



The First Thanksgiving: What the Real Story Tells Us about Loving God and Learning from History

Robert Tracy McKenzie

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Claiming that the current American perspective on the pilgrims is idolatry, this historian has crafted a thought-provoking lesson on how to contextualize the past.

The Pilgrims are heroes admired for their bravery, commitment to religious freedom, and gratitude, but *The First Thanksgiving* asks us to examine the evidence to see if these claims are supported. Readers should think “Christianly and historically about the past,” argues McKenzie, a professor of history lauded for his work about the Civil War, particularly *Lincolnton and Rebels: A Divided Town in the American Civil War*. Thinking historically and Christianly involves relying on evidence and contextualizing while resisting the urge to idolize figures from the past.

In a conversational tone, McKenzie puts forth a compelling argument that might put the Pilgrims and their place in our national and spiritual consciousness on shaky ground. For example, sifting through the evidence that is available, beginning with sources like William Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation* and letters and books written by others who visited or lived in the colony, the author challenges previously held ideas about Pilgrims, including the often cited reason for their arrival in America—religious freedom—and the cozy first Thanksgiving meal they supposedly had. According to several sources, there is debate about whether the Indians were actually invited or if they merely showed up—dashing the contemporary idea of a culturally inclusive community dinner.

While illustrating how to contextualize—a historian’s task that seeks to understand the historical background of a figure or occurrence—McKenzie explains the Pilgrims’ discontent with the Church of England while living in Scrooby and their subsequent immigration to Leiden, Holland, where they found religious freedom. After twelve years in Leiden, the Pilgrims decided to travel to America, perhaps to preserve their English customs. Once there, life was difficult, but with the sustenance left behind by a decimated Indian tribe and the help of Squanto, some of the Pilgrims survived.

The First Thanksgiving emphasizes the Pilgrims’ firm commitment to God and highlights beliefs today’s Christians might disagree with, such as refusing religious tolerance. Throughout the book, McKenzie uses carefully selected biblical scriptures to assure readers that history has a place in Christianity, but Christians must be careful not to place faith in historical figures or America. Instead, they should follow the Pilgrims’ lead and strive to make heaven their home. “One snare that awaits us when we study nonbiblical history is the temptation to fashion idols out of the admirable figures we encounter.” Christians fall prey to this when they view historical figures as sinless or as people to be emulated. Christians who embrace the strategies used by historians (e.g., examining evidence and contextualizing) that McKenzie skillfully teaches, may never view the past the same again.

KAAVONIA HINTON (Fall 2013)

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