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A People of Public Thanksgiving

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

Happy Thanksgiving from Life and Books and Everything! In this episode, Kevin reads from his recent article in WORLD Opinions about the history of an American holiday and the opportunity it presents to Christians to display their thankfulness.

Transcript

[Music] Hello and Happy Thanksgiving! This is Kevin DeYoung and Life and Books and Everything reading today. My latest piece of world opinions called A People of Public Thanksgiving for Christians Thanksgiving is a form of witness. Today Americans celebrate Thanksgiving.

It's become a day associated with many things, turkey, potatoes, pumpkin pie, the end of fall and the start of the Christmas season. All of that is fine, but let us not forget what the day is supposed to be about. Celebrating Thanksgiving in America is much older than America itself.

The pilgrims and the Puritans brought to this country a tradition of special days of fasting and days of Thanksgiving. Whenever the first Thanksgiving took place, there are several claimants to that honor, we know that Thanksgiving has been a tradition in America since at least the 1620s and 1630s. Initially Thanksgiving was an informal holiday observed annually on various dates according to proclamations by church leaders and later by civil authorities as well.

The first American president to issue a Thanksgiving proclamation was none other than our first president. In October 1789 George Washington assigned "Thursday 26th day of November next to be devoted by the people of these states to the service of that great and glorious being who is the beneficent author of all the good that was or that will be." Instructed by Congress "to recommend a day of public Thanksgiving in prayer, Washington called upon the new nation to acknowledge with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God and to unite and 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." Although Thanksgiving goes back to George Washington, it has not been uniformly decreed by all our presidents. Thomas Jefferson refused to issue a Thanksgiving proclamation in 1801 believing that supporting the holiday, rooted as it was in Puritan tradition, was tantamount to state-sponsored religion.

Jefferson did not object to individual states endorsing the holiday, but he believed the First Amendment did not allow the federal government to establish Thanksgiving. Thankfully, most U.S. presidents have not shown Jefferson's reticence. In 1863 Abraham Lincoln became the first president to make Thanksgiving an official national holiday, calling upon his fellow citizens to thank our beneficent father who dwelleth in the heavens for such singular deliverances and blessings and a humbly lament, our national perverseness and disobedience.

Lincoln's successor Andrew Johnson forgot to issue a Thanksgiving proclamation in 1865 until church leaders reminded him at which point he appointed a holiday for the first Thursday in December. Better late than never. Until Franklin Roosevelt's presidency, Thanksgiving did not really have a fixed date, though by tradition it was normally the last Thursday in November.

In Roosevelt's first year in office, the last Thursday in November fell on the 30th, the fifth Thursday of the month, which angered business leaders who wanted more shopping days before Christmas. They urged Roosevelt to move up Thanksgiving one week. The president refused that request in 1933, but acquiesced in 1939 when November again had five Thursdays.

Business leaders were pleased, but the rest of the country was outraged that Roosevelt had defied tradition and moved Thanksgiving to the fourth Thursday. Sixteen states decided to celebrate Thanksgiving on the last Thursday anyway. As a result, family and friends in different states did not have the same days off and could not celebrate together.

Roosevelt told the press, quote, "I was quite unprepared for the storm it kicked up. It looked to me for a while as if New England would secede from the union." Consequently, Thanksgiving went back to the last Thursday of November. Until 1941, Congress finally passed a joint resolution, establishing the fourth Thursday of November as the federal Thanksgiving Day holiday.

No doubt many Americans now think of Thanksgiving in purely secular terms, a day to enjoy family, friends, food and football. But that should be obvious. One cannot really celebrate Thanksgiving without, well, giving thanks.

In keeping with our own history, Thanksgiving ought to be a day of public prayer to God, thanking him for blessings given and pleading with him for mercies undeserved. Even if many do not celebrate the holiday as it was originally intended, we must do so as

Christians. I'm not a great collector of fine art, but one significant piece of art hangs on the wall in our dining room.

It's a painting of ten men in tattered rags, nine of the men beam with jubilation. One man stands without stretched hands looking pincively in the opposite direction. He is the tenth leper, about to return to thank Jesus, while the other nine go off on their merry way.

Surely as Christians, we know enough to be the one and not the nine, right? In the midst of so much cultural bad news and national upheaval, let us not be loud and grumbling and quiet and gratitude. Of all people, our lives should be marked by conspicuous Thanksgiving. Our neighbors may no longer know whom to thank, but we do.

As Thanksgiving Day arrives, let us consider whether our public witness, when compared to our fellow citizens, is most angry, most despondent, most fearful, or most thankful.

[Music]

(buzzing)