

# Thanksgiving: Giving Thanks to God for the Christian Church

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Everyone loves a great Thanksgiving feast but the real meaning behind Thanksgiving is much more than turkey and gravy. That wonderful colony of Pilgrims at Plymouth, Massachusetts who gave it to us in 1621 intended a day of thanks for the truly bounteous blessings of God upon them in their new home of America—a bounty symbolized by a great feast. Sadly today, most Americans may have forgotten God’s blessings to them personally—in life itself, health, joy, family, and so on.

We also wonder if Americans are really thankful for the Christian Church. That Church has been a tremendous blessing to America and the world, yet few even recognize this. In 2,000 years no single institution has done more good for the world—ever—in building hospitals, and orphanages and almost all the great universities of the West (Princeton, Harvard, Dartmouth, Cambridge, Oxford, etc.), in transforming pagan lands and improving socially and spiritually the lives of millions of people, in feeding the poor and hungry, in showing love and compassion to those hostile or unlovely, in producing literate societies from illiterate (e.g., Hawaii)—indeed even in largely producing modern science and its incalculable benefits to mankind.<sup>1</sup>

Western civilization itself, in its finest sense, can be traced directly to the influence of Christianity. This is why encyclopedias routinely comment upon the great influence of the Christian faith and Scriptures, e.g., “The Bible has had an *incalculable* influence on the thought, attitudes, beliefs, art, sciences and politics of Western society.”<sup>2</sup>

Especially in our day of skepticism and cynicism, it’s easy to be critical of the Church. It is true the Church faces formidable difficulties including battles within and without. Yet given the nature of humanity and the conditions of the world, not to mention the devil, the problems we find in the Church are only to be expected. But for each of us individually, the Church is where we can find much greater blessings than those we find in the world. As one person stated,

Almost everyone can come up with at least a handful of complaints against the Church.... Even so, the Church receives more criticism than it is due. Problems with the Church boil down to one problem all people have—sin.... Every organization that has people will have sin.... However... I could write a book of the good Jesus has brought about in me and through me in my time in the Church. My greatest pleasures, accomplishments and growth have occurred in the Church.... What’s wrong with the Church? Don’t bother to make a list—that’s Satan’s business. Instead, be an intimate, active member of His body, the Church, and you, too, will give and receive great blessings as a result!<sup>3</sup>

Whatever problems the Church faces, let us also remember that in the end, the Church has been promised complete victory by none less than God Himself: “the gates of hell shall not

overpower it;” before Jesus “every knee will bow” and He will “reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet” (Matt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 15:25; Phil. 2:10).

So what’s right with the Church? Plenty. The Church is a constant source of amazement and testimony to God’s grace. Given the subtlety and power of such enemies as the world, the flesh, and the devil, it is nothing short of amazing that the Church has accomplished all She has in 2,000 years.

Today most people in the world have actually heard the biblical gospel at least once—it is further estimated that each day around the world some 70,000 people accept Christ as their Lord and Savior. What’s more, the Scriptures are now translated into over 1600 different languages!

Truly, the Church of Jesus Christ and every society which honors Her, has innumerable blessings to be thankful for. Yet we sometimes wonder if most Christians recognize the tremendous blessings that come to them merely from the fact of their salvation or how powerfully the knowledge of even basic theology and apologetics can dramatically impact their lives: Do people know what biblical doctrines such as propitiation/atonement, election, calling, regeneration, conversion, union with Christ, imputation, justification, adoption, sanctification, redemption and glorification actually mean for them personally? Do they really know the infinite and eternal riches they possess merely by being a simple believer in the Lord Jesus Christ?<sup>4</sup> Do they recognize the impact a knowledge of Christian evidences can have in their lives?

Do they know the innumerable promises that God has given them personally in His Word?

I am with you *always* even to the end of the age. (Matt. 28:20)

*All things work together for good* to those who love God and are called according to His purpose. (Rom. 8:28)

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? ...For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither present nor the future, not any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:35a, 38-39)

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you *entirely*, and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved *complete, without blame* at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. *Faithful* is He who calls you, and He also will *bring it to pass*. (1 Thess. 5:23-24)

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that *can never perish, spoil or fade—kept* in heaven for you, who through faith are *shielded by God’s power* until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Pet. 1:3-5)

See how *great* a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God; and such *we are*. (1 John 3:1)

If God is for us, *who can be against us?* (Rom. 8:31b)

Even the severely persecuted Apostle Paul could say, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18). Indeed, only the length of eternity itself will reveal to each believer the incalculable love God has for them reflected at the Cross—and the joys, glory and adventures yet to be ours. Incredibly, Christians have the immeasurable privilege of leading others to this very same eternity.

So not only does the Christian have access to all the novelty and pleasures of this world that all men have—the comfort of friends and family, the awesome beauty of nature, the privilege

and challenge of work, the fun of entertainment, the pleasure of intimacy, the joy of learning, the luxuries of food and drink, etc., the Christian will soon get them in an infinitely perfected form—for all eternity, no less.

As if the spice of life weren't enough to be thankful for, the Christian can find literally dozens of other areas for gratitude. For example, a positive correlation is known to exist between active Christian faith and physical and mental health. This has been observed in scores of different studies undertaken by many researchers in numerous countries, throughout this century, using a large number of independent and dependent variables. Those having religious values are at a significantly lower risk statistically for heart disease, stroke, different types of cancers, mental illness, suicide, tuberculosis, and other diseases.<sup>5</sup>

So we want to encourage our Christian readers to remember “to give thanks.” Many have not found what we have. Unfortunately, many never will. And yet all around us are those who, incredibly, object to our Christian heritage—even, in a sense, to the very celebration of Thanksgiving Day. In 1993, a news release supplement in *Free Inquiry*, a secular humanist magazine, actually proposed we institute a “National Day of Blame.” It stated *God* should be blamed for much of our problems(!): “If we have much for which we should be thankful, it logically follows that there may be much for which we should be angry.” The article proposed, “that on this day [Day of Blame] we *blame God* for the absurdities, atrocities, contradictions and inconsistencies in His religious texts... and why so many innocent people are made to suffer.” Therefore, “The National Day of Blame is an idea whose time has come.”<sup>6</sup>

But why charge God with all the problems of various non-Christian religious texts when He had nothing to do with them in the first place? Why blame God for the evil in the world when it is people who committed such evil *contrary* to their own God-given conscience (Rom. 2:14-15) and to God's stated will in His Word, the Bible? The humanist “Day of Blame” hardly belongs at God's doorstep—it belongs at ours—and, just perhaps, also at that of the humanists who do so easily condemn God for the world's problems, failing to comprehend the moral, logical and other consequences of their own skeptical philosophy in a world whose greatest need is that of finding, knowing and loving God.

God has never sat idly by in the heavens, oblivious to human need. First, God actually sent His own beloved Son to die for the world's sin—to pay the just penalty for all the evil that men do. He willingly did this so that in His great love He could freely forgive men and graciously offer them the gift of eternal life: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

And second, in many ways known only to each individual, God has faithfully shown love and mercy far beyond what we deserve. As the psalmist declared, “The Lord is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made. The Lord upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down.... The Lord is righteous in all his ways and loving toward all he has made. The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them” (Psa. 145:13-14, 17-19).

Millions of Christians, and non-Christians as well, could echo the sentiments of noted Professor Frank Sullivan when he recalled: “When you look back over your life, carefully, you remember all kinds of moments when you felt God near you; when you felt that somehow or other you lucked out; when you got something you didn't deserve.”<sup>7</sup> Or, of famous racing jockey William Shoemaker, “I must admit that I'm really not very religious... sometimes in my life I have asked him [God] to help me.... That's happened to me many times, and I think he's helped me. I think he's been great to me.”<sup>8</sup> Or, of novelist William Peter Blatty of “Exorcist” screenplay fame, “And I

do trust him, I trust God very definitely. There have been so many personal interventions in my life.”<sup>9</sup>

And now the Humanists want a special holiday set aside to *blame* God for all the evil which *men* do. How’s that for being grateful?

So we still believe that of all people on earth, the Christian should be the most thankful. He should be on his knees before God in gratitude for what God has done for him, expectantly looking toward that glory soon to be revealed, willing in the meantime to sacrifice all for Christ’s kingdom.

Have a blessed Thanksgiving!

### Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> E.g., on science see Eugene M. Klaaren (Ph.D. Harvard) who cogently argues for this viewpoint in *Religious Origins of Modern Science* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977). R. Hookyas is the author of over 125 science publications and professor of the History of Science, University of Utrecht; he argues similarly in *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972). Robert E. D. Clark (Ph.D. organic chemistry, Cambridge University) is an honors scholar at St. John’s College, Cambridge. He emphasizes, “Christianity has contributed profoundly to the development of modern science” and “scientific development has occurred only in a Christian culture.” (R. E. D. Clark, *Science and Christianity: A Partnership* (Omaha, NE: Pacific Press Publishing, 1972), pp. 11, 21.
- <sup>2</sup> *The New American Desk Encyclopedia* (NY: Signet, 1993), p. 151, emphasis added.
- <sup>3</sup> *Personal Freedom Outreach Journal*, April-June 1989, p. 2.
- <sup>4</sup> J. I. Packer, *God’s Words* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986).
- <sup>5</sup> E.g., “Religion and Health”, *Social Science and Medicine*, 1994, volume 28, pp. 1475-82 cited in *Family Research Report*, July-August, 1994, p. 8.
- <sup>6</sup> “Humanist Calls for National Day of Blame,” *Free Inquiry News Release*, supplement (Fall 1993 issue).
- <sup>7</sup> Terrance A. Sweeney, *God &* (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1979), p. 127.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.