



Thanksgiving for Everyone

by Brad Jersak

What is the celebration of Thanksgiving about? It depends who you ask.

In the USA, Thanksgiving Day is celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November. Traditionally, it commemorates the feast shared by a group of pilgrims and Native Americans circa 1621. After disastrous crop failures and facing starvation, the surviving Pilgrims were grateful to God for a fruitful harvest, largely because the Indigenous people taught them how to grow crops and catch fish.

The nostalgic imagery of Pilgrim fashions, fall colors, turkey dinners and great pumpkins would develop over time, until it became America's primary annual family gathering, even more than the Christian "holy days" of Christmas or Easter.

Valuing hospitality and inclusion, as I do, I can see how the Thanksgiving we celebrate today has become both broader and narrower, more inclusive and more exclusive.

A Narrower Thanksgiving

After that first Thanksgiving banquet, marked by kindness, hospitality and interracial brotherhood, the sad history to

follow is lamentable. A series of European-borne epidemics (e.g. small-pox) ripped through the Native peoples, killing many, causing their hunting-gathering economy to collapse and leading to mass starvation. These tragedies wiped out up to ninety percent of the Indigenous population. Then, as treaties were made and broken, hostility and wars ensued, followed by forced relocation to small reserves across 1000s of miles. It's worth understanding this is often what "Thanksgiving" means to those people groups today.

It's also narrower in that Thanksgiving was reduced to an in-house family event rather than an occasion to help and welcome the stranger and alien to our table. That's a real loss but also an opportunity. As kingdom people, how might we open our tables and who might we invite to share with this year?

A Broader Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving has also become broader and more inclusive, including all citizens, rather than only people of faith. As a secular holiday, it is a time for *all* to be grateful. My agnostic and atheist

friends celebrate Thanksgiving just as I would, sans the religious lingo.

Thanksgiving is broader and older than its American history. It's *broader* geographically, as Canadians celebrate Thanksgiving much like Americans. We hold it on October 12—any later and the pumpkins and leaves would be long gone. By late November, we're covered in snow and decorating for Christmas.

It's also a much *older* holiday if we remember the Jewish "Feast of First Fruits," described in Leviticus 23. Verse 10 says, "*Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest.'*" It was a true harvest

festival for all Jewish people (and most of their pagan neighbors as well).

The New Testament broadens this further, identifying the First Fruits with Christ's resurrection and the festival itself with Pentecost, when Christ poured out the Holy Spirit on *all* flesh. The relevant passages include Hebrews 10:8-10, 1 Corinthians 16:15, James 1:18 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-23.

See how Paul identifies his Thanksgiving with the Resurrection and again, how this extends to ALL:

*But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the **firstfruits** of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam **all die**, so in Christ **all will be made alive**. But each in turn: Christ, the **firstfruits**; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.*

This Thanksgiving, let's *all* remember *all* we're grateful for, empathize with those in need and look forward to the great spiritual harvest these First Fruits portend. □

Brad Jersak recently co-authored his first novel with Wm. Paul Young, titled "The Pastor: A Crisis."