

## Concerning Reverence.

“REVERENCE. Where this word is used in connection with men alone it is with the old meaning of deference, or of an act of homage, or merely obeisance. When used with reference to God it means godly fear and awe”. Thus wrote Alexander Cruden in his Concordance, where he gives four references to the word as a verb and six as a substantive. In the R. V. the changes are (1) Eph. v. 33—“and the wife see that she *fear* (φοβῆται) her husband”; (2) II. Saml., ix., 6; and (3) I. Kings, i., 31, where in both passages *reverence* is changed into *obeisance*. In Psalm lxxxix., 7, *reverence* becomes *fear*, and in Heb. xii., 28, *reverence and godly fear* is changed into *reverence and awe* with a marginal alternative of *godly fear* (εὐλαβείας καὶ δέους).

What we have to consider in these pages is the subject of reverence from the Christian standpoint, as meaning godly fear and awe. Thus it is distinguished from a primitive instinct arising out of dread of the unknown and the mysterious forces of nature. On the contrary it is the reaction in man to the revelation of the personality of God through our Lord Jesus Christ. The reverence due to our God differs radically from a mere fatalistic submission to the inscrutable will of the Ruler of the Universe, or the propitiation of an offended Deity in the hope of extracting favour arbitrarily withheld. The reverence which Christians owe to God is the fruit of the Spirit in the hearts of His children to whom His infinite love and power and wisdom have been revealed. Only in such measure as we can apprehend the majesty and glory of God, can we regard Him with godly fear and awe. Our blessed Lord's knowledge of God was complete, and He has shown us with what perfect reverence He always regarded the Father. He has in this, as in all other respects, given us an example that we should follow His steps. It may indeed be said that growth in grace and in the knowledge and love of God and of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, involves a corresponding growth in reverence.

The revelation of God in the soul always produces in sinful man the sense of godly fear and awe. It was when

Isaiah "saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up" that he exclaimed, "Woe is me, for I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts." In the book of Job this great truth is set forth graphically. "I have heard of Thee", he confesses, "by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth Thee; Wherefor I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes". When St. Peter cast his net into the sea and drew in the miraculous draft of fishes, he received such an overwhelming impression of the power and majesty of Christ that he exclaimed,—“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!” And, to give only one other instance, it was when St. John, in the Isle of Patmos, remembered his wonderful vision of his risen and ascended Lord that he wrote—“When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead”. Such experiences, in whatever measure we may have realised them, have a sanctifying influence which manifest themselves unconsciously in all that we say or do. Bunyan has given us an unforgettable description of a good minister of Jesus Christ. “In the Interpreter’s house, Christian saw the picture of a very grave person hung up against the wall, and this was the fashion of it :—It had eyes lifted up to heaven, the book of books in his hand, the law of truth was written upon his lips, the world was behind his back, it stood as if it pleaded with men, and a crown of gold did hang over his head.”

Do we always remember when we enter the House of God that where even two or three are gathered together in the name of our Lord there is always One more present than we can see? The value of fellowship one with another, and the various acts of public worship, cannot be overestimated, but what makes them of supreme importance is the presence of God in the midst. When that is realised the impression received is one of “godly fear and awe”, and the expression thereof is involuntarily shown in every way both by word and action. Anything that comes short of the utmost reverence in church, whether on the part of the minister or on that of the people, is an offence against the majesty of God. Great is the responsibility resting on the minister in this respect. If he forgets the presence of God, so will his people. They may be entertained by his more or less interesting discourses, interspersed with quotations from popular authors, and may even be thrilled by fervid denunciations of other people’s sins, but his ministry will be barren. None of his hearers will feel impelled to forsake

all and go to tell others such messages. The secret of a fruitful ministry is the presence of Christ ; for, as He Himself said—"Without Me ye can do nothing". It was ever thus. The source of Elijah's power was the realisation of the presence of God. "As the Lord liveth", he said in confronting Ahab, "before Whom I stand".

Of the saintly Queen Margaret it is recorded that in her presence nothing unseemly was ever said or done ; and how much more does faith in the presence of Christ in the midst exert a sanctifying influence in Church ? The radiance of His glory may shine in the humblest sanctuary as in the stateliest basilica if only there be faith and sincerity on the part of minister and people. But the sanctifying influence is also purifying, and it must be acknowledged that all which is said and done with sincerity, is not necessarily admirable. Excellence is only achieved by the persistent pursuit of the ideal and the ceaseless elimination of the unworthy. The quest for simplicity must not become an excuse for poverty, nor that of decoration for ostentation. "Let everything be done in a becoming and orderly manner" is the apostolic injunction (I. Cor., xiv., 40, Weymouth). Initiative and restraint must ever go hand in hand. Ignorance may be excused but never justified, and in all matters relating to public worship it is incumbent on ministers and office-bearers to study the subject carefully.

Reverence manifests itself in various manners. When he enters the Synagogue, the Jew keeps his hat on his head and when he prays he wears a veil. The Moslem takes off his shoes from off his feet, for the floor of the Mosque is, to him, holy ground. The Christian man removes his hat and the woman covers her head in Church. Public opinion rules conduct very largely, and reverence shows itself in respecting observances which have won general acceptance and have stood the test of time. Any departure therefrom betrays either ignorance of what is considered good form, or thoughtless rather than deliberate irreverence.

When we see the picture of a man kneeling in Church we say that he is evidently praying, but when we see him sitting we say that he is listening or meditating. Thus when a minister enters the pulpit and sits down, the inference is that he is listening for the organist to stop playing. When, however, the minister is seen to kneel it is at once realised that he is praying, and in so doing he is certainly giving an object lesson to the congregation on correct deportment. At the Westminster Assembly the custom of bowing in

the pulpit, as kneeling was then expressed, was strongly opposed by the English Independents, but the Scots Presbyterian Commissioners refused to abandon the custom, and as a compromise the matter was not mentioned in the Directory of Public Worship. Standing and kneeling are the two authorised postures for prayer, and it is a most regrettable result of the custom of standing at the offering of praise that it has led to the widespread habit of sitting at prayer. It is of course blessedly true that one may pray without ceasing and pray anywhere, but the problem before us is how to show reverence in Church when we approach God in prayer. When the minister calls upon the congregation to "Worship and bow down": "Kneel before the Lord our Maker", it is unfortunate, to say the least of it, that the response is often so meagre, and that many do neither the one nor the other, but simply lean back and listen to the prayer offered as if it were a sermon. It is only fair to admit that in many cases the pews are so closely placed together that kneeling is difficult and even well-nigh impossible. Such conditions should be remedied without delay, and no one who wishes to kneel should be hindered from so doing. The choir, which usually occupies a prominent position, should lead the congregation in the matter of reverent deportment in prayer as in the offering of praise, and should kneel, as is always done in England. The position of the hands in prayer, whether in Church or elsewhere—even in saying grace before meals—is important. Children are always taught to fold their hands when they learn to say "Our Father"—a lesson too often forgotten in riper years. Hands should not be used to support or steady the body during prayer, and still less should they be thrust into the pocket.

The celebration of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper calls for the utmost reverence on the part of all present. This is best shown by the care with which all concerned learn and discharge the duties assigned to them. Even the slightest hitch is distracting and mars the solemnity of the occasion. When at all possible, the elders should bring in the elements marching two and two abreast. Single file processions accentuate individual characteristics and are never dignified. In performing the manual acts the minister must remember the significance of what he does. The fraction must be effected slowly with great deliberation, in full view of the congregation. The broken Bread should be held out at the words—"Take, Eat". The Cup should

be held with both hands, as one would hold something precious, and be raised so as to emphasise the words—"This Cup".

On the occasion of a marriage, more especially when the ceremony takes place in an hotel or private house, there is sometimes a lack of due solemnity during the service. Nothing is more likely to impress all present with the religious importance of the occasion than for the minister to kneel down before he begins and pray for the needed grace. Provision should always be made for the bride and bridegroom to kneel for the prayers and in receiving the blessing. During the actual marriage the congregation should be called upon to stand.

Reverence or the lack of reverence is shown by the manner in which we refer to sacred things or persons. We talk of the Bible, but "The Holy Bible" is always printed on the title page. It is usual to refer to ministers as the Reverend N or M, but ministers are not always careful to treat sacred personages with similar respect. Our blessed Lord is sometimes referred to by the name of Jesus, in the manner employed by Unitarians who deny His divinity. The name of Jesus is infinitely precious to all Christians, and it is important that it should be used with the utmost reverence. Our love to our Lord Jesus Christ should never betray us into undue familiarity either in speech or in writing. It is not the custom to accord the prefix of "Saint" to the Old Testament Prophets but it is not unfitting to substitute the word "holy", which means the same thing, and refer to "the Holy Prophet" N or M. In the Christian era it is the well-established custom to give the prefix of Saint to the Apostles, Evangelists, Martyrs, and also to certain others whose life and labours have won this distinction by general consent rather than by canonical decree. Unfortunately we occasionally hear a lesson announced in Church as "from the Gospel of John" or "the Epistle of Paul". Recently a book was reviewed in a well-known religious magazine which was said to tell the "stories of Peter, Paul, and Mark" and to have been "prepared for the elder boys, primarily of the Boys' Brigade". The Boys' Brigade has been most successful in teaching the boys good manners, but the author's way of referring to holy personages in the Bible is not to be commended to the boys or likely to be approved by their officers.

Newspaper advertisements of Church Services sometimes leave much to be desired, especially in reference to

the Sacraments. There seems a lack of reverence in printing the single words "Baptism" and "Communion" as is sometimes done, either within or without brackets. It is surely more fitting to announce them as—"Holy Baptism" or "The Sacrament of Baptism," and "Holy Communion" or "The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper." In Knox's "Book of Common Order," the people are exhorted "to celebrate the Holy Communion."

A First Communicants' Class offers a good opportunity for giving much-needed instruction in deportment in Church. The Directory has some useful passages on the subject which ought to be more widely known. "Let all enter the assembly", it states, "not irreverently, but in a grave and seemly manner, taking their seats or places without adoration or bowing themselves toward one place or other . . . . The public worship being begun, the people are wholly to attend upon it, forbearing to read anything, except what the minister is then reading or citing; and abstaining much more from all private whisperings, conferences, salutations, or doing reverence to any person present, or coming in; as also from all gazing, sleeping, and other indecent behaviour". Late comers, it is interesting to note, "ought not to betake themselves to their private devotions, but reverently to compose themselves to join with the assembly in that ordinance of God which is then in hand". The private devotions on entering are for the worshipper himself, and then when the minister enters and kneels the worshipper should pray for the minister. Bowing towards the Holy Table was evidently a custom common enough in the early seventeenth century to be condemned officially and effectually, but whispering in Church is still far too common.

"Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness" is an exhortation which is sometimes addressed to congregations, and on other occasions serves as the text for a sermon on the unveiling of a stained-glass window. Professor Moffatt however sheds a new light on the passage by rendering it thus,—"*Worship the Eternal in festal attire*" (Psalm xxix., 2). We learn from this that there is a religious foundation for the laudable custom of wearing Sunday clothes. Those who receive the honour of an invitation to Court are required to be suitably dressed for the occasion. The propriety of complying with this regulation is obvious, for it offers an opportunity of showing respect to Their Majesties. In like manner, but in a far higher degree, it is becoming that we appear in the House of God in festal attire to offer

our worship. To fail in this duty is to betray a lack of reverence. It is no valid excuse to say that what really matters is not an outward appearance but the inward grace in the soul. Such "grace" is not worth much if it does not influence conduct. We must not forget the parable of the wedding garment. And what applies to the congregation applies still more cogently to the officials of the Church. It is now being increasingly recognised that not only is it fitting and seemly that the minister should be robed but that the organist, choir, and beadle should also be suitably robed. The wearing of a white tie by the elders who officiate at Holy Communion is an old custom which has much to commend it. It adds distinction to a special occasion.

Are we advancing in reverence—in "Godly fear and awe"? Here we are concerned only with the outward evidences around us, and it is best to take long views. Within living memory a notable change in many respects has taken place, and certain landmarks stand out prominently as we survey the scene. In 1883 St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh, was restored to much of its former beauty and re-opened for public worship. The charm of the ancient building and the simplicity and dignity of the form of Service were a revelation to many of the possibilities of reverent worship in the Church of Scotland. The example then set has since been followed more or less throughout the country. In 1923, for the first time since Knox's Book of Common Order appeared, the General Assembly authorised the publication of a Service Book entitled "Prayers for Divine Service". A few years later the former United Free Church published a similar volume entitled "The Book of Common Order, 1928". These volumes are exerting a widespread influence "as a guide to ministers in the reverent and orderly conduct of worship in the House of God". Very noteworthy also is the publication of an "Ordinal and Service Book for use in the Courts of the Church". The revised edition of the Church Hymnary and the new Church Anthem Book are evidences of the desire to make the offering of praise more worthy.

Yes, there is much to encourage us to cherish the hope that as a Church we are attaining to a higher standard of reverence; yet we all have need to pray—

"Reclothe us in our rightful mind;  
In purer lives Thy service find,  
In deeper reverence, praise."

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