



Every Church's Mandate – Fellowship

“True North” Series – November 21, 2004

Thanksgiving

In his classic devotional book, *Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life*, Chuck Swindoll talks about Thanksgiving:

I recall, as a little...boy...standing in my classroom and repeating the “Pledge of Allegiance” one Thanksgiving season. Our nation was at war and times were hard. My teacher had lost her husband on the...(beaches) of Normandy. As we later bowed our heads for prayer she wept aloud. I did too. All the class joined in. She stumbled through one of the most moving expressions of gratitude and praise that ever emerged from a soul plunged in pain. At that time in my young life, I fell strangely in love with Thanksgiving. Lost in a boy's sympathy for his teacher, I walked home very slowly that afternoon. Although only a child, I had profound feelings of gratitude for my country...my friends...my school...my church...my family. I swore before God that I would fight to the end to keep this land free from foes that would take away America's distinctives and the joys of living in this good land. I have never forgotten my childhood promise. I never shall.

Thanksgiving is a holiday that has so many good dimensions. Food...Family...Football (every home has its own order for those three words) make up the bulk of the holiday. But for every Christian it should go so much deeper. Thanksgiving is an American holiday that allows us a day (and almost everybody gets the day off work) for the specific purpose of giving thanks to God.

Our American Holiday

Where did it come from? → We all know about the Pilgrims on December 13, 1621. Then there was George Washington's Proclamation in 1789. But despite that proclamation the day of thanks was usually just observed at a State level. The holiday we know today can be attributed to the persistence of a Mrs. Sarah Joseph Hale, the editor of a publication called *Godey's Lady's Book*. For 30 years she promoted the idea of a national Thanksgiving Day contacting President after President, but with no success. Finally in 1863 President Abraham Lincoln responded and set aside the last Thursday of November as a national day of Thanksgiving. For the next 75 years Presidents followed Lincoln's

precedent until in 1941 Congress permanently established the fourth Thursday of November as a national holiday. And that's the short version of how we came to have one of our favorite American holidays!

But the roots of this annual festival go much farther back, back to the Old Testament, where, not a president or a king, but God himself made a proclamation that every year the people of Israel were to take not just one day but 7 days and celebrate God's blessing on their harvest.

Our Spiritual Heritage

Celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days after you have gathered the produce of your threshing floor and your winepress. Be joyful at your Feast – you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites, the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns. For seven days celebrate the Feast to the Lord your God at the place the Lord will choose. For the Lord your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete. – (Deuteronomy 16:13-15)

Giving Thanks

Giving thanks is good for us to do. I want to show you quickly 4 reasons why you should consider developing the personal habit of giving thanks.

Pleases God (Luke 17:11-19)

The first reason comes out of the story Julie just read for us. The story of the 10 men infected with the incurable disease of leprosy healed by Jesus. Only one came back to say “Thank You.” Do you think the other nine weren't thankful? I don't either. I think they were too excited to think about saying thank you. Or maybe they planned to come back and do it later. Whatever the reason, the lesson from this story is that when something good happens to you, say “Thank You” right away! Thankfulness pleases God!

Points Others to God (2 Cor. 4:15)

All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. – 2 Corinthians 4:15

When we give thanks to others it doesn't just bless them it points them to God. You've seen the advertisement, I'm sure, where one person does something rude to another person (Two

black gals in the produce section...” Well, honey, when is your baby due?” ... “I'm not having a baby.” and there's this awkward pause followed by “Thank You.” And the voice says, “You never know what a thank you you can do!” One of the things it can do is point other people to God! Criticism doesn't. Thanks does!

Gives us Perspective

What is perspective? It's how you look at life! Let me give you an example...

There's a company that holds an inter-office softball game every summer between the marketing department and the support staff. On this particular year the support staff soundly trounced the marketing department. The next week a memo appeared on the company's main bulletin board demonstrating ‘perspective.’ It read this way:

The marketing department is pleased to announce that we came in second place in the recent softball season, after losing but one game all year. The support department, however, had a dismal season, winning only one game.

Listen to what the Bible says about perspective:

“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.” - 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Sometimes this last phrase, ‘give thanks in all circumstances’ is the only command tied to the statement, ‘for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.’ But each of these three commands is actually God's will for us. God wants us to be joyful, He wants us to pray continually, and He wants us to give thanks in all circumstances. Why? Is it because we always have reasons to be joyful? No. Is it because we always feel like praying? No. Is it because all of our circumstances make us just naturally want to say thank you? No. Then what it is? These are God's will for us because we can trust God. We can trust that God is personally involved in our lives. We can have joy when our hearts are breaking because He has not deserted us. We can pray when it seems like nobody is listening because He is. We can give thanks even in the circumstances that seem hopelessly tragic or unfair or senseless because God is able to make all things work together for good, for those who love him and are called according to his purpose. Thankfulness helps us trade

our limited perspective for God's eternal one!

The fourth reason is that the giving of thanks...

Promotes Good Health

Dr. Nick Stinnett of the University of Nebraska headed up a study that observed the qualities of strong families. The first quality that appeared, and that was the strongest, was the quality of appreciation. Dr. Stinnett observed that families are strong in part because family members express to each other their appreciation for what the other members DO and for who they ARE.

The same dynamics carried over into the work environment. In a similar study another researcher looked at the effects of praise in the workplace. He found that the ratio of praise to criticism needs to be four to one before employees feel there is a balance – that there must be four times as much praise as criticism before they feel good about their work and their work environment. That ratio carries over into the home – and I suspect, also applies in churches. 4 times more appreciation than criticism...

As we look at these 4 reasons I'm impressed with the importance of something that seems so non-important. Appreciation – Thankfulness is this important? Just saying "Thank You" is going to please God, point others to Him, give life perspective and make for healthy homes, workplaces and churches? That's right! If you haven't added the habit of being thankful to your personal list of character qualities to develop then I would say today would be a good day to do it! Seriously!

But let's add another dimension this morning to basic thankfulness. Let's fill in the box on your notes that begins with "We can give thanks..." *We can give thanks individuallyBut it is better together !*

We can't only think of thankfulness as an individual discipline. It is that but it is more. Thankfulness ties together with the mandate that God gives to every one of his churches – the mandate to be a group of people that value fellowship.

Fellowship is a word that used to be synonymous with coffee and doughnuts. When I was a boy growing up in church and the pastor said, "After the service we'll be going down the basement for a time of fellowship" I knew that meant food! But it was only

later that I learned the word meant so much more.

Fellowship – KOINONIA

(koinonia)

Simply, the word means to share things "in common." To help us understand "fellowship" from the Bible's perspective we are going to look at 5 verses in 1 John 1 that remind us of 5 reasons we "share in common" for being thankful today.

³We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. ⁴We write this to make our joy complete. (Remember that phrase?)

⁶If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. ⁷But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. -- 1 John 1:3-4, 6-7

Common BELIEF (3)

Fellowship between people is only possible when they believe the same things about Jesus. John writes how he and the other eye-witnesses of Christ had passed on the truths about Jesus to these people who had not had the privilege of being eye-witnesses. They had believed their report. They had put their faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of the world and their own personal Savior from sin. That was the basis of their common fellowship!

Common RELATIONSHIPS (3)

Because of that belief they now had a relationship with God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. Before they believed they did not know God and they had no connection with each other but because of their belief now they have entered into a relationship with the One True God and with all those who also believed in Him.

This is what we see here today. What gives us connection? We are diverse in so many categories and yet we have a commonality to our relationship.

Common JOY (4)

There are so many ways that we are different when it comes to joy. Some guys are ecstatic when they bag the monster buck; some couldn't care less. Some gals are ecstatic when they hit the perfect sale; some don't care for shopping. Some of us are overjoyed when the Vikings win; some of us are Packer fans. Some are still basking in

the glow of the elections; some are not. We are so different when it comes to common joys. But... the one joy that unites us, if we allow it, is the joy we have because of our relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Common COMMITMENT (6)

Another common element of our fellowship is a common commitment to obedience. We cannot enjoy the grace of God and at the same time knowing disobey the commands of God. (Verse 6) True fellowship comes as we commit ourselves together to obedience to God's commands. Don't despair if you aren't keeping those commands as perfectly as you want to; that's another thing we all share in common. We all wish we could do better at pleasing Him with our obedience.

Common FORGIVENESS (7)

We also share in a common forgiveness. "The blood of Jesus purifies us from all sins." This is true of me and it's true of you. It is true of the person in front of you, beside you behind you and across the room from you. None of us have "favored person status" where we aren't required to admit that we are sinners saved by grace. Oh, we would like to forget that part of our life! We would like to shake our heads at the sins of others and say, "I can't believe it" as if we had not been guilty of sins just as damaging to the name of Christ. We have all received a common forgiveness. Understanding these common elements of who we are keeps us from thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought or of thinking of ourselves too lowly than we should. We are one in Christ.

Taking Action

"Impression without Expression leads to Depression"

So... what are we going to do about what we've heard?

About the attitude of thanksgiving? Maybe a good analysis of your daily word count – how much is complaining and how much is appreciation? About the quality of fellowship? Maybe a decision to start connecting with a few of the people here at Immanuel that you haven't met! Get to know their name, for starters. Maybe sit at their table during the new class that's starting. Maybe lunch or coffee to find out a little more about their lives and to work on developing a friendship.

After all, being a Christian is all about thanksgiving – and all about fellowship!

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