

Bradford's jurisdiction. Very often the question that came to the minds of the settlers was, "Will we survive?"

What Do the Pilgrims Teach Us?

We Need a Deeper View of Providence

The Pilgrims frequently spoke of God's providence, despite the fact that half of their people died in their struggle to build a viable community. They were thankful to God, who, in the words of Winslow, "Hath dealt so favorably with us." How humbling, that through their extreme hardships the Pilgrims consistently praised God for his care. Do we do the same?

We Need a More Mature Perspective

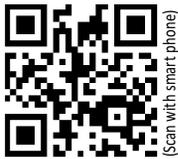
Sometime during this Thanksgiving season you will be tempted to complain about tough turkey, lack of white meat, or obnoxious friends and family members. Remember the First Thanksgiving. The Pilgrims chiefly gave thanks for the freedom to worship God unhindered. The Plymouth Pilgrims gained nothing else in the New World except that. Christian pilgrims have every reason to give thanks (1 Chron. 29:13-15). One minister conveyed this perspective to his congregation this way: "If we were afflicted, destitute, and brought a great deal lower than we are, it is even then a mercy that we are out of hell; we have very great cause to praise God that we are in the land of the living."ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Bradford wrote *Of Plymouth Plantation*, one of only two primary sources for the First Thanksgiving. The other, *Mourt's Relation* was written by Bradford and Edward Winslow.

ⁱⁱ A sermon preached Sunday Morning, March 23rd, 1879, at Croydon, By Mr. Covell.

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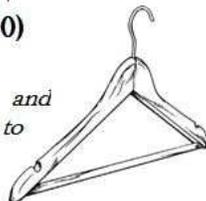


Invitation to November Events
at Covenant Reformed Church

Nov. 3 (8:00-2:00)

Open Closet

*Providing Clothes and
Household Items to
Our Community*



Nov. 21 (6 pm)

Thanksgiving Eve Service

*A Time of
Worship,
Fellowship &
Food*



PROCLAMATION

Promoting robust, religious thought in the tradition of orthodox, historic Christianity
November 2012, Issue 41

THE FIRST THANKSGIVING

AN HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

BY WILLIAM BOEKESTEIN

For many Americans, everything we know about the First Thanksgiving we learned in elementary school. Maybe that's why we have no problem picturing the Pilgrim Fathers wearing black construction-paper steeple hats surrounded by large families in warm homes eating restaurant-grade food (including cylindrical, jellied cranberry sauce). A more informed view of the First Thanksgiving might deepen our understanding of providence and help us develop perspective for giving thanks. To understand the American thanksgiving of 1621 we need to go back almost a century earlier to the reformation in England.

English Reformation. They disagreed with Anglican church government, its high-church ceremonies, and the forced use of the *Book of Common Prayer*. These concerns they shared with their contemporaries the Puritans

although the Puritans preferred to reform the church internally while the Pilgrims were separatists.

The problem with being a separatist in England in the 16th and 17th centuries was that there was no separation of church and state. To criticize the Church of England was to challenge the king. For such challenges, in the words of William

Bradford, the Pilgrims were "hunted and persecuted on every side... Some were... clapped up in prison, others had their houses... watched day and night... and the most were [obliged] to



The Pilgrims and Their Pilgrimage

The Pilgrims were English Christians who were frustrated over the stalled

flee and leave their houses, habitations, and the means of their livelihood.”¹

Seeking respite first in the Netherlands, the Pilgrims enjoyed freedom of religion and relative peace during Holland’s twelve year truce with Spain (1609-1621). Being immigrants, the Pilgrims had limited vocational opportunities and, therefore, lived in relative poverty. Given this condition few Englishmen were willing to join their community. The Pilgrims also feared the urban and cultural influences to which their children were subjected. Under their toilsome labors, the Pilgrims and their dream began to wear out. The aging Pilgrims realized that to establish a prosperous Christian community they would have to act soon.

Travels to the New World

After rejecting a plan to begin a colony in Guiana, South America, they returned to England to secure a land patent for settling in America. The *Mayflower’s* companion, ironically named the *Speedwell*, proved unseaworthy and had to turn back. Before landing two children were born on the ship and two people died. Landing at Cape Cod, but having a charter for the middle states, the Pilgrims found themselves without civil oversight.

The Founding of Plymouth

Before landing at Plymouth the Pilgrims drafted the *Mayflower Compact* affirming their allegiance to King James as well as their intention to draft their own laws “for better ordering and preservation, and furtherance of the glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith and honor of our

King and Country.” This first assertion of self-government in the New World is infused with not only religious but explicitly Christian language.

The First Winter

Hoping to arrive in the summer but being delayed departure until September the Pilgrims went ashore on November 21, 1620. During the first winter half of the 102 members perished including a dozen male heads of household. Over half of the families lost their husband or father. If not for the Indians the likelihood of their survival would have been slim.

Pilgrims and Indians

There almost weren’t any Indians to meet them. In 1617-19 roughly ninety percent of the Indian population along the Massachusetts coast was wiped out by epidemic; a sad fact, but one which providentially allowed the Pilgrims to settle with little interference.

The surviving Indians enjoyed a good relationship with the Pilgrims. Edward Winslow wrote “We...walk as peaceably and safely in the woods as in the highways in England; we entertain them in our houses, and they as friendly bestow venison on us.” The Pilgrims’ love for the Indians flowed out of concern for their souls. One Pilgrim explained, “If we pray for the heathen, should there not also be ordinary means toward their conversion exercised by us.”

Another significant reason for the positive Pilgrim-Indian relations was the service of Squanto (Tisquantum). Years before the Pilgrims arrived Squanto had been captured, enslaved,

and set free in Spain. He found his way to England, learned English and returned to America. The Pilgrims were shocked when one day he stepped from the woods and addressed them in English. Squanto helped the Pilgrims enter into a treaty with the Indian King Massasoit on whose behalf the Pilgrims would later engage in war. Squanto’s death just two years later was described by Bradford as “a great loss.”

The First Thanksgiving

The first thanksgiving was held in November 1621, a year after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth. Edward Winslow sent a letter to a friend in England describing the event.

“Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might, after a special manner, rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors... At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us [including] their greatest King, Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted; and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation, and bestowed on [us]... And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty.”

William Bradford wrote similarly:

“They began now to gather in the small harvest they had, and to fit up their houses and dwellings against winter, being all well recovered in health and strength and had all things in good plenty. For as some were thus employed in affairs abroad, others were

exercised in fishing, about cod and bass and other fish, of which they took good store... All the summer there was no want; and now began to come in store of fowl, as winter approached... And besides waterfowl there was great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, etc. Besides, they had about a peck of meal a week to a person, or now since harvest, Indian corn to that proportion.”

Ostensibly, the Pilgrims had little for which to be thankful. They had seven houses (for the remaining fifty-three people) and four buildings for common use. Of the eighteen adult women who left England only four survived the first year. They had a good corn harvest, thanks to the Indian techniques; their barley was good too. But, according to Winslow, “Our peas not worth the gathering, for we feared they were too late sown. They came up very well, and blossomed; but the sun parched them in the blossom.”

Both Winslow and Bradford refer to their plenty unaware that this plenty was about to disappear. A ship called the *Fortune* had recently landed carrying more pilgrims but few supplies. The goods sent back on the *Fortune* were apprehended by the French. With additional pilgrims arriving and the need to outfit the *Fortune* for her return voyage things took a turn for the worse. That winter the Pilgrims survived on “half allowance” still with no cattle, sheep, or horses.

In fact it took ten years (and visits by four ships) to raise the population from 100 to 300. By 1650, thirty years after their landing there were still less than 1,000 people under Governor