of bearing the Light of the world, they prayed diligently over where to resettle. It was their life and death. (Following the king's edict in 1618 it was illegal for them to live in England.)

[[They were tempted to resettle in British Guiana, which enjoyed a tropical climate and a reported abundance of gold to be claimed. But thru hard experience these pilgrims already knew their only hope was to pray; to obey the will of God. The geography or rumors of easy wealth did not matter. Bradford summed up their consensus decision to set out for America: "It was answered that all great and honorable actions are accompanied with great difficulties and must be overcome with...answerable courages...and [all these considerable dangers], through the help of God...might either

be borne or overcome....The condition [of that congregation of pilgrims] was not ordinary. Their ends were good and honorable, and their calling...urgent, and therefore they might expect the blessing of God...yea, though they should lose their lives in this action, yet they might have comfort in the same..."

Their Pastor John Robinson continued to pray and to lead them, although when the time came for them to ship out to the New World—August 5, 1620, having been deceived and swindled out of their remaining savings and future earnings by James Weston (to the point of indenturing their labors and their lives for longer than seven years, which each had eventually paid back in full by 1640); having gotten started in the larger *Speedwell*, which developed mysterious hull problems, two separate times, and put back after several days to the port of Plymouth (you recognize that name.) The *Mayflower* could only accommodate a fraction of the 600 members of the congregation, so Pastor Robinson stayed back to oversee the main flock while elder William Brewster served as leader for those who finally sailed west.]]

Those 102 Pilgrims who endured the journey had already been forced, thru the treachery of Thomas Weston and the long delays, to begin eating the rations even before they left Plymouth which they had intended to help them survive the first winter. They lived belowdecks in one room the size of a volleyball court in perpetual, foul stench from the bilge. They were probably forbidden to light any fire to cook their meager fare—hard biscuits, dried roots and cheese and fruit, and beer and hard cider. After a dozen days of being forbidden any fresh air due to a particularly severe storm, one John Howland thought he would go mad. He disobeyed the order, opened the hatch, and stepped onto the deck. He was promptly pitched overboard when the ship dropped out from under him.

The Pilgrims on board had to put up with the crying babies; the cramped and fetid, rolling and pitching, ill-lit conditions; the sailors who tormented them in their seasickness (“psalm-singing puke-stockings” they called them) and roughly 80 other “strangers” who had also rented space on the *Mayflower* to come to the new world for their own purposes. (They were not Pilgrims, not part of any church.)

How did the Pilgrims survive those seven weeks at sea? They kept singing songs of thanksgiving—another reason they were teased and tormented by the “strangers” and sailors. They kept praying, making their petitions known to God with thanksgiving, even in the midst of those hideous conditions.

Two babies were born during that time: Oceanus Hopkins, born at sea, and Peregrine White, born at anchor off Cape Cod. (Imagine being seven months pregnant in those circumstances!) Only 41 of the arriving 102 Pilgrims had come all the way from Leyden; the Pilgrims who made the Atlantic crossing numbered 50 men, 24 women, and 26 children (plus those two newborns.)

The driving storms created another challenge. They had been aiming for the mouth of the Hudson River, at the northern boundary of the Virginia Company’s holdings, but had landed about 100 miles to the north. One of the sailors recognized their landfall as Cape Cod. The Pilgrims prayed and discussed the matter. Their praying directed them to remain there at the Cape rather than to sail down to the Hudson. Captain Christopher (“Christ-bearer”) Jones sailed into the inner harbor for shelter. But they also grasped the fact that when they landed on the Cape, they would not be on British soil. The laws of no government covered them. Fearing the mutinous attitudes of those 80

“strangers” on board who would be with them, they created another covenant similar to the one which had governed them in Holland.

This covenant, the “Mayflower Compact,” signaled the first time in known history that free people had chosen to covenant together to create their own civil government. It reads, in part, “In the name of God, Amen...Having undertaken, for the glory of God and the advancement of the Christian Faith...[we] do solemnly covenant... ourselves together into a civil body...” [signed and dated 11 November, 1620]

The Pilgrims had begun their experiment in religious freedom kneeling on the dock at Delftshaven asking God’s blessings, and now they ended this part of their pilgrimage kneeling in the sands of Cape Cod, again to give thanks to God for His blessings. William Bradford describes the event in his diary: “Being thus arrived in a good harbor and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of heaven, who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean, and delivered them from all the perils and miseries thereof...And no marvel if they were thus joyful.”

They had learned to give thanks to God in all circumstances. This safe landing was one highlight—but a brief one. Winter had struck early that year, 1620, so that the capes of the men who went from the Mayflower to scout a place to land on the Cape were frozen stiff. Native Americans attacked them the first night they slept ashore, unleashing a flurry of arrows at them. They missed. (Apparently these braves had been cheated by British traders.)

The cruel winter took its toll. Even holding onto an axehandle to build the shelters became difficult in the cold. Wading ashore, sleeping on the damp ground, bodies weakened from malnutrition, common colds turned into pneumonia or consumption—all took their toll. Six Pilgrims died in December, 1620, eight in January, seventeen in February, thirteen in March. The greater their adversity, however, the more earnestly these Pilgrims prayed. Captain Jones had noticed their attitudes of thanksgiving. When the bosun’s mate taunted them as to how glad he would be to dump their dead bodies into the sea they did not complain; nor about the food or the weather or the sickness. In all things they prayed, and thanked their God. He had agreed to keep the Mayflower off shore.

By the end of that first winter, they had lost 47 of their number. Thirteen of the eighteen wives had died; only three families suffered no loss. But their loss only strengthened their faith and their bonds of love and their resolve to live in Christian community and to advance the Kingdom, as they had resolved to do. When April 21 arrived, 1621, Captain Jones, whose own supplies were running short, offered these surviving Pilgrims a free pass back to England. He pleaded with them to come with him. He was concerned for them. Each one, however, despite the challenges and losses, chose to honor their covenant commitment. They stayed. Some of those Pilgrims didn’t make it—still, they considered obedience to God more important than life itself.

God did not ignore their prayers. In mid-March, God brought, of all things, an English-speaking Algonquin prince, Samoset, walking down the “main street” of this primitive Plymouth village. This Samoset was amicable, and following their gracious if cautious welcome, he vanished and then reappeared a few days later with Squanto—Squanto who was to teach them to catch eel and fish, to plant corn fertilized with fish, to harvest and trade beaver pelts, to make maple syrup, to cultivate pumpkins, and many

other helpful things. (I have drawn heavily in these historical particulars from *The Light and the Glory*, by Peter Marshall and David Manuel—a fascinating book.)

Squanto was a Godsend. Those Pilgrims enjoyed a bountiful summer of 1621, and Governor Bradford called a day of public Thanksgiving that October. The Pilgrims were grateful to Squanto.

They prayed to God with thanksgiving. The Lord had delivered them thru their most grim scenario. The Lord had heard their prayers and met their needs even when their faith had faltered. Hundreds of millions of Americans have been greatly blessed in this land from then ‘til now. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Philippians 4:4-9

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.