

*The*  
FIRST  
THANKSGIVING

WHAT THE REAL STORY TELLS US ABOUT  
LOVING GOD AND LEARNING FROM HISTORY



TEACHER'S  
GUIDE

ROBERT TRACY MCKENZIE

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The purpose of *The First Thanksgiving* is to help American Christians—whether current students or life-long learners—think more “Christianly” and historically about the American past. It offers a fresh retelling of a familiar but often mythologized story, interwoven with historical and theological reflection that underscores both the pitfalls and opportunities that await us when we turn to the past. Although the book centers on a compelling episode from early American history, my primary goal is not simply to provide a more accurate understanding of the First Thanksgiving. Rather, the story of the First Thanksgiving and the evolving Thanksgiving holiday serves as a concrete framework within which to develop a number of broadly applicable insights concerning the study of history through eyes of faith.

My hope is that *The First Thanksgiving* will be both interesting and accessible to academic and non-academic audiences. I have spoken on the First Thanksgiving to numerous Christian gatherings, and I well imagine it becoming the focus of a church book group, for example. As a history professor for the past quarter century at the University of Washington and now at Wheaton College, I also believe that the book is tailor-made for effective use in any number of academic contexts at institutions where Christian perspectives may be openly explored. Because of its subject matter, the book would work well in courses on U. S. religious history; in seminars on historiography, historical methods, or the relationship between faith and history; and in U. S. survey courses. As someone who regularly teaches the first half of the American history survey, I can easily imagine assigning the book at the outset of the course and then drawing from its concepts throughout the remainder of the term. Assigning a primer on the practice of history might serve the same purpose, but I have long believed that abstract concepts are most easily understood in the context of a concrete story.

I have designed this study guide by asking myself what I would find most helpful for facilitating discussion of a book like this one. For the introduction and each of the book's eight chapters, I have crafted a brief synopsis, identified what I consider to be the most important points, quoted a number of (hopefully) provocative contentions, and posed a few key questions for consideration. Where appropriate, I have also identified and defined key concepts that are applicable to historical study generally.

*Robert Tracy McKenzie*

# INTRODUCTION

## **Overview**

The introduction has three goals: (1) to make a brief case for why Christians should care about the past; (2) to identify two of the most common snares that plague Christians who do care about the past; and (3) to explain why the history of the “First Thanksgiving” is an ideal framework for exploring both the opportunities and pitfalls that await us when we study the past.

## **Main Points**

1. We should resist the common cultural mindset that dismisses or trivializes the importance of history.
  - a) *As citizens of a free society*, we must recognize that historical ignorance leaves us vulnerable in the public square, given that politicians and pundits regularly appeal to the past and contentious political debates frequently turn on historical assertions.
  - b) *As Christians*, we must remind ourselves that our faith rests squarely on the theological interpretation of past events; that the past is itself a sphere that God has created, and thus a form of natural revelation; and that both the Old and New Testaments affirm the value of historical knowledge in the quest for a heart of wisdom.
2. While the biblical principle of honoring age and the biblical injunction to “take every thought captive” both point to the value of historical knowledge, we must beware of two common pitfalls that await us when we study the past.
  - a) There is a strong temptation to look to the past for *ammunition* instead of illumination. The history-as-ammunition approach robs history of its power to educate us, since our determination to see history “do its duty” means that the past we encounter will rarely challenge us, surprise us, or teach us anything that we don’t already believe. This approach may also adversely affect our character, both by feeding our pride and by enticing us to violate the law of love by using historical figures to further our own agendas.
  - b) There is also a tendency to allow our thinking about history to *distort our identity* as followers of Christ. As believers we are always tempted to link our identities as followers of Christ too closely with other group attachments. When American Christians study the American past, we often face the subconscious desire to see our na-

tional and religious identities as perfectly reconcilable. We may even be tempted to rewrite the past—or the principles of our faith—to accomplish this.

3. How we remember the Pilgrims and the “First Thanksgiving” reveals a great deal about how we understand both our religious heritage as Americans and our national heritage as Christians. Thanksgiving interweaves the strands of national identity, religious heritage, and historical memory, and by revisiting the Thanksgiving story, we can learn not only about the past but about ourselves as well.

### ***Key Contentions***

- “As Christians, our challenge is to ‘take every thought captive in obedience to Christ’ (2 Corinthians 10:5), including our thinking about our national heritage. We need to respect our forefathers without worshipping them. We must find a way to learn from the past without making it an idol” (p. 10).
- “At its best, the study of the past can be part of a life-changing dialogue with the ages in which we confront enduring questions and seek a heart of wisdom” (p. 13).
- “Without doubt, we have chosen the Pilgrims as our honorary ancestors, and we have done so, at least in part, because over time enough of us came to agree that the Pilgrims exemplified values we wished to affirm—even if we couldn’t agree on what those values actually were” (p. 21).

### ***Important Concepts***

- **history-as-ammunition** (pp. 16-19): going to the past to “prove points” rather than gain understanding
- **epistemological arrogance** (p. 18): having too high an opinion of our capacity to know the past, an intellectual error with spiritual implications, inasmuch as it exalts our own faculties unduly while minimizing the marvel of God’s omniscience
- **“Christianity And”** (p. 20): C. S. Lewis’s phrase (from *The Screwtape Letters*) for the temptation to blur the lines between our faith in Christ and our commitment to earthly attachments, e.g., fidelity to nation, class, ethnic group, or political party

### ***Questions for Students’ Consideration***

1. A more historically accurate (and far more tedious) title for the event we remember as the “First Thanksgiving” would be the “First American Protestant Christian Thanksgiving North of Virginia and South of Maine” (p. 9). Why is this significant?
2. Do you agree with the author’s contention that “ours is a present-tense society” (p. 10)? How persuasive is his argument that Christians have an obligation to resist this mind-set?

## LOOKING UNDERNEATH THE HOUSE

### *The Evidence the Pilgrims Left Us*

#### **Overview**

Chapter one is all about the “e-word,” i.e., **evidence**. By devoting an entire chapter at the outset to a discussion of the limited evidence that survives concerning the Pilgrims and the First Thanksgiving, the chapter’s primary goal is to underscore the fundamental difference between *the past*—what actually happened—and *history*—our understanding of what happened. The past is dead and gone. History is the product of our ongoing quest to reconstruct and make sense of that vanished reality with the aid of historical evidence.

#### **Main Points**

1. For a group of common folk born four centuries or more ago, an impressive amount of evidence survives concerning them as a group.
2. In contrast, almost no evidence survives concerning the First Thanksgiving itself. The only substantive reference to the event consists of three sentences (115 words) from the pen of Pilgrim Edward Winslow in a letter to supporters in England.

#### **Key Contentions**

- “Whatever the topic that interests us, we never have all the relevant facts at our disposal; we work instead with a subset, often a miniscule proportion. What is more—tired clichés notwithstanding—those facts that remain never ‘speak for themselves.’ They lie silent and inert until the historian breathes life into them, literally resurrects them by fashioning them into a persuasive interpretation. Interpretation of historical evidence is at the very core of the historian’s task” (p. 26).
- “The law of love requires that we take individuals from the past seriously, not that we believe everything they say. Our quest for understanding is best served when we read their words with both sympathy and skepticism” (p. 26).

#### **Important Concepts**

- **the past** (p. 25): everything that has happened before us, the vast expanse of human thought and action that C. S. Lewis likened to “a roaring cataract of billions upon billions” of moments

- **history** (p. 25): not the past itself but subsequent human understanding of the past; academic historians sometimes choose to define “history” more restrictively as knowledge of the past emerging from the disciplined, rigorous use of historical evidence
- ***You are There* history** (pp. 24-26): a vivid recreation that makes past events “come alive” but conceals the crucial interpretive role of the historian in effecting the resurrection

***Questions for Students' Consideration***

1. What is the difference between history and the past?
2. What is your definition of good history? Is it wrong for a work of history to make the past “come alive”?
3. How does it affect your understanding of history to know that “interpretation is at the very core of the historian’s task” (p. 26)?
4. What evidence survives concerning the Pilgrims and what kinds of questions can these sources answer? What evidence survives concerning the First Thanksgiving itself?

## REMEMBERING ODBODY'S AXIOM

### *The Pilgrims' Historical Contexts*

#### **Overview**

The focus of chapter two is **context**. It opens with an extended illustration of the importance of context from the Hollywood classic *It's a Wonderful Life*. The remainder of the chapter situates the tiny dissenting congregation of Scrooby, England in multiple contexts that might be thought of as a series of ever smaller concentric circles. Successive sections briefly survey the broader Protestant Reformation, trace the trajectory of the “Henrician Reformation” in England, and characterize the nature of English Separatism. The chapter concludes by identifying the Scrooby dissenters’ main criticisms of the Church of England, as remembered by John Robinson, the Pilgrims’ pastor in Leiden, and William Bradford, the future governor of Plymouth Colony. The chapter’s concluding paragraph finds the Scrooby dissenters positioned to leave their native homes in order to escape the authority of an established church to which they can no longer, in good conscience, submit their lives.

#### **Main Points**

1. An appreciation of context is utterly essential to sound historical thinking. Wrenched from its historical context, an isolated historical fact may be interesting or intriguing, but by itself it is essentially meaningless.
2. Historians’ reconstruction of context is necessarily selective. Ideally, it will take into consideration that we live our lives in multiple contexts simultaneously. For example, as the early 1600s unfolded, the lives of the dissenting Christians of Scrooby, England were influenced by local, national, and international developments.
3. Most broadly, the Scrooby dissenters were influenced by the arguments of the Protestant reformers in Europe, most notably those of John Calvin, the French theologian based in Geneva, Switzerland whose writings inspired many early English Puritans, dissenters from the Church of England who believed that the established church needed further purifying.
4. Within England itself, the Scrooby dissenters identified with a more radical minority of Puritans known as Separatists, so called because they concluded that the only righteous response to perceived corruption in the Church of England was to separate wholly from it. The writings of William Bradford and John Robinson indicate that the Scrooby Separatists objected especially to surviving Catholic ritual in the Church of England, the hier-

archy of priests and bishops, and the intermixture of believers and non-believers as automatic members of each parish congregation.

***Key Contentions***

- “. . . if there is a single truth that inspires the serious study of history, it is the conviction that we gain great insight into the human condition by situating the lives of men and women in the larger flow of human experience over time” (p. 38).
- “. . . when wrenched from its historical context, an isolated historical fact may intrigue or entertain us . . . but it has nothing meaningful to teach us. No context, no meaning. It's that simple” (p. 38).

***Important Concepts***

- “**Odbody's Axiom**” (p. 40): my whimsical label, drawn from *It's a Wonderful Life*, for the angel Clarence's insight into the unlimited interrelatedness of human experience, a principle that explains why attention to context is utterly central to sound historical thinking

***Questions for Students' Consideration***

1. “No context, no meaning. It's that simple” (p. 38). What does the author mean, and can this really be true?
2. What core religious beliefs are reflected in the Scrooby congregation's critique of the Church of England? How do those beliefs compare with your own?



## PURSUING AUTHENTIC EDUCATION

### *Thinking about What the Pilgrims Wanted*

#### **Overview**

The heart of chapter three traces the Scrooby congregation from their relocation to Holland, through their twelve years in Leiden, to their decision to move again, this time to North America. The chapter's central question is one of **motive**, i.e., why did a portion of the Leiden congregation risk everything to come to America? Possible motives include the desire to expand England's dominion in the Americas, evangelize Native Americans, secure religious freedom for themselves, preserve their English heritage, shield their children from a corrupt culture, improve their material standard of living, and prevent the disintegration of their church.

I have framed this portion of the Pilgrim's story with a discussion of the role of history in the quest for "authentic education," defined, in contrast to vocational training, as an undertaking that is more about how we should live than about how to make a living. The opening pages challenge the reader to think of history in terms of a grand conversation across the generations about Permanent Things, i.e., questions that never go away because they are perpetually relevant to the human condition. In the conclusion I provide an example of what it might look like to draw from scripture to think Christianly about the dialogue. Specifically, I suggest that Jesus' parable of the sower provides useful categories for thinking about the Pilgrims' motives and for thinking about the relevance of their example to our circumstances today.

#### **Main Points**

1. Several Pilgrim writers explicitly discussed what motivated the Leiden congregation to consider relocation to America, but their arguments must be read with a grain of salt. This is especially true of their references to a supposed desire to advance the dominion of England and to spread the gospel to Native Americans, neither of which appears to have been an important motive.
2. The Pilgrims undoubtedly wanted to live where they could worship God freely. At the same time, the Pilgrim writers never mentioned a desire for religious freedom as a motive for removing to America. This was because they already enjoyed considerable religious freedom in Leiden.

3. Far more influential motives for emigration were the desire to preserve their ethnic heritage and to improve their material standard of living, yet neither motive can be rightly understood apart from the Leiden Separatists' fear for the survival of their church.

***Key Contentions***

- Authentic education “invariably ‘engages the heart,’ and *it always changes who we are*” (p. 54)
- “I’m dubious of the value of moral reflection that focuses on hypothetical circumstances. Avowals of how we would respond to imaginary adversity are worth pretty much what they cost us. Character isn’t forged in the abstract, but in the concrete crucible of everyday life, in the myriad mundane decisions that both shape and reveal the heart’s deepest loves” (p. 69).

***Questions for Students’ Consideration***

1. According to the author, “The popular understanding that the Pilgrims came to America ‘in search of religious freedom’ is *technically* true, but it is also misleading” (p. 64). In what sense is it misleading?
2. As the Pilgrim writers explained their situation in Holland, according to the author, the “principal threat to the Leiden congregation was not the scorching sun, but strangling thorns” (p. 69). What does he mean by this? What difference does this distinction make in thinking about the relevance of the Pilgrims’ story to our lives today?

## FINDING HEROES, NOT IDOLS

### *Following the Pilgrims to America*

#### **Overview**

The narrative of this chapter traces the Pilgrims' story from their departure from Holland in the summer of 1620 through the eve of their famous "thanksgiving" celebration in the fall of 1621. It features a succession of arduous trials through which the Pilgrims displayed remarkable fortitude and determination: the late-Autumn crossing of the Atlantic in the tiny *Mayflower*, the search for a settlement site on the cusp of a cruel New England winter, the staggering death toll of their first months ashore, and their relentless struggle with hunger until reaping the fruits of their first harvest. At the same time, the story contains numerous less than heroic features: among other things, the Leiden emigrants were disingenuous with the British crown, they clashed with their supposed benefactor, they bickered among themselves concerning preparations for their voyage, and they arrived ill prepared for the challenges of building a permanent settlement in a strange and in some ways hostile world.

Appropriately, the narrative is bookended by a discussion of our legitimate need to find heroes in the past as well as our temptation to transform those heroes into idols. The introduction discusses what idolatry might look like in historical study and offers advice on how to avoid it. We do well to remind ourselves frequently of our tendency to erect historical idols and to be careful not to gloss over our heroes' imperfections. The conclusion utilizes an encounter with the National Monument to the Forefathers in Plymouth in building a Christian case against "monumental" history that glosses over the frailties of the figures we admire. It defends a more balanced approach because it is more honest, is truer to human nature, and leaves more room for God's glory.

#### **Main Points**

1. This phase of the Pilgrims' story is a period of conflict. As the *Mayflower* prepared to set sail for America, relations were strained within the group of Leiden emigrants, between the Leideners and their financial backers, and between Leideners and the strangers that the Merchant Adventurers had recruited.
2. This phase of the Pilgrims's story is also a period of disappointment, disillusionment, and tragedy. A significant number lost faith in the venture and turned back when the *Speedwell* was pronounced unfit for the voyage. Those who continued arrived in a strange and for-

bidding land not at all like the semitropical garden they had envisioned. Unprepared for the cruel winter conditions, one half of the party perished before springtime, and all but four of the twenty-six families were touched by death.

***Key Contentions***

- “. . . we must beware of describing any figures from the past other than Christ Himself as if they were above reproach—or to put it another way, as if they were without sin. None of us would ever come right out and say this of a historical figure, and yet there is a subtle temptation to gloss over the flaws in our heroes that their virtues may shine the more brightly. To take even a single step down this path is to begin the gradual descent from history to hagiography, from the admiration of heroes to the worship of ancestors” (p. 74).
- “. . . we must be careful never to act as if we are morally bound to follow the example of figures from the past, for this is to impute authority where God has not granted it” (p. 74).

***Questions for Students' Consideration***

1. Can you define in your own words the difference between a hero and an idol?
2. The author writes, “When we make room for our heroes' frailties in our narratives of the past, we at the same time make greater room for God's glory” (p. 97). What does he mean here, and do you agree?
3. In what sense does history that glosses over human shortcomings teach bad theology?

## SEEING RHINOS, NOT UNICORNS

### *The Strangeness of the Pilgrims*

#### **Overview**

Chapter four followed the Pilgrims up to the eve of their 1621 “First Thanksgiving.” Chapter five briefly interrupts the narrative to look systematically at the values and beliefs that they brought with them to their new home. The deeper purpose of the chapter is to alert readers to the tension between the familiar and the strange that lies at the core of our encounters with the past. The chapter’s title—taken from an anecdote about the travels of Marco Polo in what is today Indonesia—serves as a reminder of our natural tendency to make sense of people from the past in terms of categories that come from our world, not theirs. This means that the danger for misunderstanding them is ever present. This is abundantly evident in the way that Americans have remembered the Pilgrims, for we have frequently imputed values to them that they would have found repugnant.

We can see the “strangeness” of the Pilgrims in a myriad of small ways—in their language and diet, for example—but especially in their thinking about liberty. The bulk of the chapter explores the Pilgrims’ views of religious, political, and economic liberty. There are two recurring threads. The first is their conviction that liberty meant “the freedom not to do what you wanted but to do what was right” (p. 106). The second is their understanding of society as composed not of individuals but of groups—family, church, and civil community. The section concludes with an extended discussion of what it meant to the Leiden Separatists to think of themselves as “pilgrims,” i.e., temporary sojourners on earth in route to a heavenly country.

The chapter concludes by emphasizing how important it is to take the strangeness of the past seriously if we hope to learn from it, perhaps even be changed by it.

#### **Main Points**

1. “At its best, the study of history always involves a simultaneous encounter with both the familiar and the strange” (p. 98).
2. Over the years, Americans have frequently imputed values to the Pilgrims that they did not hold. It is anachronistic to think of the Pilgrims as idealizing a society in which individuals have the freedom to worship God according to the dictates of their conscience, as advocates of unrestricted capitalism, or as champions of democracy.

3. In contrast to our more individualistic conceptions, the Pilgrims conceived of liberty in the context of group life. They emphasized order, obedience, and obligation more than personal autonomy and self-expression.

### ***Key Contentions***

- “Let me suggest that in studying the Pilgrims—or any other group from the past with which we are tempted to identify—we should spend much more time than we do in meditating on the differences that separate us. . . . It is in introducing us to strangers who see the world differently that the study of history most facilitates moral reflection about our own place and time.” (p. 120).
- “When we take the strangeness of the past seriously—not simply dismiss it as curious or bizarre, but really grapple with it—history has a way of making the *present* seem strange to us” (p. 121).

### ***Questions for Students' Consideration***

1. The author contends that “our tendency to exaggerate the familiarity of the past is natural but costly” (p. 120). In what sense is it natural? What are the costs involved?
2. Why might it be misleading to think of the Mayflower Compact as one of our country’s “founding documents”?
3. How would you describe the Pilgrims’ understanding of religious liberty? What do you think of it?
4. The author argues that it is possible to think of the Pilgrims as our spiritual ancestors without distorting their worldview, but he warns against thinking of them as our *national* ancestors. Why is this?
5. Does the concept of “pilgrimage” influence your own sense of identity in any way? Should it?

## DISCARDING FALSE MEMORIES

### *The Real Story of the First Thanksgiving*

#### **Overview**

Chapter six, at long last, explores the historical moment that we remember as the First Thanksgiving. Because so much of what we think we know about that event is mythical, I begin this chapter with a discussion of collective historical memory and our propensity to remember the past falsely. This section centers on two examples. The first is a twentieth-century hoax—a document purporting to be Governor William Bradford’s original thanksgiving proclamation—and a nineteenth-century novel, Jane Austin’s *Standish of Standish*. The acceptance of the former and the wild popularity of the latter both point to what I call *willful gullibility*, defined as a natural “readiness to accept uncritically what we want to be true” (p. 125).

The heart of the chapter addresses the question, “What remains of the First Thanksgiving once the embellishment has been stripped away?” Much of this discussion is aimed at helping readers to see the event in their mind’s eye. Acknowledging the dearth of evidence, I offer educated guesses concerning a number of basic details: how many Pilgrims were present, how old they were, how tall they were, what they wore, what they ate, where they ate, and what they ate with. More importantly, I question two central pillars of popular memory of the event: the insistence that the Pilgrims intentionally invited the Wampanoag to take part in their harvest celebration, and the belief that the Pilgrims thought of the festival as a Thanksgiving holiday. The first is doubtful; the second is certainly wrong. The chapter’s final section examines the Pilgrims’ understanding of holy days and concludes that, from their perspective, the first true Day of Thanksgiving came not in the autumn of 1621 but in the summer of 1623, when the Pilgrims gathered to honor God for the end of a drought that threatened to destroy the colony.

#### **Main Points**

1. Much of what we think we remember about the First Thanksgiving is imagined. Although the evidence is severely limited, it is likely that the event took place outdoors and that most of the participants (two-thirds of whom were Wampanoag) sat on the ground, ate with their hands, and dined on a menu devoid of turkey and pumpkin pie.
2. Although the peaceful fellowship between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag has loomed

large in popular memory in recent years, there is no clear-cut evidence that the Pilgrims actually invited the Wampanoag to take part.

3. There are compelling reasons to believe that the Pilgrims thought of their 1621 celebration as a kind of harvest festival, not as a formal Thanksgiving holiday. From the Pilgrims' perspective, their "First Thanksgiving" in New England occurred nearly two years later, an episode that contemporary Americans have almost wholly forgotten.
4. As the Pilgrims defined it, an authentic Thanksgiving "holy day" should be an expression of gratitude for God's "special providence," not a regularly scheduled occasion. Generations would pass before Thanksgiving evolved into an annual occurrence in Plymouth.

### ***Key Contentions***

- "If authentic education always changes who we are, and one of the first fruits of true education is humility, one of the ways that the study of history educates us is by reminding us of our own limitations" (p. 123).
- "Typically, only a portion of popular perception of the past is firmly grounded in historical evidence. The other part—often the more entertaining part—consists of stuff somebody made up" (p. 124).

### ***Questions for Students' Consideration***

1. Consider having students evaluate the accuracy of a picture in the book (maybe the book cover) in light of the discussion in this chapter.
2. What does the author mean by "willful gullibility"? How might we guard against this tendency in our study of history?
3. The author suggests that in imagining our contemporary Thanksgiving tradition as an inheritance from the Pilgrims, we are rejecting a central pillar of their world view while claiming to honor them. Does that bother you? Should it?



## UNDERSTANDING REVISIONISM

### *How the First Thanksgiving Has Changed Over Time*

#### **Overview**

Because history and the past are not the same thing, historical memory exists only in the present, and like human memory generally, it is flawed, selective, and invariably influenced by perspective. Chapter seven drives home this point through a broad overview of American memory of the First Thanksgiving over nearly four centuries. Americans scarcely remembered the 1621 celebration for more than two centuries afterward. They rediscovered it in 1841, when Edward Winslow's brief description was reprinted in a popular volume called *Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers*.

For generations thereafter, Americans outside of New England were slow to incorporate the event into their commemoration of Thanksgiving. I think the best way to explain this is with relevance to the cultural usefulness of the First Thanksgiving. Edward Winslow described an event in which the Wampanoag played a central role, but national policy in the middle of the nineteenth century called for the removal of Native Americans from the eastern half of the United States. The emphasis on the Pilgrims underscored the New England roots of the holiday, but this was a liability at a time that tensions between North and South were growing dramatically. Finally, the circulation of newly available Pilgrim sources made clear that the Pilgrims thought of Thanksgiving as an irregular holiday centered on public worship. Americans who celebrated Thanksgiving in the mid-1800s thought of it as an annual event celebrated in private homes.

By the close of the nineteenth century, however, the Pilgrims' story had become much more culturally useful. This was in part because the broader American context had changed in ways that made it easier to graft the First Thanksgiving onto the larger story of America. Conflict with Native Americans was declining and sectional reconciliation was proceeding apace. The more pressing cultural concern of the day concerned the implications of massive immigration into the United States, and the Pilgrims could be readily embraced as model immigrants. By the early twentieth century the correlation of the Pilgrims with Thanksgiving was ubiquitous, and Americans were citing their honorary ancestors in support of a host of contradictory causes.

### ***Main Points***

1. The story of the First Thanksgiving simply wasn't very useful to mid-nineteenth century America. It didn't fit well with how they wanted to remember the past, and it contradicted how they wanted to celebrate Thanksgiving in the present and the future.
2. The importance of the First Thanksgiving in American popular memory grew as the Pilgrims story became "usable history" (p. 153). This process involved both changing memory of the Pilgrims as well as changing contemporary circumstances.

### ***Key Contentions***

- "The past in its pristine purity has not been revealed to us, and history is not the past itself but the result of our efforts to make sense of the past in the ever-changing present. Because 'time is the very lens through which' we gaze on the past, the passing of time necessarily influences what we see in the past" (p. 148).
- Allusions to the past are often employed to justify cultural traditions. If we can prove that a contemporary custom has a long history, we validate that custom by giving it the "sanction of precedent." And if we can link the precedent to specific heroes from the past—figures that we admire for some reason or other—the moral legitimacy imputed to the contemporary practice becomes all the greater." (149)
- "If the study of popular memory teaches us anything, it is that all historical interpretations exist in time, which means that, to differing degrees, they are influenced by cultural context. This applies as much to our own understandings of the past as to the 'revisionist' accounts we are quick to denounce" (p. 170).

### ***Important Concepts***

- **revisionist** (p. 146): the term has two different meanings—academics employ it as a label for any historian who revises a previously accepted version of the past, whereas in more popular usage it connotes someone who intentionally distorts the past to promote a personal or ideological agenda
- **popular historical memory** (p. 148): what a society remembers collectively about the past
- "**sanction of precedent**" (p. 156)—the idea that a contemporary cultural practice or belief is made morally legitimate by proving that it has a long history or by linking it to heroes from the past

### ***Questions for Students' Consideration***

1. Search the internet for examples of contemporary popular usage of the word *revisionist*.

(Avoid academic sites.) Do the examples you find support or contradict the author's reasons for discouraging the term?

2. How could the Pilgrims' celebration of 1621 not become "a part of history" (150) until 1841? If true, how does this fact further our understanding of what *history* actually is?
3. How can the concept of "cultural usefulness" (p. 153) help us to make sense of the evolving place of the First Thanksgiving in popular memory?

## RECEIVING GIFTS FROM THE PAST

### *The Search for Larger Meaning*

#### **Overview**

The book's final chapter is all about the "so what?" question. Academic historians are in the habit of answering this question historiographically. What makes their conclusions significant, they contend, is how they add to or modify the views of other historians. The point of chapter eight is to model a different approach. "What would it mean not only to learn *about* the Pilgrims," I ask, "but also *from* them?" (p. 173). Posing the question more broadly, "What does it mean to search for significance in the past through eyes of faith?" (p. 181).

Lay Christians have often answered the latter question by advocating a providential approach to the study of history, i.e., by fashioning interpretations that claim to delineate God's work and explain his purposes. While there are some merits to the approach, providential history suffers from serious flaws and Christians should eschew it. Most significantly, it vastly understates the difference that divine inspiration makes in discerning divine purpose. Although unintentional, providential history actually both reflects and promotes a low view of Scripture.

Instead of providentialism, I recommend an approach to the past that views history as a context for serious moral reflection. Academic historians are probably right to oppose moral judgment in historical study, defined as the effort to determine the guilt or rectitude of the people or events or belief systems in the past. Moral *judgment* too easily becomes an impediment to understanding. From a Christian perspective, it can also stimulate self-righteousness. I advocate instead the practice of moral *reflection*, defined as a form of moral inquiry aimed at self-understanding by inviting figures from the past to ask *us* hard questions and demand explanations for what *we* believe. Thus defined, moral reflection "is deeply introspective and never leaves the heart untouched" (p. 182).

In the book's concluding pages, I share some of the ways that my own heart has been touched by my engagement with the Pilgrims. I have variously felt thankfulness, holy fear, inspiration, encouragement, challenge and conviction. One of the ways that the study of history promotes moral reflection is by making the present seem strange to us, that is, by helping us to become more aware of beliefs and behavior that we would otherwise take for granted. By their emphasis on social relationships, the Pilgrims call attention to the su-

preme individualism that defines our own generation. In their privation and suffering, their experience underscores the magnitude of pleasure and possessions that we take for granted. Through their understanding of pilgrimage, they bring into bold relief the worldliness that envelops us.

### *Main Points*

1. “There will always be gifts to be received from the past,” in the words of Rowan Williams, but we must know how to look for them.
2. The providential approach to history has understandable appeal to Christians, but there are compelling theological reasons to reject it.
3. While moral judgment too easily becomes a substitute for serious thought, responsible moral reflection is essential if the study of history is to be more than an “academic” pursuit.

### *Key Contentions*

- “One of the priceless benefits of studying history is that it allows us to situate our own brief lives in a far larger story. In our natural narcissism, however, our tendency will be to reverse the process: to see the past as but a vast prelude to the drama of our own lives” (p. 174).
- “Providential history reflects a low view of Scripture” (p. 177).
- “When encountering figures from the past, the wisest initial response is to close our mouths and open our minds” (p. 184).
- “Our study of the past is not wholly unlike our engagement with Scripture. The book of James speaks of God’s word as a ‘mirror’ that helps us to see what kind of people we really are (James 1:23). History is not inspired—that truth cannot be emphasized too much—but it can help to lay bare what we believe” (p. 185).

### *Important Concepts*

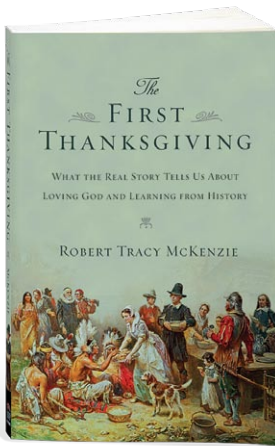
- **providential history** (p. 174): an approach which “views history as an arena in which to trace God’s unfolding plan for humanity” and assumes that the historian, without benefit of special revelation, can discern God’s purposes in specific historical events
- **moral judgment** (p. 182): as applied to history, an approach that directs moral inquiry outward and strives to determine the guilt or innocence of people or events or values from the past
- **moral reflection** (p. 182): as applied to history, an approach that directs moral inquiry inward in an effort to understand ourselves, making our lives vulnerable to the past and allowing figures from the past to ask us hard questions

### ***Questions for Students' Consideration***

1. What are the merits of providential history? What are its flaws?
2. What is the difference between moral judgment and moral reflection? Why does the author criticize the former and endorse the latter, and do you agree with his assessment?
3. The author maintains that moral reflection "is something that each of us must undertake for ourselves" (p. 186). Has your encounter with the First Thanksgiving prompted moral reflection? If so, how?

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