Building a Nation by Giving Thanks

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The Thanksgiving holiday is here again. What will we do? We will get together with family and friends and will eat a big meal. And what is the meaning of this activity? Well, the quick answer is that this is a harvest festival; it celebrates the bountiful crops that have been brought in from the fields during the fall. In other words, we eat to celebrate the harvest that provided the food being eaten.

If this is so, then Thanksgiving is little more than the equivalent of the ancient harvest festivals celebrated three millennia and even longer ago. The ancient Israelites, for example, celebrated a harvest festival called the Feast of Booths that is recorded in the earliest portions of the Bible (Exodus 23).

The parallel with the Feast of Booths suggests that Thanksgiving is not just a harvest festival, but contains multiple layers of meaning. The description in Leviticus 23:42 links the Feast of Booths to the story of the Israelites’ origins, namely, the Exodus from Egypt and their sojourn in the wilderness with God. It reads: celebrate the feast “so your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt.”

A second point appears in the phrase, “that your generations may know.” The scriptural instructions are designed to help the descendants of the Exodus participants remember this founding event. Since dwelling in booths is what the Israelites did when they traveled from Egypt to the land of Israel, the repetition of this action in the Feast causes the celebrants to recall the origins story. It was in these years of wandering with God that the Israelites became God’s chosen people, a nation under God. So the Feast of Booths celebrates not just a harvest but also reminds the celebrants who they are by recalling their beginnings as a group.

This theme of unity was an important feature of the holiday in its early centuries. During the period of the Israelite tribal confederacy (sometimes known as the Judges period), roughly 1200-1000 B.C., the Israelites had no all-Israel government. Each of the tribes had a governing structure, but the only pan-tribal connection lay in the religion. Festival celebrations such as the Feast of Booths bound them together as a people.

Our Thanksgiving holiday functions in the same way. It is as much a recollection of American origins as it is a harvest festival. Our annually repeated feast recalls their first feast of thanksgiving. By retelling the Pilgrim story and recalling that first feast of thanksgiving at our Thanksgiving time, we remind ourselves of the origins of our nation and our identity as Americans.

Although the Thanksgiving did not become a legal American holiday until 1941, from Lincoln’s time onwards, US presidents made a proclamation for the celebration of the holiday every year. In part, this annual attention to Thanksgiving was due to Sara Josepha Hale, who decided in the mid-1800s that Thanksgiving should be a national celebration and not just a local New England feast. Hale edited the influential women’s magazine Godey’s, a competitor to the Ladies Home Journal, and every year used her position to write editorials, letters, and feature articles encouraging the adoption of Thanksgiving.

Over the decades, increasing numbers of “thanksgivers” joined in the campaign. Originally, Hale’s conception of the holiday united rural and urban America. Cities and their populations were increasing and losing touch with the rural life. Hale’s holiday emphasized plain, wholesome, country food, featuring products native to America: turkey, squash, potatoes, cranberries, and pumpkin. This unsophisticated fare reminded city dwellers of farms and the source of their food, at least once a year.

Following the Civil War, Thanksgiving was celebrated in both North and South and became a healing festival that helped unify the post-war nation. As immigration increased in the 1880s and following, it served as a means of integrating the new-comers into the nation. People whose ancestors may not even have heard of America, identified with the pilgrims and made the story of their new nation into their own story. So in the end, a simple harvest festival became a vehicle of national unity.

Note: Thanks to Anne Blue Wills, “Pilgrims and Progress: How Magazines Made Thanksgiving,” Church History (March 2003), pp. 138-158.