

REVERENCE – THE MISSING VIRTUE

All is not well in our society today. We hear complaints about the lack of respect for older people, for those in authority, for the law of the land. In the professing Church the same casualness and even anarchy influences much of worship and practice in the sanctuary. If Christians from past generations could visit us - walk our streets, drop in at our schools, enter our homes, visit our churches - they would be aghast at what they would see and hear.

Everywhere

We find lack of reverence and respect everywhere. In times past certain values and niceties were the norm, now an "in your face" and "as it is" mentality prevails, combined with a levelling of distinctions and lack of deference. The news media interrogate politicians, intrudes into peoples' grief, displays victims of catastrophe weeping before viewers, and make images of suffering and dying flash before millions. In recent years, entertainment stooped as low as Dr. Gunther von Hagens performing a real autopsy before capacity audiences. It seems almost nothing is sacred, and contempt for taste and decency, respect and reverence knows no bounds.

Blasphemy

Around the time of writing this, a news item reported protests by Christians outside the Welsh Assembly building against a poetry reading. Patrick Jones was invited to read from his collection *Darkness Is Where The Stars Are*, which led to claims of obscenity and blasphemy. In one poem, there is a reference to Mary Magdalene and our blessed Lord in words no Christian would wish to repeat. This is yet another blatant attack upon our "most holy faith," and follows in the wake of the Jerry Springer opera and previous sacrilegious outrages.

Chivalry

In the realm of chivalry, the respect due from men to women (1 Peter 3:8) is deemed outmoded. Gentlemanly considerateness toward the opposite sex that makes a woman feel feminine and safe was regarded as a virtue – now it is made to appear dated. Love that cherishes and protects, and waits for marriage has degenerated into cohabitating sexual partners. Many young people are promiscuous and behave like animals on heat, hence the spiralling levels of sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS. In addition, reverence for the sanctity of male-female differences are trampled upon by homosexuals and lesbians with their: "vile affections" and "that which is against nature" (Romans 1:26).

Church

In the professing church, there is not much welcome contrast to the profanity of the world. Time was when "the house of God" meant "how thou oughtest to behave thyself" (1 Timothy 3:15), but not so much now. The depths to which some denominations ape the irreverent world is astonishing. Church services resemble the superficial entertainment world, making it clear where the cue has come from. "Outreach" makes sinners laugh rather than, under God, bring them to conviction and godly sorrow. Standards of dress and modesty do not betoken "that which becometh godliness" (1 Timothy 2:9,10).

Cause

Some might say these are sweeping generalisations and that laudable exceptions exist. I acknowledge they do and I am very thankful for it. However, that they exist as *exceptions* shows that the *prevailing* trend is as I have indicated. Moreover, our concern should not just be with symptoms but with the cause. Why have things become as they have in society and in the church? "Is there not a cause?" The answer lies in considering the subject of "reverence."

1. Let us explore the concept of reverence.

Some dictionary definitions are helpful,

To consider or treat with profound awe and respect; venerate.

Reverence denotes a mingling of fear with a high degree of respect and esteem.

A feeling of profound awe and respect and often love; veneration.

Scripture uses the word translated "reverence" thirteen times, and significantly, the first and last occurrences relate to the worship of God: "Ye shall ... reverence my sanctuary: I am the LORD" and "let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Leviticus 19:30; Hebrews 12:28). This is not surprising, since divine worship is our highest expression of reverence. Although the actual word occurs infrequently, the concept fills the Scriptures in words like "afraid" (Genesis 28:10; 2 Samuel 6:9, etc.); "awe" (Psalm 33:8); "dread" (Isaiah 8:13); "the fear of the LORD" (e.g. Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10); and "trembling" (Psalm 2:11).

It is interesting to notice, also, the other connections in which "reverence" occurs. It is in relation to categories of important people. We find reverence paid to the elderly (Leviticus 19:32); the king (1 Kings 1:31); civil government (Romans 13:4); employers (Matthew 21:37; 1 Peter 2:18); the wife to her husband (Ephesians 5:33); and a son his father (Hebrews 12:9). The progression therefore is clear: reverence is first to be shown to God, and then to those whom He has placed in positions of honour and authority above us.

2. Let us examine some areas of reverence.

a] God is the first cause of this virtue.

"Holy and reverend is his name" (Psalm 111:9). This tells us that God is "holy" – that is His nature; He is "reverend" (meaning, fear, awe, reverence) – that should be our regard. Reverence is the reflex action of a man in the presence of God. In scripture, every encounter a man has with God prostrates him, whether it is Abraham (Genesis 17:3), Joshua (Joshua 5:14), Job (Job 42:5,6), Isaiah (Isaiah 6:5), Peter (Luke 5:8) or John (Revelation 1:17). It is impossible to truly know God and not be reverent.

b] The Holy Scriptures.

Scripture teaches that God stands very close to the Word He has given. So close, that He appears to subordinate Himself to it: "thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name" (Psalm 138:2). David means that great as the sum of God's attributes are (His

name), yet greater still is His word because it *reveals* them. In Holy Scripture, we see the Holy God manifested and glorified. Therefore, that which alone can show us God can be said to be greater and “above” the name of God. It follows, then, that as men must reverence God, so they must tremble at his word (Isaiah 66:2).

c] Human government and authority.

Scripture makes reverence for “the powers that be ... ordained of God” (Romans 13:1) second only to reverence for God: “Fear God. Honour the king” (1 Peter 2:17). In the Old Testament, rulers are called “gods” (Psalm 82:6) because they represent the Most High in office and dignity. Like Him, too, they are to repress moral wickedness. In Judges 18:7 “magistrate” has in the margin, “possessor, or heir of restraint.” They are “sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well” (1 Peter 2:14).

God solemnly mandates a judge to be “a terror ... to the evil,” one “who beareth not the sword in vain,” and “the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil” (Romans 13:3,4). Sin, manifesting itself in crime, is so serious that it must be punished to deter others, and to eradicate it as much as possible in a fallen world. This is for national righteousness and the protection of law-abiding citizens (Proverbs 14:34). Sadly, we have come a long way from the concept of “punishment” these days. Loss of reverence for this has led to spiralling levels of crime on the one hand and absurdly lenient sentencing on the other. The judicial system, stripped of its divine dimension, seems capable of doing little more than trying to contain and manage wrongdoing, almost frightened to wield the sword that God has put in its hand.

d] Marriage and the family.

God has made marriage and the family the social infrastructure of human society. Men and women devoted to each other in holy wedlock make happy, secure homes for the children entrusted to them. Children growing up in such a principled environment are far more likely to become responsible adults in later life. Such was the influence of biblical teaching, that the creation ordinance of marriage and the family was embedded in British society for centuries.

Tragically, a shift has taken place. Modern secularism sees marriage, not as a divine institution but merely a human one. As a “lifestyle choice,” it now ranks only alongside cohabitation and same-sex civil partnerships. Being downgraded like this, its sanctity and solemnity is removed. This is why weddings tend to be just expensive social events and divorces a ready option. If marriage is only a voluntary contract, it is easy to annul it and try with someone else, usually next time just living together with less commitment still.

When life-long marriage commitment is absent, sex loses its meaning. Hence, men and women explore alternative channels of fulfilment, with catastrophic consequences. Homosexuality, and its cousin paedophilia, become almost necessary alternatives. However, such will never satisfy, and depraved minorities will ever seek new forms of gratification.

e] The sanctity of life.

“Thou shalt not kill” i.e. murder (Exodus 20:13) is God’s fence around human life. Its sacredness, and the reverence due, is grounded in creation. We are made “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27) and that gives to human beings dignity and nobility, despite their fallenness. Every injury done is an attack upon that sanctity, murder being the ultimate and should be punished by the ultimate sanction God gives the state: death (Genesis 9:6; James 3:9).

Alas, how far from this has evolutionary thinking brought us! In the UK since 1967 six million unborn infants have been murdered in what should have been their place of safety: their mother’s womb! Even if the baby survives into this world, it has a gauntlet of dangers to face. For many would-be parents, bringing a baby into the world is seen as little different from buying a pet dog or cat. Once there was a caption that said: “The female celebrity’s ultimate fashion accessory: a baby.” The solemn responsibility of parenthood has almost disappeared, and “kids” tragically suffer. The statistics for cruelty to children make heartbreaking reading.

And yet ironically, since 1965, a murderer is not executed but given a “life sentence,” which can be as little as seven or eight years. If there is no sanctity of life inside the womb, there is none outside either. Innocent babies are put to death and guilty murderers are allowed their forfeited lives, leaving the higher Tribunal to finally right matters. The alarming rise in gun crime, knife crime, murders on an almost daily basis is the terrible fruit of Darwin and his latter-day followers. Yet TV programmes, encyclopaedias, education and popular thinking subscribe to this poison with a naivety and folly that is breathtaking. When the sanctity of life is not revered, “science falsely so called” (1 Timothy 6:20) is, with all its ruinous consequence.

3. What happens when we lose the virtue of reverence.

1] Others are revered instead.

People who reverence God have a right view of themselves and their place. When they have not, they can demand a reverence out of all proportion to their due (Romans 12:3). This expressed itself ancient Rome, when Caesars were worshipped as deities, and when Antichrist (the papacy) arose “showing himself that he is God” (2 Thessalonians 2:4).

People these days love to glorify themselves also. The media turn sportsmen and women, actors, entertainers into “celebrities,” even using religious terms like “icon” and “idol.” Magazines carry the latest pictures of them out and about. And gossip about their affairs and divorces, making them so trivial, and such disgraceful examples.

This virtual deification took another form recently with regard to teenage gangs. Many of the killings are over a strange demand for “reverence.” A Metropolitan Police Commander said at the end of 2008,

We’ve seen 14 and 15-year-olds being killed over what seems the most trivial slights or just a glance. In the past, they would use violence over something like enforcing debts but now it’s over this “respect” issue, the smallest insult.

The words of philosopher Paul Woodruff are apposite when he said that reverence is “the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods.” Only when the Most High God occupies His rightful place in our esteem do we occupy ours, and others occupy theirs.

2] This inverted reverence is thoroughly perverse.

In 1965, Richard Dimbleby, not realising his microphone was on, took our Lord’s name in vain, and afterwards had to apologise profusely. The incident was reported in the national newspapers of the day. Nowadays, public figures have only to make a mildly “racist” remark and a chorus of complaints and calls for apology ensue – blaspheme our Lord’s name and no such protests are heard, except from the Lord’s people and usually brushed aside with contempt. Political correctness demands reverence for all else, except what belongs to the honour of God.

Moreover, losing sight of what matters most, other issues become inordinate. We are gravely assured that certain products are not tested on animals, that imported products are Fairtrade, that paper is from managed forests, that “ethical” and “moral” policies are followed in everything else – well in their way - yet the most godless and degenerate lifestyles are condoned, and even turned by the media into entertainment. We are bombarded with warnings about saving the environment, and yet a morally polluted environment increases around us and an irreverent generation could not care less.

3] Moral absolutes go

Men will not glorify the God of creation, but “hold the truth in unrighteousness” (Romans 1:18), i.e. suppress the truth of natural revelation and thus avoid its implications. It is no coincidence that the shocking catalogue of human sins later in Romans 1 follows from this rejection of God earlier in the chapter. When the living God is not revered, moral absolutes are not either.

4] Scripture is downgraded.

Modern Bible translations show how far we have departed from reverencing His word. Taking liberties with the sacred text in paraphrasing is man standing above the word rather than humbling himself under it. The *New International Version* (1978) began this. We now see the logical fruit in the *Today’s New International Version*, which altered God’s word as a concession to feminists, and the publishers only released it when they thought the climate was right. When we compare the high reverence the Authorised Version scholars paid to God’s word, producing an exact equivalence translation as much as possible, we see how far we have come. Just when we thought such profaning of God’s word could get no worse, here is a recent news item,

Most people think of the Bible as a densely printed book with no pictures, but a version of the scripture that resembles a glossy coffee table magazine aims to change that. It’s part of a wave of radical presentations of the Bible, including a manga version and a Lego gospel ... It’s the kind of magazine you might find in a doctor’s waiting room next to *Cosmopolitan* or *Reader’s Digest*. On the front is a pale face heavy with mascara. A flick through throws up striking images: urban flooding, a Nigerian abattoir, a girl eating noodles, a pooch in a limo. *Bible Illuminated* is the latest attempt to bring the Bible into the modern world. In the

format of a 300-page glossy magazine, it contains the whole text of the New Testament in a popular translation, with no chapter or verse numbers.

Surely, the best preventive, and antidote, to this downgrade is to cleave to the Authorised version. We will then walk in the worthy paths of reverence for the Scriptures that our forefathers walked in.

5] People who exhibit the virtue of reverence are little appreciated.

Yet this must be one of our Christian distinctives because it is biblical. True religion, worshipping the God of heaven, has the highest regard for all levels of human authority – parents, teachers, employers, police, judges, right up to politicians and royalty. We pray “for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty” (1 Timothy 2:2; cf Jeremiah 29:7). Christians are the best citizens a state has and are the most respectful of all: “honour to whom honour is due” (Romans 13:7). Reverencing God, we can respect the powers He has delegated to be over us.

Most tragic are laws that now demand reverence for homosexuals, with authorities branding dissentients with the epithet “homophobic.” People at work are turned into criminals, being guilty of nothing more than asking exemption from something that sanctions same sex relationships. Such people are bullied or sacked for refusing to implement “equality and diversity.” When governments don’t know their place, they become demigods. “Human rights” are uppermost, and the crown-rights of the Most High, and the ancient freedoms of our godly forefathers, must give way so that depraved minorities are protected and right-thinking people persecuted.

However, the Most High claims our prior and supreme faithfulness. Therefore, if something required of us clashes with His will expressed in scripture, at that point, we are released from obligation to the lesser authority. Then we must “obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:19) regardless of the consequences. Let us do this, and be those who fear God and nothing else.

We represent a cause that is greater and longer lasting than the agendas of this fallen world. “The triumphing of the wicked is short” (Job 20:5). Ours is “a kingdom which shall never be destroyed but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever” (Daniel 2:44). Whether appreciated or not, we shall do the most good in this world by restoring the lost virtue of reverence and all its blessed fruits. God will then bless us and make us a blessing (Isaiah 66:2).

“The loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of men shall be made low: and the LORD alone shall be exalted in that day” (Isaiah 2:17).