

Reverence.

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TRUE reverence is a quality which belongs to those alone who have savingly embraced the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a grace which is begotten only in hearts that are renewed and reconciled to God. It is what the Prayer-Book calls "holy fear." It is the believer's awe-inspiring recognition of the ineffable almightiness and majesty of God, which might have been justly operative, in view of his sinfulness, to his destruction, and yet in Christ has proven operative to his present and eternal salvation ; and, following from that, his sensitiveness at the possibility of occasioning grief and displeasure by any act or word or thought of his to such a holy, gracious, and loving Heavenly Father.

Love blends itself with this reverence, as a constant, unailing complement. Very beautifully in several places the Prayer-Book weds them together. The two exhibit a choice equipoise. Indeed they invigorate each other. Both alike are kindled by the blissful contemplation of our God as He shows Himself in Christ to be both Just and the Justifier.

The ancient Greeks had in their vocabulary an inspiring word, for which ours presents no equivalent, descriptive of a certain rare and admirable type of character. The *semnos* man was one who, in virtue of his lofty qualities, evoked a feeling of respectful awe among those with whom he came in contact, and nevertheless, along with that, was an engaging and attractive personality, and not in the least repellent. The New Testament uses the word repeatedly in the Pastoral Epistles, where our words "grave," "gravity," furnish a poor approach to it. Now our covenant God is the ideal *semnos* Being. "There is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared." "After the fire a still, small voice ; and it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle." Hence we find so often the Scriptural "fear of the Lord" represented as keeping company

with joy and trust. Yea, mention is made in Eph. v. 21 (R.V.) of "the fear of Christ."

Bishop Butler thus enunciates the matter: "The particular feeling towards good characters—reverence and moral love for them—is natural to all those who have any degree of real goodness in themselves. This will be illustrated by the description of a perfect character in a creature, and by considering the manner in which a good man in his presence will be affected towards such a character. He will, of course, feel the affections of love, reverence, desire of his approbation, delight in the hope or consciousness of it. And surely all this is applicable, and may be brought up to that Being who is infinitely more than an adequate object of all these feelings, whom we are commanded to love with all our heart, soul, and mind."

Now this sanctified fear must needs be distinguished from a fear of a lower kind. For there is the fear which "hath torment" and which, so far from being a permanent co-efficient, has to be "cast out by perfect love" (1 John iv. 18). This is the innate terror of mind which the sense of unpardoned guilt before God awakens. It is the apprehension of His righteous retribution, which, if not happily transmuted into the higher kind, can collapse like steam under cold water, as with Pharaoh of old, whenever the hope is caught at that the divine Judge looks listlessly upon the guilt of men.

The true filial fear, to be unshakeable, must be socketed, as it were, in the evangelical knowledge and personal realization of Christ's all-sufficient and alone-sufficient righteousness, imputed and transferred to His believing people, in virtue of the mystical union between Head and members. A finished work of justification with God there must needs have been, wrought out for us, and to be applied by the Spirit to our souls, or else the reconcilment and acceptance could not be complete. It would be as when David, blinking the strict claims of justice, released his fratricide son, Absalom, from under the ban of outlawry, and still forbade him access to the royal presence.

The truly regenerate and Spirit-taught Christian, in due

accord, will be reverentially minded towards God at all times and hours. This filial attitude of soul will be as real, if not as intense and concentrated, with him in work as in worship. In striking harmony with this, it is worth noting, the Greek verb *sebomai*, from which the above word *semnos* springs, appears regularly in the continuous present form in the Acts of the Apostles, without any restriction to devotional exercises in its reference. Yet we find that among the generality at the present day reverence is an idea unthought of except in relation to worship. This is surely a very sinister circumstance. What is the explanation of so artificially circumscribed and externalistic a conception of reverence?

The cause must be sought for and will be found in the confusion of the two kinds of fear towards God. They who will not avail themselves of the true and divinely provided panacea for the lower, conscience-disturbing, unfilial fear, will adopt one or other of two courses. Multitudes choose to stifle that fear by plunging into the pursuit of "worldly lusts," and shutting out God as completely as they can from their thoughts. But another multitude essay to satisfy violated justice, and to earn for themselves a discharge, with meritorious performances of their own, and it is this class we are concerned with here. Many of them are eventually led to see the futility of their course, and to claim and lay hold on the righteousness that is by faith in Christ Jesus. But such as do not arrive at this desirable conviction, are all too frequently found predisposed to relieve the situation for themselves by minimizing the depth and inwardness of divine morality, the sternness of divine justice, the grounds for serious apprehensiveness, and, consequently, the amount of compensatory performance supposed to be requisite on their part. This last has a tendency with them, as a class, to diminish in the direction of a bare rendering of homage, in the form of external worship.

A Hebrew poetical word comes to mind here. *Kachash*, when descriptive of a cowed enemy, signifies "to come cringing" (Ps. xviii. 45, lxvi. 3, lxxxii. 15), and in its more

general use "to put on an insincere appearance." Bishop Dowden was well warranted in sounding the warning that "reverence, like many another grace of the soul, has its counterfeit—a counterfeit that assumes its name, apes its manner, and successfully passes itself off as the authentic virtue."

At the same time, it is not at all essential on our part to assume that the offerers of this transient appearance of deference at the outset fancy for one moment that they are actually hoodwinking Deity, or even their fellow-worshippers. But they see every day a hugely disproportionate emphasis being laid, in the Roman manner, by a large and increasing number of their teachers, on external aspects of worship in other directions—such as the adornment of sacred buildings or the frequency of Communion attendance. They seize upon the elementary fact also that no one, not even the saintliest, abides at the same level of concentrated fervency and solemnity outside his worshipping moments (public or private) that he attains to within them. From some such considerations it may readily appear warrantable enough to many a one, be he never so frivolous and graceless in ordinary life, to deduce the feasibility of summoning up "reverence" on and for a given occasion, sufficient to be palliative of and prophylactic against fear of Divine judgment, and even meritorious of Divine good-will, through a passing recourse simply to a certain approved set of countenance or posture of body.

Whilst with some the mere outward pose or mannerism itself, independently of thought or feeling, is believed to constitute reverence, the major part would build on the super-inducing therewith of a real mental attitude. Experts in mind-science (psychology) have taught, it is claimed; that one can call up, partly at least, by adopting or simulating the outer expression of a given feeling, the actual feeling itself. How some such effect is brought about can be gathered from the treatises of Titchener, Hiram Stanley, and others. It is through association of ideas—ideas, however, based upon and taking shape from real experience. One assumes the regulation

posture, movement, or expression understood to be identified with the desired mental state. This bodily action or play of feature, having been so often on past occasions the natural, unaffected, un contemplated resultant of a strong mental concept or conviction, jogs the recollection into motion, resurrecting in the mind an amorphous idea of one's having some cause to be cheery, say, or merry, or sorry, or angry. The idea, to be sure, on this occasion is merely imaginative, and of a vague, indefinite content ; nevertheless, having had a basis of definite actuality when apprehended and entertained on previous occasions, it now, on receiving no more than a factitious harbourage, overcharges the mind as before. Thence also instantaneously the motor or efferent sensibilities (the infinitesimally fine nerves operating outward from the mind or brain towards the body's surface) are stimulated into action, and the resonance produced is consciously felt.

But the ascendancy is only momentary. The mind's own native and substantiable ideas promptly reassert again their due dominant position, and dispel the illusion. And if the mechanical process of resuscitation be persisted in, the imaginative idea will grow fainter, and also the mind's own proper ideas will more stiffly yield a place, till at length the transient illusion will cease to recur.

Hence it follows that, even if it were but a mental concept (and not something spiritual, transcending the mental plane), true reverence could not be reckoned producible by any physical stimulus. An antecedent feeling of reverence, vivid and unaffected, would have to be postulated, but even the semblance of such does not appear ever to be thought of ; and a genuine feeling of this kind could not be intermittent. Love, which, as we have seen, is the unfailing complement of true reverence, cannot be switched on and off, even when it is centred on a human object only. It cannot be put to sleep for the week between Sundays. And divinely inspired love in the soul would insist on more than periodic opportunities of dwelling upon the celestial qualities and the gracious dealings

which primarily evoked it. "Happy is the man that feareth always." "I have set the Lord always before me."

Before passing away from this point, something may be said with reference to children, and how far the conspicuous emphasis laid by most teachers, designedly in the interests of reverence, upon appropriate external demeanour during united devotional exercises, is efficacious. The Sunday-school superintendent on his platform, uplifting his hand, and solemnly enjoining "Now, children, be reverent," is a familiar spectacle, and one endeared to the recollection of many. And some such words sound pretty regularly also on the ears of a Boys' Brigade or juvenile portion of a choir.

The question turns on the nature of the ideal that is before the instructor's mind. If an intermittent reverence for the occasion, such as has been analyzed, and, it is to be feared, is nowadays frequently enough entertained, be the end he aims at in itself, the efficacy of his monition may be fairly doubted. "We soak our children in habits of contempt [of matters of sacred associations], and yet are confident that we can always teach them to be reverent at the right place," is an utterance, which has some point here, of a notable character in fiction. Reverence cannot be injected like morphia. But, given a truly godly teacher, the monitory usage is, so far as it goes, most appropriate and conducive to edification at this formative period. It bespeaks deference towards the Unseen One, self-restraint, heedfulness, detachment, and concentration of thought, and the facilitation of the same things for one's neighbour, all which are calculated, positively or negatively, to prove ancillary to upspringing devoutness, if the true reverence be in the heart in never so rudimentary a measure.

The word "reverent" may not be an exactly perfect one for use in the particular connection, but a better is not ready to hand. The teacher, however, ought not to forget that there is a stolid passivity which must not be mistaken by him for the outer demeanour of true reverence; and, in view of the ceremonialistic trend of the age, he should see the necessity of

dropping, from time to time the caution that, while man may judge from outward appearance, "God looketh on the heart."

There are many things, finally, to make us pause ere we accord the palm for superiority in real reverence to the particular section in the Church which is most vocal and visibly fastidious on the subject. Within its circle there are large numbers, clerical and lay, who are all too compliant in accommodating holy things to the dubious standards of "the spirit of the age"; who lend their practical sanction to the superlatively irreverent principle of "will-worship"; who acquiesce in the most unedifying modes of money-raising for sacred purposes; who are by no means sensitive to the absoluteness of the Spirit's guiding voice, speaking from the written Word. They are prepared, by implication, to represent our Lord as choosing an unsuitable hour for the first Supper. A favourite liturgical authority of theirs, who has been suggesting "enrichments" for the Prayer-Book recently, does not contribute to the deepening of reverential awe when he recommends for (the more or less mythical) St. Faith's Day "a skilfully-framed Collect playing on the meaning of the Saint's name"! Archbishop Benson, in his "Minutes," acknowledged from observation that reverence had not kept pace with advance of ritual in the English churches.

The "fear towards Me" which is "taught ["learned by rote," R.V., marg.] by the precept of men" merely is a "vain" thing. "My son, if thou wilt receive My words and hide My commandments with thee, so that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom and apply thine heart to understanding . . . *then* shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord" (Isa. xxix. 13; Prov. ii. 1 f.).

