

Reverence, a prerequisite for love?

“When we stand by the sea and watch a storm dash huge waves on the rocks with furious roar and tumult, the power of the ocean fills us with awe. When the storm passes by and the night comes on and the stars shine out, at first one by one and then in throngs, till the great dome is all aflame and infinite spaces open above us, lighted with innumerable fires,—while the grandeur of the scene awakens awe, the mystery and boundlessness of these evening skies awaken wonder also. But when the day dawns, and we look around us and see some lovely landscape, we no longer feel either awe or wonder; both have disappeared with the shadows of the night and the mystery of the stars; we feel only admiration. Then, if we enter some home where sons and daughters gather around the chair of an aged mother, we see that they feel no awe, for she is feeble and they are strong; and perhaps there is no admiration, for her form may be bent and her features wrinkled; but when her children think of what her sweet goodness has been to them through many years, they feel a nobler sentiment. It is not mere respect, however, such as we always render to age; it is not mere gratitude and love; it is reverence.”^[1] Charles Allen penned these stirring words over a hundred years ago. His purpose, however, was not to move his readers emotionally. Instead, he was attempting to distinguish between the higher and lower sentiments of human nature. “Reverence” he put in the higher category while “wonder,” “admiration,” and “awe” he put in the lower. The remainder of his extended essay is both fascinating and convicting; but for this article, the thing to recognize is that for him, reverence was highly esteemed. The vital importance, therefore, both of understanding and practicing reverence was strongly urged upon his readers.

Allen was standing in a long tradition. For centuries and continuing at least until 1911 when his work was published, reverence, called in the Bible the “*fear of God*” was a common feature of religious life.^[2] The towering Gothic cathedrals still dotting the European landscape are testaments to and attempts to reflect the wonder, awe, respect, and indeed the profound reverence their builders felt for God.^[3] Such feelings were altogether proper, and to this day, those people, places, and performances that we treasure most we treat with reverence. I think, for example, of the vast metropolitan concert halls and the orchestras that perform within them. For many years, my wife and I had season tickets to the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra. The Bass Concert Hall where they play is both majestic and fabulously appointed. Additionally, attendants are stationed both inside and outside the doors so that no one enters or leaves save at the appropriate time. There is a level of decorum expected commensurate with the dignity of the performance that is taking place in the great hall. The same is true in the public courts. A few years back, I received a summons to appear in court for jury duty. I arrived early with jacket and tie but was soon joined by dozens of others whose attire was somewhat less than professional. Eventually, we were all escorted into the courtroom where the bailiff then seated us to await the judge. Upon entering the courtroom, the judge took his seat and prepared to address the potential jurors, when suddenly, as he looked out on the crowd, he noticed a twenty-something-year-old man wearing jean shorts and a blue t-shirt. To my astonishment (and amusement) the judge immediately called him out and publicly humiliated him for his lack of respect and then threatened him with some severe form of censure lest he dare to return the next day in the same disheveled condition. In the judge's opinion, the exalted status of his office demanded reverence from all those under its authority. He is right. Scripture itself is replete with examples and injunctions extolling fear. The great apostle is explicit; we are to “*honour [i.e., revere] the king*” (1 Peter 2:17). Since governments have been delegated authority from God Himself, government officials represent His power and should be feared (Romans 13:1). If that is true for delegated authorities, how much more so should we fear the One with ultimate authority whose power is infinite? The answer is so obvious that Solomon says, “*the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge*” (Proverbs 1:7).

In the latter half of the twentieth century, however, many claiming to be Christians have begun to “reinterpret” the obligation to revere the Lord. The concept of reverence as respect and humility before God's supremely exalted status is now routinely disparaged, and the notion of reverence as a feeling of adoring love has taken its place. A quick search on Google turned up these lyrics to a children's song “Rev'rence is more than just quietly sitting: it's thinking of Father above, a feeling I get when I think of his blessings. I'm rev'rent, for rev'rence is love.”^[4] I'm afraid, however, that such a redefinition will not hold water for as Lawrence Davis explains, the fear of God (i.e., reverence) “is a rational response to [the] awareness of God's exaltedness... Now whatever precisely “exaltedness” consists in, it would seem to be a central attribute, or [at least] an implication of [the] central attributes, of God. For starters, He is the creator and sustainer of the entire universe, and His will reigns supreme within it. This would seem to imply a measure of divine exaltedness relative to us. It would be hard, then, to have a clear idea of who God is, yet somehow fail to be aware of His exaltedness. If one has this awareness and is in addition sufficiently rational, one will perforce revere God. [But] consider a person who loves God. He or she must have some conception of the object of this love. If this conception diverges too far from the truth, we should say it is not God who is loved, but some other being, who may or may not exist. [But] if it is God whom the person loves, the conception may still be (must be?) incomplete. Still, it is plausible to suppose that a satisfactory conception will

include God's exaltedness, or those of His central attributes, which imply His exaltedness. It follows that any sufficiently rational person who truly loves God must also revere Him. And if we assume that rationality and an adequate conception of God are prerequisites for a spiritually satisfactory love of God, then reverence also is in effect a prerequisite for this love.”^[5] Said differently, one can revere God without loving Him, but one cannot love God without revering Him. “To love God is already to revere Him.”^[6]

Let us see, then, where we have come. If reverence is basic to love, what conclusion are we to draw from the many Christians whose attire in church is so sloppy it would not be allowed in a courtroom?^[7] What are we to make of those whose thoughtless and distracting conduct in a service would not be tolerated at the symphony? What should we conclude of those who want to remake their *sanctuary* in the image of a movie theater with a coffee lounge? I'm afraid it means more than simply that they do not revere God as they should. It means that they do not truly love Him. “*Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man*” (Eccl. 12:13).

^[1] Charles A. Allen, “Reverence as the Heart of Christianity,” *Harvard Theological Review* 4, no. 2 (04, 1911), 253.

^[2] Cf. Deuteronomy 6:2; 1 Samuel 12:24; Psalm 34:9; Proverbs 9:10, etc.

^[3] Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, Rev. and updated ed. , Vol. 1: HarperOne, 2010), 381.

^[4] https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/music/library/childrens-songbook/reverence-is-love?lang=eng&_r=1. Retrieved 2 August 2019

^[5] Lawrence Howard Davis, “The Importance of Reverence,” *Faith and Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (04, 1990), 142.

^[6] *Ibid.*

^[7] I am *not* attempting to argue for a particular type of attire in church, such as a suit and tie. I *am* arguing that one's attire should be appropriate for the occasion (e.g., one should not dress better for an earthly judge than he or she does for the supreme Judge).

Bro. Hix, for a potential “callout sentence” consider: “One can revere God without loving Him, but one cannot love God without revering Him.”