

Education for the Kingdom of God “Manners” For the June/July 2002 *Chalcedon Report*

Ronald Kirk
Created January 18, 2002
Modified October 28, 2002

Manners as a social norm carry a bad reputation. When someone mentions the word *manners*, we may instantly think of self-absorbed snobs who use their pretentious and formal manners as a weapon designed to vanquish supposed inferiors. Such social guerilla warfare has long been the ideal for many by which all common social conduct is measured. In the great Christian novel *Ben Hur*, the character of the now adult Roman Messala returns to his home in Judea after a period of education in the Eternal City. In a reunion with his childhood best friend, Messala sarcastically insults leading character Judah Ben Hur, according to the rigor of noble Roman etiquette.¹ Similarly, in Walter Scott’s Christian romantic/historic novel, *Ivanhoe*, the noble Norman hosts made the manners of their Saxon guests “the subject of sarcastic observation,” while “the untaught Saxons unwittingly transgressed several of the arbitrary rules established for the regulation of society.” Moreover, “it was well known that a man may with more impunity be guilty of an actual breach either of real good breeding or of good morals, than appear ignorant of the most minute point of fashionable etiquette.”² Such hypocritical pomposity was a favorite target of Charles Dickens in virtually all his stories, and rightly so. In reaction however, anti-manners have now replaced high manners, as dictated by the Hollywood, social-trend-setting elite. With these poor examples, it is now easy to discard manners as superficial or worse, as against the weightier requirements of Scripture. Yet, we ought to be careful of drawing rash conclusions, tantamount to throwing the soup out with the chicken bones at a fine meal. God did not intend His plumb line for a pendulum. Indeed, manners rightfully seen clearly reflect the weightier commands of the Scriptures, including the Commandment of Christ to love our neighbors as ourselves. Even in these negative literary examples, a better, clearly superior morality and etiquette are implied to exist.

More pointedly, we observe several examples of good manners in history and literature. Note how young George Washington produced his *Rules of Civility* which bore on character, and moral and polite conduct. Washington’s character, conduct and accomplishments were renowned in his age, such that Americans long revered him. The connection between Washington’s upbringing in moral manners and his lasting reputation ought to be obvious. A quick reading of the Rules, such as “Associate yourself with persons of good character. It is better to be alone than in bad company,” illustrates their Biblical base (1 Corinthians 15:33).

Laura Ingalls Wilder, in her *Little House* series books, presents an elevated example of Christian manners in the home of a latter nineteenth century family. For example, five-year-old Laura in *Little House in the Big Woods* knows it is wicked to cry selfishly or to be envious of her sister. Interestingly, the fine manners of the Ingalls home are commonly set against the increasing incivility and roughness of the age in which Laura grew up. These books form a textbook of manners and morals remarkably approximating Biblical ideals, though signs of secularization in the home were also beginning to appear.

As late as the 1940s, manners were not yet entirely divorced from their Biblical roots. Emily Post opens her opus volume *Etiquette* with a discussion of the term’s true meaning. Attempting to distance herself from mere formality and rigid rules in manners, she asks, “What is the purpose of this rule? Does it help to make life pleasanter? Does it make the social machinery run more smoothly? Does it add to beauty? Is it essential to the code of good taste or to ethics? If it serves any of these purposes, it is a rule to be cherished.”³ Regarding good taste she says, “Good taste is necessarily helpful! It must be the suitable thing, the comfortable thing, the useful thing for the occasion, the place, the time, or it is not in good taste.” (Christians would recognize that the experience of true *beauty* is a blessing from God corresponding to a peoples’ responding to His gift of grace (Philippians 4:8).) With respect to men, Miss Post says, “the code of the gentleman...is an immutable law of etiquette...Decency means not

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merely propriety of speech and conduct, but honesty and trustworthiness in every obligation. Integrity includes not only honesty but a delicacy of motive and of fairness in judging the motives of others.” Finally, “Etiquette is most deeply concerned with every phase of ethical impulse or judgment and with every choice or expression of taste, since what one is, is of far greater importance than what one appears to be.”

Doctor Rushdoony declared that Love is Law in action.⁴ In this sense, self-government and ordinary relational practices—manners—truly constitute the first sphere of civil government. Where the individual is constrained to do what is right in his conscience, and aided by the Holy Spirit by faith, little coercive government is required and the people are generally free. How important it is not to presume upon one’s neighbor in his property or person, particularly in absence of a previous relationship which might grant some degree of imposition.

Clearly, as we seek to establish a more Biblical view of human conduct we must set priorities. In Christian love, certainly kindness, making another comfortable, and providing a beautiful setting are all a part of Christian love toward one’s neighbor. However, morality and ethical conduct according to the commands of Christ are fundamentally far more important. With respect to the higher expression of the faith found in Christian liberty (2 Corinthians 3:17), self-restraint in manners is essential. No common liberty is long possible in an essentially selfish society.

Conversely, a society where people generally do good to each other is one of the most important foundational elements for a successful Gospel mission. With such salt and light, godly influence may work to prepare the soil of the people’s hearts to receive the Good Seed of the Word of God.

Modern education theory requires peer socialization. This is the blind leading the blind, where they all fall in a pit. Much better is a home which teaches and practices careful conduct toward one another in life’s ordinary activities. If one can learn to love his neighbor, in practice, when that neighbor happens to be his brother or sister, or husband or wife, where it is so terribly easy to be lax in our social conduct, how much more skillful will the practice of love toward one’s neighbor outside the home be. Indeed, I have often observed this to be so.

Training good manners in our children and ourselves, then, is a worthwhile and even imperative Christian endeavor. In an age where examples of good Christian manners may be difficult to find, the tradition of manners we do practice tend to be the institutionalized result of our sinful disposition. The combined benefit of Scriptural, and Christian historical and literary insight offer a theoretical and practical set of instructions for a manner of life able to revive Christian civility, Gospel influence, and a foundation for the free institutions needed to propagate the Kingdom of God.

¹ Lew Wallace, *Ben Hur, A Tale of the Christ* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1922), Book Second, Chapter II.

² Sir Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (New York: A.L. Burt, no date), p.174.

³ Emily Post, *Etiquette* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1945), p. 1.

⁴ Rousas John Rushdoony, *Law and Society* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1986), p. x.