

Reverence Begins in the Place of Worship

NO ONE would deny that reverence is due to Almighty God by right. But how can He be properly acknowledged and worshipped if the worshipper has replaced Him with a god of his own making — a much smaller god? Today many evangelical Christians have remodelled God, turning Him into a being only a bit higher than themselves. He is no longer the infinite, almighty, holy God, Who sees and searches every heart. He is merely a chum or pal sharing our smallness and triviality, and enjoying our entertainment-based culture. He is no longer to be feared; no longer to be given reverence.

With this new God, Moses would not need to remove the shoes from his feet, nor the apostle John fall at His feet as dead. This revised God does not mind how we worship Him, and so we need have no inhibitions or qualms about anything we do in His presence. But to change God is to deny Him and to insult Him. So where is reverence today?

Where is the God of Elijah? Where is Old Testament Jehovah? Where is the mighty God so respectfully addressed in the recorded prayers of the New Testament? Amazingly, this glorious God is not wanted, even by many who believe His Word and seek His salvation. Reverence has become distasteful. It has been relegated to the debris of a cast-off former culture. ‘Give us a God,’ we now cry, ‘on our level.’

This chapter is about the necessity of reverence for God and how it brings great benefits and blessings to worshippers. *Hebrews 12.28-29* provides a specially challenging verse for the present day:

‘Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: for our God is a consuming fire.’

‘Reverence’ here literally means — with downcast eyes or great humility. ‘Fear’ means caution, or the reverence of holy fear.

The Lord Jesus Himself, when living out for us a life of perfect righteousness, maintained the deepest reverence toward the Father, the Bible telling us that His prayers were heard because He ‘feared’, using the same Greek term for caution or reverence (*Hebrews 5.7*). The term ‘fear’, indicating reverential fear, appears often in the New Testament. Cornelius of Caesarea, visited by Peter, was acknowledged by all to be one who ‘feared’ God. His reverence for God was conspicuous. When preaching at Antioch in Pisidia, Paul appealed twice to those that ‘feared’ God, using the same reverential fear term. They would be the people who truly received the Word. ‘Fear God!’ wrote Peter, using the same term (*1 Peter 2.17*). ‘Fear God!’ said the angel of the preaching of the everlasting Gospel in *Revelation*, using the same term, indicating that the ultimate objective of the Gospel is to bring men and women not just to salvation, but to reverence (*Revelation 14.7*).

The victorious people of God sang, ‘Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name?’ using the same reverential fear term (*Revelation 15.4*). And the voice from the throne of God commanded, ‘Praise our God, all ye his servants, and ye that fear him, both small and great’ (*Revelation 19.5*).

In the parable of the wicked husbandmen, the Lord spoke of a householder who let out his property. But when he sent servants to receive the produce, they were beaten and killed and stoned. Finally the householder sent his son saying, 'They will reverence my son.' Reverence, respect and deference is exactly what is due to the eternal Son of God, the Lord of glory. Its expression is to be seen first and foremost in worship, and if it is not there, it will not be seen in other areas of the Christian life either. Reverence-deficient worship soon leads to Christians who are shallow in commitment, seriousness, depth and even holiness. Reverence in worship is paramount for believers, and must be firmly maintained.

Another very valuable passage about reverence is *1 Timothy 4.7-9*, where Paul says to Timothy:

'Exercise thyself rather unto godliness. For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things.'

To show the pivotal importance of these words Paul attaches the comment — 'This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance.' He is talking about the necessity of reverence toward God. We may think that the key word in these verses — *godliness* — refers in a general way to righteous character. Paul's exhortation then would mean — exercise yourself in sanctified living. This, of course, would be a correct thing to do, but the word *godliness* does not mean that. It is a highly special word with a very distinctive meaning. The Greek is *eusebeia*, meaning 'well-devout'. It refers to our entire attitude toward God. It is far more specific than righteousness, and as this is so important we shall briefly prove the point by glancing at other passages where the word is used.

In *1 Timothy 6.11* we see a very interesting construction: 'But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, GODLINESS, faith, love, patience, meekness.' Here godliness sits among other specific qualities. Like them, it is distinctive. It is obviously not a general term for Christian living as it takes its place in a list of very particular virtues. The term is used in the same way in the famous 'list' of *2 Peter 1.5-7* — 'And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience GODLINESS; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity.' Godliness again sits as a specific virtue alongside others.

The Greek word in question appears in classical literature where philosophers used it to mean *an appropriate attitude toward the gods*. This is the sense in the epistles, where the word means — right demeanour before God, that is, reverence and respect. It is all about the fear of God, humility before God, and deference toward God.

The root of all our problems today as evangelical Christians is the collapse of such reverence. With the new style of worship, all carefulness in God's presence and all deep respect for Him has gone, and yet this is the ultimate purpose of salvation — to revere and obey Him. Paul therefore says, 'Exercise yourself unto reverence.' Other spiritual graces cannot flourish without this foundation.

Many believers exclaim — 'Oh, but I want to have joy and happiness and the filling of the Spirit. I want a thrilling sense of God and of glory.' Such a desire is fine, but it can only come with reverence. God must always be to us a great God, to Whom we come with reverence and submission. It is only when we truly hold God in respect that the Holy Spirit gives genuine

Christian joy. If we dislike reverence, seeing it as a gloomy alternative to Christian joy, we will only achieve a sham, worked-up, shallow, emotional substitute. All the charismatic meetings in the world, with their noise, rhythm and sensationalism, cannot work up *real* Christian joy, because they do not have a foundation of reverence, fear and awe.

The prime movers of new-style worship, with its love of entertainment-style music and its utter shallowness, show the same indifference to reverence in their style of teaching. Paul, in giving Timothy his exhortation about godliness, says — ‘Refuse profane and old wives’ fables.’ These fables had much in common with the way-out teaching approach of modern charismatic worship. They were myths based on Scripture. The teachers of fables would take Old Testament characters and embellish them, fabricating events and messages wildly beyond anything alluded to in the text. They appealed cleverly to popular taste, their stories gripping the minds of the people. The storyteller is always easy to listen to.

No doubt many of these fable-teachers possessed immense charm, and no doubt their stories were memorable. It was a fascinating, entertaining way of teaching. However, in commanding Timothy to refuse them, Paul uses an interesting word. He calls these fables *profane* — a word which indicates the opposite of reverence and respect. The Greek word for *profane* literally refers to a ‘threshold walker’, or someone who is free and easy and does whatever he likes. He has no reserve, no sense of caution, no fear or respect for the premises. The fable-teachers had no reverence and respect for the sacred text. They just made things up and passed them off as Bible teaching. The largest charismatic denomination in the world today invents a new spiritual duty almost every few months. New anointings (all at a price) tumble out as the preachers concoct and invent gimmick after gimmick, always, of course, finding a text to pin them on. Like the fable-teachers of old they have no reverence or respect for either God or the sacred text. They do not seem to realise that there is a God in Heaven Who will hold them responsible for all their wrestings and distortions of His Word. There is no fear in them. ‘Refuse their profane, freewheeling fables,’ Paul would say, ‘because such people are not governed by reverence, respect, carefulness or conscientiousness with regard to Scripture.’

It was teachers of just this character in recent times who were the first to launch away from traditional worship, substituting entertainment, lightness, showmanship, gimmicks and games. The showbiz style of worship has been the product of profane teaching. Reverence was jettisoned, and inane superficiality and emotional abandonment brought in.

How can some of these modern worship leaders behave as they do, when they run jauntily on to the platform like television celebrities showing off their personalities, and behaving in an entirely flippant and irreverent manner in the presence of the holy, all powerful, wonderful God? Reverence knows how to honour divine dignity, but for them it is burdensome and restrictive.

As it happens, reverence is a door to much blessing in this present life, as well as in eternity, as Paul says in *1 Timothy 4.7-8*. So, he exhorts, ‘exercise thyself . . . unto godliness.’ The word *godliness*, as we have shown, refers to reverence and respect for God. The Greek word translated ‘exercise’ is literally *gymnasticise*. So Paul says — gymnasticise yourself to practise reverence.

There is no doubt that reverence is instinctual for new-born Christians. When we are converted, our new nature is impregnated with great reverence for God. But we can allow this to run down, and even lose it. Therefore, says Paul, it must be exercised. We know that

exercise in the physical realm does not make muscles. It will certainly develop them, and it should preserve them, but it does not make them in the first place. Similarly, reverence comes with the new nature, but exercise is necessary to strengthen and maintain it.

Some years ago a medical practitioner friend was telling me about his church, and how it was adopting new charismatic songs, choruses, hand clapping, swaying, tongues, and producing considerable noise in services. This doctor had a good grasp of reformed truth, and I asked him what his feelings were. He replied that he was quite ambivalent, and did not mind what went on. Whether worship was conducted the old way or the new he felt it was all worship. It did not upset or offend him that reverence had fallen. His instinct for reverence had virtually disappeared.

The apostle Paul, incidentally, does not scorn bodily exercise when he says, 'For bodily exercise profiteth little.' Some believe he means — for a little time. However, the statement may equally be translated — 'For bodily exercise profits *to a* little.' Paul's statement acknowledges that exercise achieves something. The apostle experienced considerable bodily exercise himself, walking great distances. Even in later years he would have walked us off our feet, as the saying goes. Also, when he found himself in a place where there was no support, he laboured as a tentmaker. In those days there were no industrial sewing machines, and workers had to put thongs and threads through heavy textiles and canvases by hand. We should never think of Paul as a present-day academic.

Paul was well aware of the athletic activities of his day. It was clear to him that the benefit of training was, first, effective only for a time, and secondly, was limited to preparing an athlete for his special event. The heavily trained wrestler did not necessarily make a fast runner. Moving into the moral realm, an athlete's physical training would not help him control his temper, or any other sin-tendency. Physical exercise worked only in a limited area.

The apostle's argument is that the exercise of reverence has a much broader benefit, because it deepens and strengthens every aspect of Christian life and service, and prepares for eternity. 'For bodily exercise profiteth [*to a*] little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.'

Reverence is stated to be immensely significant and beneficial in the Christian life, but it must begin with worship. If worship is stripped of reverence, then reverence will be stunted in all other aspects of Christian living. What begins in worship, spreads into the whole Christian life. If worship is more like a performance, with showing off, imitation of the world, sensation-seeking, much noise, and everything for my pleasure, then reverence will not be found in any other department of life. How cruel it is, then, for churches to abandon reverent worship! The members will be seriously hurt and disadvantaged for their personal spiritual lives.

Reverence and understanding

Take our understanding of the Bible. Reverence for God produces humility and fear of offending Him in the handling of the Bible. We take the opposite approach of the fable-teachers and the charismatic teachers just referred to. 'This is God's sacred Word,' we say to ourselves. 'I must not rush through it. I must open my heart day by day to what God is saying. I must make sure I get it right, and if I don't understand it, I must consult a reliable book or person for help. I must learn and obey.' Reverence leads to conscientiousness with Scripture,

and this in turn leads to right understanding. Reverence certainly helps us not to come to hasty and superficial conclusions. It safeguards us against many errors. This attitude of reverence and care is seen perfectly in the stance of the apostle Peter, recorded in *2 Peter 1.19-21*:

‘We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.’

The person with reverence for the Lord and for His Word is concerned to get things right. The preacher always checks his work with conscientious care. If he thinks he sees in the text something he has not seen before, he worries lest his imagination should have led him astray, and checks his understanding more carefully. Reverence keeps him from falling into foolish conclusions and errors. Reverence checks his step and humbles his self-confidence. What a difference reverence makes! But if it is omitted from worship, it will not be found in handling the Bible. The essential exercising of reverence begins in worship. The house of God is the best gymnasium.

Reverence and sanctification

Turning from Bible study to holiness of life, reverence again makes all the difference, and strengthens our advance. Without reverence, repentance for sin becomes light and easy, but with it (sown and nurtured in our worship) we become far more serious and determined.

In *2 Corinthians 7*, Paul speaks of the repentance of the Corinthians, saying, in effect, ‘When you repented for sins you had committed, what heart-searching there was! What sensitivity of conscience there was! What hatred of yourselves was shown! What zeal and vehemence you had, to get rid of the wrong! You had such reverence for God, and awareness of His holiness, that you longed to be accepted before Him, and you were really sorry and struggled to get this matter right.’

Reverence for God says, ‘I *must* leave this sin behind. I *must* obtain His pardon and forgiveness before I proceed with anything, for God sees me!’ Reverence gives birth to great diligence.

The believer may always run into the presence of God as a child runs into the presence of a loving father, but not without reverence and respect, because our heavenly Father is demanding in holiness, and severe in His holy indignation against sin. Reverence never steals from our joy, but it maintains within us a right degree of seriousness, so that we do not collapse into lightness and superficiality. Once again we must say — if such reverence does not begin in worship, it will never grow and survive.

Reverence and bearing

Reverence for God shapes our lifestyle and conduct before the watching world like no other influence. To use an old-fashioned but very descriptive word — what is our deportment before unconverted people? What is our bearing, our stance and our behaviour like? If we have deep reverence and respect for God, we will always feel ourselves to be ‘on duty’ as His servants. The last thing we will want to do is to let Him down.

Reverence for God does not forget that He observes our every reaction to circumstances. It also gives rise to such a sense of privilege and responsibility that we shall never abandon our composure, and fall to bad behaviour. We will be diligent to witness, and careful to control ourselves when under stress. We will be very concerned to handle our troubles and our difficulties well, and not to lose our self-control. Reverence remembers that God knows best, and that He provides and trains us for our eternal good. Reverence never doubts the Lord, and certainly cannot be bitter against Him. Reverence holds us through many a valley, and sees us through to new phases of joy and peace.

Every department of life is considerably affected, blessed and strengthened by reverence for the Lord. Husbands and wives say to themselves, 'God has given me a lifelong partner and a charge to keep my marriage pure and harmonious and purposeful. Because this commission is from the mighty and eternal God Whom I revere and adore, I will keep it with awe and diligence. I will keep alive the flame of love and the vision of marriage, and will behave with respect and affection in every situation.'

Through reverence, we subdue unworthy thoughts about one another, and practise appreciation. Reverence for God holds us to the rules. God observes, and chastises and rewards according to our conduct. However, this kind of reverence will never be maintained in us if it is not exercised and developed first in the time of worship.

Exercising reverence

Paul says that reverence for God is profitable unto all things, but how can it be exercised? 'Gymnasticise,' says the apostle. Train every day. But how? We have noted that God's house is a fine gymnasium, equipped with the Word of God and the apparatus of corporate worship. Equally precious is the time of daily devotions. Much is to be learned from the training of athletes. One of the chief aspects of training in the physical sphere is *sacrifice*. In athletics, sacrifice characterises all training, and the exercising of reverence necessitates that certain things must be put aside. This begins with the purifying of worship. Levity (but not joy) must be put aside, and with it mere emotional self-indulgence and selfish pleasure. The Lord must have highest place. If we are ready to do this, and to place God first and foremost in worship, then we will find no hardship in doing the same in other areas of life.

In their personal lives, some believers need to make a pledge to sacrifice worldliness. Many things that the world does are attractive, and even in this world's current musical products there will no doubt be some compelling melodies and arrangements coupled with brilliant instrumentalism. But if these accomplishments are wedded and glued to a rotten culture, they will have to be sacrificed. Reverence for God will cause us to say, 'I do not want an immoral culture to dominate and train my thinking, nor should I condone it by association. I therefore sacrifice it to the Lord.'

Reverence also leads believers to consecrate their individual programme to the Lord. They do not say yes to every activity open to them. When friends come along and say, 'Oh, let's go there tomorrow evening,' and others say, 'Come here with us the following evening,' they pause and reflect. What is proposed may be legitimate and wholesome, and the invitations may come from good friends, but believers are ready to sacrifice the luxury of saying yes to everything, lest their lives should become disorganised. If we yielded to every overture we would have no time for devotions, no time for Christian service, and no time to do justice to other priorities.

We are not talking here about being drawn into godless things, but about sacrificing the right to do *everything* that is good and enjoyable, for the Lord's sake. We all have to learn to say no to certain things. Training starts here, as any athlete will testify. This kind of discipline — the fruit of reverence — applies to worship in the house of God, where extraneous activities are shut out. It applies also to daily life. But we repeat yet again that this consecrated attitude to life is only found where believers have deep respect for God, and that will be seriously injured if it is not first exercised in worship.

The athlete also sacrifices liberty of dress, and dons shorts and singlet for training, and, in a sense, so should we. The believer says, 'I will sacrifice the right to dress however I like whether in church or at business.' We may be under pressure in our work environment to follow prevailing styles, but we have a Christian dress code to observe, and must stay within the bounds of morality and decency. We therefore remember that certain things are unacceptable for us because we have reverence for God and want to please Him and live for Him. It is not surprising that wherever reverence has been thrown out of worship, even the dress code of believers has been lost also. Reverence begins in worship.

For some believers, it may be pleasurable superficiality that has to be curbed. They must pray, 'Lord, I sacrifice my desire to live in constant lightness.' Clearly this affects some people more than others. But some want to be light all day long, and never serious. They must say, 'Lord, I realise I must have a larger serious element in my life. I must mature. I'll sacrifice my perverse escape into whatever amuses. I'll sacrifice the freedom to be a fickle person flitting from one thing to another as it suits me. I'll abandon my constant avoidance of self-discipline and sustained thought. I will seek times of seriousness, and focus on solid things.'

Such a desire and pledge is vital daily training for some believers. This is the gymnastics of reverence.

It is observable that reverence for God keeps us in balance whatever our personality or gifts. For example, we have believers in our midst who are gifted with a great sense of humour, and it lightens the day, and we enjoy their wit. But if they have reverence for God, they also have a serious side, and we can enjoy mature conversation with them. They know when it is time to be humorous, and they know when it is time to be serious. And if they do not know when it is time to be serious and mature, then they have probably failed to exercise reverence for the Lord. Such friends will have no help in keeping their balance if the worship in their church is light and flippant, or if the worship leaders have no visible respect for God, and no sense of occasion.

Every day the believer in training goes through a kind of programme check. What am I going to do today? What is happening in my spare time? Am I aiming to do anything useful for the Lord? Should I visit someone, perhaps to draw back a faltering friend? Today I will serve and honour the Lord. If I find myself in trouble I will count my privileges and remember the promises. I will respect sacred duties. I will not skimp devotions. I will remember that I represent the Lord in all situations. I will be careful to recognise when I must be serious, so as to weep with them that weep, or discuss some important matter properly.

Reverent Christians do not insist on having their own way all the time. Reverent Christians work hard in the Lord's service. Reverent Christians are sacrificial in their stewardship. Reverence influences all these things, and if it should be lost, we soon fall to superficial Christian living. Training in reverence benefits every department of life, producing a healthy

measure of seriousness, conscientiousness, respect for the Word, and zeal for the work of God.

How is our reverence? Have we missed this crucial department of the Christian life? As we have repeatedly asserted — reverence in worship is the essential starting point! Take that away, and there is no hope that we will even remotely resemble the kind of people whom God desires to be His own.

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