Harvest Thanksgiving rests at the junction of liturgy, nature and memory. From the late-nineteenth century it was a major event on Nonconformist church calendars, drawing crowds well beyond regular attendance. By the 1980s it was viewed with nostalgia: a fondly remembered icon of a rural religious past. Yet it was the Nonconformist churches’ uneasy relationship with icons, visual display and imagery of all sorts that made the spectacular displays of fruit and vegetables associated with Harvest Thanksgiving so memorable, so marvellously out of the ordinary. Each autumn, in chapels normally stripped bare, the laity constructed crosses out of cauliflowers and hearts of oranges. Balancing fears of idolatry and kitsch, the people took snapshots of a parsnip moon and stars. Connecting deeply with vocation and place, sugar cane towered over pulpits in Queensland and an entire apple tree was cut from the earth and brought, laden with fruit, to a chapel in Victoria. Displays could take days to construct and then dismantle. Entire weekends of special events were sometimes scheduled. On Sunday morning the people sang “Come Ye Thankful People, Come”, “Scatter Seeds of Kindness”, and “For the Beauty of the Earth”. Choirs performed. Prayers were offered. Photographs were taken and treasured. These snapshots offer a glimpse into a rich and peculiar world of food and display that is at once consonant and dissonant with Nonconformity’s professed and assumed theological stances on the use of imagery. In this time of celebration and thanksgiving, of spectacle and transformation, how were Nonconformist prohibitions on display, materiality and excess so extravagantly overcome? How was the divide between the sacred and profane so colourfully rearranged? This article explores the history of Harvest Thanksgiving in Nonconformist churches in Australia through the medium of photography. Examining what the people sought to preserve on film, it seeks to understand what Harvest Thanksgiving meant in the faith lives of the people.

There is a little historical scholarship that touches on Harvest Thanksgiving. James Beattie describes the rich appreciation of nature’s bounty that was part of the Wesleyan Church’s 1892 Harvest Festival in Tapanui in New Zealand’s rural south and the widespread adoption of harvest festivals by the Calvinist Presbyterians who had, until the early-twentieth century, resisted such materiality. Working largely from contemporary news reports, Alison Clarke notes Wesleyan concerns about religious innovation in 1879 and the modesty of nineteenth-century Presbyterian Harvest Thanksgiving days which were appointed to be held in Otago, New Zealand, from the 1860s. She also observes the importance of the theology of Providence in making Harvest a Christian event despite the tenuous correlation between the success of annual crops and the sporadic observance of Thanksgiving. Evidently the people celebrated the harvest even when Providence left them hungry. Were they especially gracious and thankful people, or keen to appease their God in the hope of a better crop next year, or were they celebrating something more than divine benevolence? In similar vein, Harvest

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Thanksgiving photographs strongly suggest that the event resonated with the people as more than a response to Providence.

British historians note that the annual practice originated with mid-nineteenth century Anglican clerics who sought to rescue their drunk and unruly parishioners by casting the popular rural celebration of Home Harvest within Providence’s Christian theological framework. Having reframed Harvest Home as Harvest Thanksgiving and moved it into the church, many clerics further objected to the lower classes’ whole-hearted engagement with Harvest (and Christmas and Easter) and their corresponding lack of attendance at the doctrinally important days of Ascension and Epiphany. Such scholarship reads the argument as an issue of class. This misses the theological point. Providence was a doctrinal overlay to an earthy celebration of humanity’s intimate relationship with God through Creation. Evidently many people chose not to come to church when it was time to celebrate Christ’s divinity: the focus of Epiphany and Ascension. But they turned up in droves to celebrate His humanity as a newborn babe and a ‘Man of Sorrows’. In the same way, Harvest Thanksgiving was about embodied faith. It belonged to the people rather than the theologians. This experience of embodied faith was remembered by the people through the material reminder that is photography.

If theological historians seem to have given little attention to Harvest Thanksgiving, denominational historians have given even less. The practice was so ordinary, so theologically insignificant and uncontentious, that it rated little or no mention in the various traditions’ history books for lay readers. Denominational history has so often been concerned with the distinctive and the identity-defining, it has overlooked the religious events that the people most loved and attended. Similarly, Nonconformist historiography in Australia has largely been concerned with ecclesiology and church-state relations, overlooking the peculiar mixture of iconophobia and Harvest display that was uniquely shared by Nonconformist churches.

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7 *Port Lincoln Times*, 19 Feb 1932, 1; Gorringe, *Harvest*, xi.
That Harvest Thanksgiving has not drawn the attention of social and cultural historians is more surprising, as the hugely popular annual event belonged not to the preachers but to the Christian people. It was the people’s practice, a yearly acknowledgement of their spiritual vocation as stewards of the earth. At Kingaroy in southern Queensland locally grown sugarcane, peanuts and pumpkin dominated both the working week and the Harvest Thanksgiving. At Tatura Methodist church in fertile north-central Victoria it was all fruit, flowers and the lush foliage that grew so readily in the region. In South Australia’s Mount Gambier cereals filled the Salvation Army citadel, both in sheaves and baked into loaves arranged around a bass drum. The link between regional rural work and ritual thanksgiving for the product of that labour was unmistakeable.

Ministers were regularly required to preach on the topic of Harvest Thanksgiving and generously found scriptural imprimatur for this new practice within Christian worship. Providence was one popular theme but other sermons, like that of Baptist minister, Mr McDonald who preached on Psalm 23:5, emphasised the special grace extended to God’s people. Ministers were attentive to the need to guide their flocks away from nature-worship, but the fruity creation of once condemned graven images often escaped theologically-minded condemnation as the pastors looked to shepherd their people. In this

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gracious light, a cross from cauliflowers was not seen as utterly profane despite Nonconformity being steeped in iconophobic tradition. Evidently it sat comfortably with the faithful, and was accepted by their pastors. More than that, it was an occasion worth photographing.

Figure 3: Cauliflower cross from unknown Church of Christ, c.1930-1960. Private collection.

The rising availability of amateur photography at the turn of the twentieth century coincided with the widespread adoption of Harvest Thanksgiving among Nonconformists. While the sanctity of baptism, Lord’s Supper and regular church services were hardly ever disturbed by the camera’s lens, recent innovations in worship such as Sunday School anniversaries and Harvest Thanksgiving Festivals were often photographed before or after the service. Setting up the display on Saturday allowed for photography outside the sacred hours of the worship service, although photos from Williamstown, South Australia, appear to have been taken during the service. The laity’s sense of ownership and the material richness of these events may have been further enticements to the lens. The coming together of new camera technology and new liturgical event made for a remarkable but unofficial historical record.

Just as Harvest Thanksgiving displays belonged not to the preachers but to the laity, the photographs typically do not belong to the church or its public record but to individuals. The images were rarely
published or displayed. Occasionally they were reprinted in congregational histories as a nostalgic novelty from time long past. But, treasured by individuals, most photographs remained in family albums alongside other snapshots taken at church: weddings, social nights, picnics, and gatherings at church anniversaries. Such social images featured the congregation as an extension of family that fitted easily in the family album. However, Harvest Thanksgiving photos were highly selective about allowing people within the frame. These images sought to preserve a spiritual memory, an aesthetic and material faith experience that was about more than vegetables. As David Morgan argues, ‘photography captures the elusive reality of things’.11

In the heyday of Harvest Thanksgiving religious imagery was otherwise largely absent from most Nonconformist chapels. The Nonconformist aesthetic, with its well-developed ‘suspicion of the visual imagination’,12 was characterised by usefulness, virtue, and the presence of words both preached and sung. Methodist, Baptist and Churches of Christ places of worship were often bare but for hymn numbers. Whitewash was arguably more common than the cross. Nonconformity’s persistent iconophobia referenced scriptural warnings against graven images and feared the dissolute ‘distraction of sensuality’.13 Importantly for the study of Harvest Thanksgiving displays, there were exceptions. Exploration of these exceptions allows insight into Harvest Thanksgiving’s glorious visual transgression.

The display of words, however artful, was regularly permitted in Nonconformist chapels and in Harvest displays. Biblical texts were often painted at the back of baptisteries and chancels as if on colourful unfurled scrolls.14 ‘Worship Him in the beauty of holiness’, it read behind the pulpit in the Tatura Methodist Chapel, Victoria. The same message greeted worshippers each week at the Kingaroy Church of Christ, Queensland. There was no need to add scriptural attribution, as the congregation would have recognised Psalm 29:2. Although a variety of verses were used, Psalm 29:2 was popular in chapels

10 I am indebted to those who shared their long treasured photo collections with me during the last ten years of collecting such images.
12 John Dillenberger, The Visual Arts and Christianity in America (Chico: Scholars Press, 1984), 11.
across the country. To the inheritors of the Holiness Movement’s emphasis on sinlessness, the ‘beauty of holiness’ exhorted worshippers to live a sinless life. However, the phrase also signified that ‘beauty’ was there to be seen, and there was physical beauty in the portrayal of the words. It is possible to read the ‘beauty of holiness’ as evidence of a spiritual aesthetic beyond righteous living. The stylised lettering betrayed Nonconformity’s forbidding of icons for, in its presentation as a scroll or banner, the decorative text itself performed the role of icon: window to the divine. Just as bibles were often photographed in the hands of the faithful to show the piety of the holder, so the presence of painted scrolls conveyed that the congregation were pious people in touch with the ancient wisdom of the scriptures. They also affirmed humanity’s over-riding visual impulse\textsuperscript{15} and pointed toward the authority on which the Word is based: the eyewitness. Despite Protestantism’s alleged emphasis on hearing the Word, seeing was believing.

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Tatura Methodist Church, c.1900. Note that the church was still using the term ‘Harvest Home’ at this time. \textit{Source: Tatura Irrigation and World War II Camps Museum, Image 100049.}}
\end{figure}

Bible verses were frequently used within Harvest displays, making clear the connection between scripture and vegetables. Significantly, Harvest Thanksgiving photographs were careful always to include the words within the frame. In 1956 at the Congregational Church in Ipswich, Queensland, a fabric banner reading ‘The Earth is the Lord’s’ was provided as a backdrop to the display, justifying the visual artistry with a Psalm. At Bayswater Church of Christ, Victoria, in 1968, a banner beside the

\textsuperscript{15} Saliers, “Liturical Aesthetics,” 188.
display read ‘…show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed’ (2 Tim 2:15). Not only was the workman ‘approved’, but the art too. Through words, art could be authorised. In like manner, images for Sunday School children were welcomed as long as those images remained subordinate to the accompanying text, ensuring accurate decoding. Similarly, travelling evangelists carried canvas charts composed of image and text in order to better communicate with the unsaved. The Word clarified the meaning of images and rescued them from Nonconformist concerns over mystery and superstition.

![Image](image-url)

Figure 6: Ipswich Congregational Church, 1956. Source: Whitehead Studios, Picture Ipswich, Ipswich City Council.

From the mid-nineteenth century the Word also accompanied visions of the natural landscape. In this way, nature became another exception to iconophobia, provided that a line was drawn between the teaching of God’s grandeur through the medium of nature and the worship of nature itself. This Romantic idea was reflected in the panoramic landscapes of the time. Christ’s own teachings were also seen as having been materially located in the visible beauty of the natural world. Aaron Maston, a Melbourne-based Churches of Christ evangelist, explained:

Jesus of Nazareth… was one of nature’s true noblemen. He practically spent His life in the fields and on the mountain’s side, and when He spoke to men of the stirring truths of

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immortality, He drew from the great storehouse of nature’s wonders, and hence is universally acknowledged the world’s great teacher, not only for what He taught, but the way He taught it.\textsuperscript{17}

The observation that there was something profound and elemental about Jesus’ educative relationship with nature was widely shared at the time.\textsuperscript{18} Nature was interpreted as a witness to God’s glory when aided by the sanctifying words of the New Testament. The Reverend Robert Williams took this a step further when he preached at the Lawrence Vale Methodist Church, Tasmania, in 1918: ‘The harvest is primarily the gift of God, in that "He gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons" [Acts 14:17], and it is a silent yet forceful witness both to His wisdom and goodness. If we had no revelation, nature would still speak to man of God’.\textsuperscript{19} The natural world had a place in the people’s spirituality. It also featured in their chapels. At Sunday School Anniversaries photographs were taken of children holding bouquets. Flower arrangements were a weekly presence in churches and a frequent focus of annual Harvest displays. Their inclusion, despite not being an edible product of the harvest, strongly suggests that Harvest Thanksgiving was not merely about bountiful food but about God’s beautiful natural world. In photographs of the Harvest Thanksgiving at Tumby Bay Church of Christ on the southern Eyre Peninsula, South Australia, vases of flowers drew the eye, and, at Williamstown, foliage hung from the chapel’s normally unadorned ceiling supports. Biblical foliage was prominent in photographs too, with palm fronds at Beulah Park and Ipswich and cornstalks at Doncaster.

Harvest Thanksgiving photographs suggest an appreciation of decorous arrangement. The displays were orderly and any lingering suspicions of spiritual and material disarray or excess could be laid to rest. For all the odd assortments of local produce, the photos reveal evidence of balanced, even symmetrical, arrangement. The emphasis on tasteful display was near universal in newspaper reports. The \textit{Wellington Times} in New South Wales reported that the Baptist chapel had, ‘a very fine display of fruit and vegetables very tastefully set out about the rostrum’.\textsuperscript{20} Likewise, the \textit{Port Lincoln Times}

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\textsuperscript{17} A.B. Maston, \textit{Australasian Christian Standard}, 1 July 1892, 197.


\textsuperscript{19} \textit{The Examiner} (Launceston), 29 April 1918, 8.

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Wellington Times} (New South Wales), 18 March 1943, 8.
described the scene at the Methodist chapel, writing, ‘The front of the church was tastefully decorated with fruit, vegetables, cereals and flowers’. The same might have been said for Port Lincoln’s Baptist Church with its neat row of sheaves standing to attention. The emphasis on tasteful display suggested that gaudiness and lack of restraint, rather than the worship of graven images, might have been the greatest threats.

Figure 7: Port Lincoln Baptist Church, 1931. Source: State Library of South Australia, B71790/313.

Photographs taken in rural churches illustrate the extent to which religious aesthetics and vocation were tied together. In fruit-growing areas the same people who prepared Harvest Thanksgiving displays spent their working lives preparing produce to look its best in the market. At Bayswater, Victoria, in the mid-twentieth century apples and pears were packed on the orchards in ‘flats’, a wooden case used for market, measuring approximately 50 x 75cm and holding two layers of fruit. Orchardists almost never photographed the fruit in their packing sheds. But in the chapel at the Bayswater Church of Christ the fruit was transformed. The flats were balanced on temporary frames and further fruit was added to ‘finish’ the display and conceal joins between the cases. It was then that the fruit was

21 Port Lincoln Times, 19 Feb 1932, 1.
photographed. These professionally produced exhibits testified to Harvest Thanksgiving’s integration into the working (and artistic) lives of the worshippers in this rural community. The practice of photography suggests that the fruit in the chapel was altered in the eyes of the congregation.

Given the skill of the fruit packers, it was a small step to extend their Harvest Thanksgiving displays to include pictorial representation. The results were spectacular, startling and irresistible to photographers. In 1960 the local orchardists in Bayswater dispensed with displaying produce on tables and used their skills as fruit packers to produce images in apples and pears. A radiating cross was created from Red Delicious, Golden Delicious and Granny Smith apples and brown Bartlett and green Williams pears, all of which were grown on the members’ orchards at the time. The rural congregation produced similar designs in the years to follow.

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 8: Bayswater Church of Christ, Vic., 1960. Photo by Norma Clinton. Source: Private collection*

In a series of photographs from Oakleigh Church of Christ in the suburbs of Melbourne an emphasis on fruit and vegetable images is also evident. It developed with the influential involvement of a woodwork and graphic design teacher and craftsmen from the congregation. Vocation again played a role in imagery’s acceptability, and its celebration. The men at Oakleigh worked on themed Thanksgiving displays throughout the 1970s and 80s, using frames built for the purpose and lettering made using coloured card, pasted onto a white board which was re-used each year. Breaking with convention, those who assisted putting the display together were confidently photographed beside their creations and in their Sunday suits. In one display the Australian Churches of Christ are represented as a Red Delicious apple cross and the mission in the New Hebrides and Papua New Guinea were depicted as circular targets made of oranges, Granny Smiths and Red Delicious apples. In the early 1980s the
congregation’s church planting efforts were represented in the form of a tree made of potatoes with five branches representing the five congregations it had helped to establish. In another photo a heart of oranges proclaims ‘God’s Good Gifts’. However, it is the 1985 photo that most surprises. Under a sign reading ‘Thou Crownest the Years with Goodness’ (Psalm 65:11) are the words, ‘150 Years Growing Together’. It refers to the state of Victoria’s 150th anniversary and the central design depicts the logo used by the state in publicising civic events. Mixing imagery derived from civic celebrations with Harvest Thanksgiving was a long way from the stark separation of church and state insisted upon by the denomination’s pioneers.

The charitable destination of the fruit and vegetables also helped sanctify their brief transformation from produce to chapel art and, just as congregations kept records of monetary donations, photographs witnessed to the people’s material generosity. Care was taken to fit all the produce in the frame as a record of gracious giving. Donations were very often publicly advertised as humility required that it be known that the great excesses were intended for charity. The Gippsland Times article is typical when it reports that the ‘elaborate display of garden and home produce’ at the Baptist Church in Sale was ‘to be donated to the Gippsland Hospital and Baptist Kindergarten in Carlton’. In many churches if the produce was unlikely to keep for the journey, as was often the case with stone fruit, it was auctioned among the members of the congregation. Individuals bid generously for the cause and the cash was donated in place of the food.

22 Gippsland Times, 27 Feb 1939, 3.
23 Interview with John Masterton, 17 June 2007.
ministry. Usefulness could sanctify food’s place in an otherwise bare chapel.

As the suburbs engulfed farming areas and people turned their once productive yards over to lawn and azaleas the availability of locally grown produce declined. From the 1960s more and more churches attempted to maintain Harvest Thanksgiving displays with the aid of breakfast cereals and other products from the new supermarkets. But such products were difficult to use artistically. More often than not they languished at the bottom or the edge of the designs while the cauliflowers and carrots maintained centre stage. Then there was the sense that products such as Vegemite, Skippy Corn Flakes and John Bull Oats lacked authenticity. Despite their long shelf-life and potential usefulness for charities, they did not resonate with the people in the way of natural produce. They did not carry the sense of blessings from God’s abundant earth. With their branding and logos and non-scriptural text, such products clearly belonged to corporations, and not to God. Realising the symbolic poverty of supermarket products and the aesthetic and spiritual value of natural produce, some churches approached retail fruiterers to donate vegetables for display. The liturgical tradition of Harvest Thanksgiving was too valuable to give up for want of home-grown food, and the generous Oakleigh fruiterer and his daughter were honoured with inclusion in a Harvest Thanksgiving photograph. Photographs reinforced the priority of nature and of personal connection to the produce, framing images to focus on the vegetables, their donors and arrangers.

Vocation had once sanctified Harvest Thanksgiving’s celebration within the church, but urbanisation meant that by the 1970s and 80s, in many Australian Nonconformist churches, horticultural vocation and Harvest Thanksgiving were no longer bound together. While Harvest Thanksgivings continued on a smaller scale in an age of abundance people yearned for the time when Harvest’s intimate connection with vocation could be seen in the regional produce of Harvest displays. The ritual and its association with vocation was so hard to let go, and thankfulness so much a part of the prayer life of the people, that attempts were made to preserve Harvest Thanksgiving in other forms. Some churches began giving thanks for other vocations. By 1974, even before the rural town of Berwick was absorbed into Melbourne’s suburbs, the Church of Christ there had re-named their service ‘Thanksgiving for the Harvest and our Daily Work’. They offered prayers for policemen, students, retirees and factory workers as well as farmers and their produce. It made theological sense in the circumstances. But the practice did not last. Thanksgiving for vocation did not seem to resonate in the same way as Harvest
Thanksgiving. Was this because Providence no longer seemed necessary in the age of supermarkets or because nature was out of the picture? The photos, if any were taken, cannot be found.

By the time Skippy Corn Flakes and ‘Daily Work’ became widespread inclusions, Harvest Thanksgiving was in decline. Indeed, these later adaptations were attempts to preserve the ritual memory of a time of meaningful sacred connection and whole-hearted celebration. Harvest Thanksgiving photographs intuitively recognised the ungraspable nature of the past. They witnessed to the fact that the flowers would wilt and the fruit decay. They implicitly acknowledged that the abundant life transformed within the chapel would pass away. In ghostly images suggestive of the fleeting nature of temporality, they captured ‘the elusive reality of things’.

Harvest Thanksgiving photographs provide a glimpse into the spiritual lives of Nonconformists in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their careful framing allows the viewer to focus in on the practice’s significance. Generosity was a feature, as evidence of both God’s Providence and the people’s charity, and photographers ensured that this was captured in time. Redeeming words ensured that the displays were not mistaken for idolatry, for these were the products of people well-versed in scripture. However, there can be no doubt that the displays were artistic and even representational, confirming that Nonconformity’s iconoclasm responded to an equal or greater human urge to create

Figure 11 (left): Doncaster Church of Christ, Vic., 1914, with children seated in the elders’ chairs on the platform. Source: Doncaster Church of Christ.

Figure 12 (right): Williamstown Church of Christ, S.A., 1948, with children leaving the chapel. Source: Private collection.

24 Morgan, Sacred Gaze, 78.
images. Sheaves of wheat and sugarcane conveyed a sense that the people’s spiritual and working lives were intertwined: a fact graciously affirmed each autumn in the spectacular transformation of white-washed chapels. The photographs witnessed to a delight in nature and a connectedness to it that went beyond the providentially useful. Appreciation of nature’s beauty and embodied faith are evident everywhere. Ultimately the photographs represent an attempt to capture the elusive temporality of life in all its abundance and passing beauty. In such images we glimpse the fleeting transformation of sacred space and object, saved as snapshots. In this way they are photographs of grace.