

The Word's Eye View

The Word's Eye View is a newspaper column written by
Dr. James Modlish

The Real History of Thanksgiving (Article 22)

With the realization that most American history that mentions God has been thoroughly sanitized, I thought it appropriate to rehearse the real Thanksgiving story.

The story actually began in 1608 when a small group of Separatist Congregationalists under the leadership of their pastor, John Robinson, fled from England to Holland because of religious persecution. Although the Dutch offered the Pilgrims work and religious freedom, they experienced a growing sensation of distress compounded by an increasing desire to journey to the New World. They submitted three reasons to engage in this adventure: (A) a longing to once again be under English rule; (B) a belief that their children were falling under the influence of an extreme secular culture; (C) upon hearing of the native Americans from adventurers, they had a great desire to preach their faith to them...now that's one that is certainly excluded from modern history books.

In 1620, after three years of negotiations to obtain permission and financial support, about forty-five church members were declared ready to cross the Atlantic. The majority of the church stayed behind, so the pastor agreed to remain with them. In July, 1620, this small band of pioneers set sail for England aboard the Speedwell. The Mayflower, bearing about sixty-five persons, many who were not people of faith, joined the expedition. The two ships left South Hampton in August but had to return when the Speedwell was deemed un-seaworthy. Things were re-consolidated, and the Mayflower departed on September 16, 1620, with about 102 souls and reached Massachusetts on November 19th under the leadership of William Bradford and Elder Brewster.

After sixty-four days of sailing much of the food had been utilized, and they faced a herculean task of building shelter to face the immediate winter. In the following months these new immigrants suffered from exposure, pneumonia, tuberculosis, and scurvy, resulting in the deaths of roughly half of this congregation. In the spring crops were planted, buildings were constructed, and local Indians taught them a large variety of survival skills concerning hunting, fishing, meat preservation, etc.

A harvest of measurable success led to a celebration of thanksgiving that was initiated on November 26, 1621, with some of the Indians who had helped them. The Pilgrims did not observe a Thanksgiving in 1622, but in 1623 after a rainstorm ended a summer drought and saved the settlers' crops, the Plymouth populace again observed a day of thanks, probably toward the end of July. In November after the crops were gathered, Governor Bradford ordered that "all the Pilgrims with your wives and little ones, do gather at the meeting house on the hill...there to listen to the pastor, and render thanksgiving to the Almighty God for all His blessings." These believers never set a regular Thanksgiving Day but did hold such observances at various times. A law was passed in 1636 that permitted the governor "to command solemn days of humiliation by fasting, etc. and also for thanksgiving as occasion shall be offered."

The War of Independence which joined the thirteen colonies in a common effort for the first time,

also caused the first Thanksgiving Day to be observed simultaneously throughout all the colonies. The occasion was the patriot victory over the British at Saratoga in October, 1777. So important to the rebel cause was this battle that Samuel Adams called upon the Continental Congress to declare a national day of thanks. On November 1, 1777, the Congress approved Adam's proclamation, setting December 18, 1777, as a day of "Thanksgiving and praise," and the residents of the embryo nation enthusiastically embraced the day with prayers and feasts. When George Washington received news that France had allied with the colonies he ordered his troops to assemble on May 7, 1778, for ceremonies which began with army chaplains offering prayers of gratitude.

The Revolutionary War and the formulation of the constitution were massive undertakings, and to celebrate their successful outcomes, Washington proclaimed Thursday, November 26, 1789, a day of national thanksgiving. He wrote 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 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."

The establishment of a national Thanksgiving Day on a permanent annual basis was largely the work of Sarah Josepha Hale. Beginning in 1827 when she was the editor of the Ladies Magazine of Boston, she began to urge the observance of a day of thanks. For years she wrote editorials, lobbied legislators and Presidents to invoke such a tradition. Finally, Abraham Lincoln responded to her great hope by issuing a proclamation on October 5, 1863, setting the last Thursday in November as a national Thanksgiving Day. Lincoln entreated Americans "not to forget that prosperity and freedom were the gifts of a beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens."

I can only hope that similar verbiage will continue to come from the White House. Shall we divorce ourselves from our history or allow it to be a beacon of light into a dim future? Clearly our forefathers did not believe in the present interpretation of "separation of church and state!"