

Is Thanksgiving a Christian Holiday?

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I. Introduction

What's the origin of Thanksgiving? When did this holiday begin and why? Can it be called a "Christian" holiday? Which president instituted it and why? Was he a Christian? What does God say about Thanksgiving? Why does God want us to thank Him always and for everything? What will an attitude of constant gratitude do for our outlook on life?

II. Is Thanksgiving a Christian Holiday and What does God have to say?

Why do Americans celebrate Thanksgiving?

Is Thanksgiving a Christian holiday? Christians would say that it is because its origins are Christian and the president who enacted it was a Christian. The origins of Thanksgiving go back to December 1621 when the Pilgrims who settled in Massachusetts essentially gave thanks to God for not starving to death. During their first winter, 44 of the original 102 died. They were down to 5 kernels of corn each, when an unexpected trading vessel arrived and they were able to trade beaver pelts for grain. "Governor William Bradford decreed that December 13, 1621, be set aside as a day of feasting and prayer to show the gratitude of the colonists that they were still alive. These Pilgrims, seeking religious freedom and opportunity in America, gave thanks to God for His provision for them in helping them find 20 acres of cleared land, for the fact that there were no hostile Indians in that area, for their newfound religious freedom, and for God's provision of an interpreter to the Indians in Squanto. Along with the feasting and games involving the colonists and more than 80 friendly Indians (who added to the feast by bringing wild turkeys and venison), prayers, sermons, and songs of praise were important in the celebration. Three days were spent in feasting and prayer."¹

Though Abraham Lincoln is known as the president who enacted Thanksgiving as a national holiday, George Washington was actually the first president to officially declare a national day of Thanksgiving in America. In his proclamation, Washington said,

"Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 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, that is, or that will be — That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks — for his kind care and protection of the People of this Country previous to their becoming a Nation..."²

Was Abraham Lincoln a Christian? As we see from its origins and from the first president who declared it a national day of thanksgiving, Thanksgiving is a Christian holiday. However, some may argue that Thanksgiving is not a Christian holiday because Abraham Lincoln, the president who actually made it an official holiday, was not a Christian. Was he a Christian?

¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/thanksgiving-Christian.html>

² <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/holidays/meaning-of-thanksgiving.html>

Christians are quick to affirm Lincoln's Christianity while non-Christians are quick to deny it. Non-Christians cite Abraham's history and words to show that he wasn't a Christian: Lincoln grew up with Christian teaching but he rebelled against it. As a teen he refused to join the Little Pigeon Baptist Church that his parents and sister joined. He often listened to sermons but would later mimic the preachers before an audience of children until his father forced him to stop. In his 20s, he publicly questioned the accuracy of the Bible and divinity of Christ. His law partner, William Herndon, was an evangelist for transcendentalism, which ruined Lincoln's reputation among Christians. In fact, all these things later plagued Lincoln in his bid for public office. When he ran for congress in 1846, his opponent Peter Cartwright, a Methodist, accused him of being an infidel. Lincoln responded with, "That I am not a member of any Christian Church, is true; but I have never denied the truth of the Scriptures; and I have never spoken with intentional disrespect of religion in general, or of any denomination of Christians in particular." Some see here a true politician, a man who chooses his words carefully. They argue, Lincoln didn't say he respected religion, only that he'd never been caught disrespecting it. And Lincoln never affirmed the truth of the Scriptures or that he never questioned them, only that he never denied them.³ Thus, non-Christians who study Lincoln's history don't see a religious person. At best, they would see a deist, who believes in a God who somehow controls history but not in the Christian God of the Bible.

Was Abraham Lincoln a Christian? There are other such things that non-Christians point to to prove that he wasn't. But I think he was. Why? I base it on what he said later in life about God, His Word, His Son, His Church, and His people.

In a speech at Columbus, OH, in September 16, 1858, Lincoln said, "Judge Douglas ought to remember when he is endeavoring to force this policy upon the American people that while he is put up in that way a good many are not. He ought to remember that there was once in this country a man by the name of Thomas Jefferson, supposed to be a Democrat — a man whose principles and policy are not very prevalent amongst Democrats to-day, it is true; but that man did not take exactly this view of the insignificance of the element of slavery which our friend Judge Douglas does. In contemplation of this thing, we all know he was led to exclaim, 'I tremble for my country when I remember that God is just!' We know how he looked upon it when he thus expressed himself. There was danger to this country — danger of the avenging justice of God in that little unimportant popular sovereignty question of Judge Douglas. He supposed there was a question of God's eternal justice wrapped up in the enslaving of any race of men, or any man, and that those who did so braved the arm of Jehovah — that when a nation thus dared the Almighty every friend of that nation had cause to dread His wrath. Choose ye between Jefferson and Douglas as to what is the true view of this."

In his remarks to the Baltimore Presbyterian Synod on Oct 24, 1863, he said, "Nevertheless, amid the greatest difficulties of my Administration, when I could not see any other resort, I would place my whole reliance on God, knowing that all would go well, and that He would decide for the right."

In response to a serenade on May 9, 1864, he said, "While we are grateful to all the brave men and officers for the events of the past few days, we should, above all, be very grateful to Almighty God, who gives us victory."

³ https://world.wng.org/content/what_did_abraham_lincoln_believe

In response to Methodists on May 18, 1864, he said, “God bless the Methodist Church — bless all the churches — and blessed be God, Who, in this our great trial, giveth us the churches.”

In a letter to Eliza Gurney on September 4, 1864, he said, “I am much indebted to the good Christian people of the country for their constant prayers and consolations; and to no one of them, more than to yourself. The purposes of the Almighty are perfect, and must prevail, though we erring mortals may fail to accurately perceive them in advance. We hoped for a happy termination of this terrible war long before this; but God knows best, and has ruled otherwise. We shall yet acknowledge His wisdom and our own error therein. Meanwhile we must work earnestly in the best light He gives us, trusting that so working still conduces to the great ends He ordains. Surely He intends some great good to follow this mighty convulsion, which no mortal could make, and no mortal could stay.”

In September 7, 1864, when the Loyal Colored People of Baltimore presented him a Bible, he said, “In regard to this Great Book, I have but to say, it is the best gift God has given to man. All the good the Savior gave to the world was communicated through this book. But for it we could not know right from wrong. All things most desirable for man's welfare, here and hereafter, are to be found portrayed in it.”

In a letter to Thurlow Weed on March 15, 1865, he said, “Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them. To deny it, however, in this case, is to deny that there is a God governing the world. It is a truth which I thought needed to be told; and as whatever of humiliation there is in it, falls most directly on myself, I thought others might afford for me to tell it.”⁴

And in Lincoln’s proclamation of the national holiday of Thanksgiving, he said this,

“As a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and Union.”⁵

How did Thanksgiving become a national holiday? It wasn’t until magazine editor and writer Sarah Josepha Hale (known for authoring the nursery thyme “Mary Had a Little Lamb”) started her campaign to make it a national holiday in 1827. For 36 years she kept at it, publishing many editorials and writing countless letters to governors, senators, presidents and others, earning her the nickname “Mother of Thanksgiving.” Finally, Hale’s call to nationalize Thanksgiving came to Abraham Lincoln’s ears and in 1863 during the height of the Civil War he declared the last Thursday of November to be Thanksgiving day. It remained so until 1939 when president Roosevelt tried to move the holiday up a week in an effort to boost retail sales during the Great Depression. There was a great backlash and in 1941 he reluctantly signed a bill making Thanksgiving the fourth Thursday in November.

⁴ All these quotes can be found here: <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/faithquotes.htm>

⁵ <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/holidays/meaning-of-thanksgiving.html>

What does God say about thanksgiving?

The idea of thanking God shows up throughout the entire Bible. For example, God's people were called to make thanksgiving offerings (Leviticus 7:11-15). They were also called to travel three times a year for the three pilgrimage feasts Unleavened Bread (also known as Passover), Pentecost (also known as Harvest), and Tabernacles (also known as Ingathering). These feasts were a time of celebration but it was also a time to thank God for His provision because each of these feasts involved the harvest that God had blessed them with. When we look at the New Testament Scriptures, we see that God wants us to constantly be thinking of thanksgiving:

God wants you to thank Him for giving us victory over death, for rescuing you from death and decay. (1 Corinthians 15:51-57)

He wants us to thank Him for His indescribable gift, Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 9:15, cf. 8:9)

Instead of wicked talk on our lips, God wants thanksgiving to be on our lips. (Ephesians 5:3-4)

One of the results of us giving God's Spirit control of our lives is thanksgiving, always and for all things! (Ephesians 5:18-20)

When we're anxious, God wants us to thank Him. (Philippians 4:6-7)

He wants us to thank Him because we are now in Christ, which means we have everything we need. (Colossians 2:6-7)

No matter what we're saying or doing, God wants us to have an attitude of gratitude, to thank Him for everything. (Colossians 3:17)

When we pray to Him, He wants us to thank Him (Colossians 4:2).

When we eat, He wants us to thank Him. (1 Timothy 4:3-4)

He wants us to thank Him for EVERYTHING because regardless of what it is, good or bad, that's exactly what He wanted in our lives. (1 Thessalonians 5:18)

Why does God want us to always be thinking thanksgiving? What does an attitude that says, "Thank you, God," regardless of our circumstances, do to our outlook? How does this constant attitude of gratitude change us, what can it do for us, especially when bad things happen? Job 1-2 — what does Job have that his wife doesn't and what's the result (2:9-10)? One says, "Curse God and die." The other says, "Shall we indeed accept good from God and not adversity." Job is essentially saying, "Am I going to thank God for the good things He's given me and not for the bad things?" A heart of gratitude enables us to see life clearly, especially when things go very wrong.

III. Conclusion

In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.