

HICKMAN MILLS MINISTRY ALLIANCE  
THANKSGIVING SERVICE MESSAGE  
23 NOVEMBER 1993

Paul Turner

It takes a lot of people to pull off a Thanksgiving dinner. You need someone to do the shopping, someone to clean the house, someone to prepare the food, someone to set the table, someone to serve the meal, someone to clear the table--sometimes that's the same someone. Actually we expect a high degree of co-operation for a holiday like this. We have other expectations. It should gather a large number of people. The food quality should be outstanding, but food quantity is more important. (It doesn't really matter how dry the stuffing is; there simply must be plenty of it.) We expect decorations, and that food will be served from those silver platters you got as wedding gifts, but haven't used since. We expect a family there, preferably an extended family. We expect children to play and older folks to remember. And of course we expect the three essentials: prayer, turkey, and televised football. If many people enjoy the feast it's because many people worked for its success. It takes a lot of people to pull off a Thanksgiving dinner.

Our annual ecumenical prayer service has similar expectations. We expect a lot of people to come. We want to see our minister up there. We expect an equality of roles. We expect to put aside our religious prejudice and embrace one another as Christians. We expect good music, good spirit, a good collection for a good cause, and good cookies. What inspires all this is the one feast day we can all agree to. Not everyone celebrates World Communion Sunday, Reformation Sunday, the seasons of Advent and Lent, or feasts of Mary. We could all agree to a patriotic holiday like Independence Day or Flag Day, but celebrating those might violate the separation of church and state. But on Thanksgiving the state bows to religion and admits we should thank God. We can't set up mangers or crosses in public squares, so the most unlikely hero, the turkey, symbolizes much more than another family gathering; it symbolizes our nation, our history, our unity, our pride, our belief in God, and a golden opportunity for believers of every stripe to lay down our differences and worship together. Of all things to thank God for maybe we should start by thanking God for Thanksgiving.

On the day the Son of Man appears in glory, he's going to separate sheep from goats. Not Catholics from Protestants. Not Americans from illegal aliens. Not women from men. Not republicans from democrats. Not Al Gore from Ross Perot. Not mom's side of the family from dad's side. Just sheep and goats, based on a simple principle: did they put their faith into practice? That's all. Did they do what they said they believed? I've got a friend in Oregon who was moved by the example of a humble Franciscan brother. This brother spends the morning in his kitchen making sandwiches, and the afternoon standing on a streetcorner downtown passing out sandwiches to the hungry. My friend sent this man a check to help him do the work. A few days

later he received a letter from the Franciscan brother. Enclosed was the check which he refused, and a curg letter which read, "Dear Ray, make your own damn sandwiches." Sheep from goats; it's going to be real simple at the end.

I've participated in this ministerial alliance for several years. I derive comfort, support, wisdom, and enthusiasm from my colleagues. It's great to spend time with people who share values. I'm confident that you all make the same discoveries. You attend church regularly because you meet people who treasure what you treasure. And you've certainly discovered that as Baptists, Catholics, Christians, Episcopalians, Evangelicals, Lutherans, Methodists, Mormons, Nazarenes, and Presbyterians, we share more in common than we do in conflict.

The conflict lies more with those who govern our churches. Much of it is out of our hands. We don't control what our congregations believe. If it were up to us, we'd unite these too many branches of Christianity before they splinter any further. Ecumenism thrives better in neighborhoods like ours than it does in theological debate. Our friends, neighbors, and co-workers cut across the artificial boundaries of belief to form a network in which we all find comfort and support.

Just as a Thanksgiving meal requires the work of many people, so does the kingdom of God. Just as Thanksgiving needs service, leisure, and community, so do our churches. My brothers and sisters, God has called us together in this part of the Kansas City area to spread the Gospel, to evangelize. We must not permit religious differences to impede that work. Our neighborhood needs us. Our neighborhood needs stability when so many dwell in apartments or move away; it needs people with values to block crime and fight racism; it needs churches to expand its vision. Our neighborhood needs people who value more than merchandising and malls; it needs families for stability; it needs people who fulfill their dreams with hard work and prayer, not with drugs and thievery. If it weren't for Thanksgiving and this celebration, our churches might never know the faith we share. How could we ever hope to know the mission we share? If we believe, but do not work together to make a difference, we are goats, you see; we are not sheep.

God called Abram, saying "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you." God has blessed us with faith, called us to this promised land, and given us a mission. Our mission on Thursday is to eat turkey. Our mission on Friday is to eat leftovers. Our mission on Sunday, and ever after is to build the kingdom. It's incumbent on the members of our churches, thankful as we are for the faith we share, that we live the Gospel--in our churches, among our churches, in our businesses, on our streets, and in our homes. Then we'll hear Christ say to us, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."