

Education for the Kingdom of God
“Cultivating Reverence in the Home”
For the *Chalcedon Report*, May 2003

Ronald Kirk
Created February 4, 2003
Modified February 5, 2003

The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, to depart from the snares of death.—Proverbs 14:27

In this age of democratic equality-of-outcome and rights-as-entitlements, reverential regard for God and corresponding honor for men are rare. This should not be so. The Scriptures supply plenty of reason to cultivate an attitude of honor toward the deserving. Practicing reverence and living honorably will exert a godly influence on our neighbors for the Gospel. Most importantly, upon our covenantal duty before God, we should also cultivate in our children and ourselves a character worthy of regard. To inculcate an attitude of honor toward parents and elders in our children is to prepare them to venerate the Lord.

Reverence toward God

The Hebrew and Greek words for *fear* used in the Biblical term the “fear of the Lord” find their English counterpart in the words *reverence* and *veneration*. Noah Webster defines *reverence* as:

Fear mingled with respect and esteem; veneration...The fear acceptable to God, is a *filial* fear (emphasis added), an awful reverence of the divine nature, proceeding from a just esteem of his perfections, which produces in us an inclination to his service and an unwillingness to offend him.

Reverence is nearly equivalent to veneration, but expresses something less of the same emotion. It differs from awe, which is an emotion compounded of fear, dread or terror, with admiration of something great, but not necessarily implying love or affection. We feel reverence for a parent, and for an upright magistrate, but we stand in awe of a tyrant.

The Creator of heaven and earth, the Savior of our souls, should command our veneration. His Living Word created the vastness of the universe and the splendor of heaven. His power over the earth and His exaction of justice instill awe among those who do not revere Him. Perhaps our greatest reverence arises from the painful fact of Jesus’ humiliation, suffering, and death upon the cross for our sins. Eternal life upon His Resurrection and assent to His throne add reverential joy.

Unfortunately, men do not naturally or easily reverence the invisible but almighty God. Consequently, He requires honor and compels awe. A general attitude for due reverence will help men to overcome the sinful disposition for contempt of others and will encourage due reverence toward God.

Honor toward Men

As Dr. Rushdoony rightly notes, men have claimed more than their share of honor in competition with God.¹ However, it should also be clear that paying due honor to men is a Biblical practice. God plants greatness in men, bringing glory to Him and regard to those whom He makes great. The greatness of godly men serves to inculcate in others a disposition for reverence of God. Stories and histories portraying true nobility exemplify dignity of office and magnanimity. For example, Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* clearly distinguishes character worthy of honor from affected nobility that inspires awe through mean bullying. Moses, King Alfred the Great of England, Oliver Cromwell, and George Washington present portraits of magnificent character. The proverbial American frontier home elicits admiration for its unassuming greatness. There, God used both the persistent faith of the pioneering child of God and the harshness of his life to engrave a character of deep furrow and substance, like the relief of some

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great bronze commemorative plaque. The courage and dynamic presence of such men of God as John Knox, John Wycliffe, Martin Luther, and John Calvin each arouse reverential regard. Good people cannot help admire the gravity and grandeur of such men as these. Their lives glorify God. Christian homes will do well to make the rich literary heritage of great men and women a regular part of family intellectual life.

Given that God made men and women in His image and destined them for glory with Christ, Christians should grant proper respect to their fellows. Observing honor toward men properly reflects reverence of God. Love God; love your neighbor. The Apostle Paul enjoins honor to whom honor is due. Honor here and in Hebrews 12:9, translated *reverence* in the AV and applied to one’s father, means to *invert*. To invert oneself is to view and treat another as superior. It is inversion because of the natural man’s disposition to make ourselves superior at another’s expense (e.g. Cain and Abel). In the Old Testament, the primary Hebrew word translated *honor* means *heavy weight*. *Weight* in the sense of honor means *moral substance* or *moral gravity*. The New Testament counterpart often translated honor is a set of related terms essentially meaning *material value* and similarly apply to moral worth.

The Scriptures supply many examples of due honor given to men. Abraham, in Genesis 23:12, prostrates himself before Ephron and the people of Heth as a suitable sign of respect. Paul urges Timothy to, “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.” (1 Timothy 5:17). Honorific titles in Genesis suggest a yet remaining reverence for human life, coming so soon after near extinction in the Great Flood. Rachel refers to her father as “lord” (Genesis 31:35), as does Ruth to Boaz (Ruth 2:13). In His earthly life, men uniformly addressed Jesus as Lord or Rabbi. The common terms *mister*, *miss*, and *mistress* (usually pronounced *missus* and spelled *Mrs.*) communicate honorific respect to the present day, at least in form. The point is that men, especially godly ones, have since Biblical times treated their fellows reverentially.

Parental Reverence

The Fifth Commandment requires children to honor parents. Arguably a part of the First Tablet, it parallels the requirements toward God of the first four Commandments. Whether the Fifth Commandment is a part of the First Tablet or Second, it is clearly pivotal to those commandments directly concerning God and those directly concerning men. John Calvin says of the Fifth Commandment that society itself depends upon children learning proper reverence.² For children, who by nature know nothing of God, honoring parents prepares the heart and habits to an attitude of appropriate reverence. The covenant child must learn the weighty things of life, especially the weight of majesty and grace residing in the King of Kings. The child’s father is thus extremely important to him. God made men fathers and calls Himself *our Father* for a reason that should not be lost on us.

How do parents inculcate reverence? First, parents must possess or learn what they seek to cultivate in their children. Fathers and mothers provide the chief example to young children. Children, out of their sin nature, easily acquire any parental sloppiness, vulgarity, or baseness in habits, manners, or speech. Therefore, parents should practice elevated Biblical conduct as a way of life. Where it reflects sound Biblical doctrine, emulating the noble conduct of God’s men and women in history may serve as an apt parental discipline.

A good example is not enough. Biblical education includes instruction, and discipline or directed practice. Children must learn that selfishness contradicts agapé—Scriptural charity. Children’s natural

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selfishness serves sin; selfishness militates toward contempt of others. It is a joy to make another happy, but requires a great deal of practice. My daughter has observed that my three-month-old first grandson (as precious as he truly is—oh, you should see him) already exhibits some signs of sinful attention-demanding. If parents will minutely observe and correct the smallest patterns of conduct at the earliest age, they will train their children toward righteousness and the ability to demonstrate proper honor and reverence.

For some, it may be a startling revelation that parents can and ought to expect obedience of their children. A law is worse than meaningless if it is not consistently enforced. I feel considerable pain when I observe parental permissiveness that does not correct selfishness and train positive righteousness in conduct. A parental disposition to neglect correction, when a little benign pain would serve the cause of Christ, is not love but sin unto idolatry.

It is important to recognize that we Christian parents can unwittingly encourage the modern social and political view of authorities as entitlement suppliers. As a father, if I make myself just one of the boys, then perhaps I can relieve myself of some of the weight of my paternal authority. Rather, I should both require and deserve reverence. Learning personal righteousness and righteous parenting can be painful as we seek to correct childish recalcitrance in our children and ourselves! Mothers, in their serving and nurturing nature may encourage contempt toward themselves and others when they refuse to require respect and obedience of their children. I have many times observed mothers ignoring or excusing their children's abuse. Rather, mothers must remember the holy trust for their part in the eternal well-being of their young. Fathers must establish the child's respect for mother. Such noble federal headship is a holy trust, a burden to carry, but one that will return great blessings in our grown children.

Particular disciplines help establish reverence in the home. Parents can teach children to yield to adults in speech and place. The child who forces himself to the forefront or runs across the path of his elder demonstrates selfishness and not respect. The child who offers his seat or holds a door open to his mother or father practices love. The loving and reverent child will voluntarily yield the better portion of his favorite food to mom. Parents should require proper respect for a parent's person. Ultra familiarity breeds contempt, not respect. Answering by appropriate title or name encourages loving respect. Parents might require their children to answer them “yes, ma'am” or “no sir,” or as our family prefers, “no, mom” or “yes, dad.”

Love, grace, and tenderness are not at odds with requiring parental reverence. Meek and tender love goes far. However, parents must be ready to command when needed. A sullen or rebellious child may require a restrained degree of severity. I may get close to my son's face and say with a low voice, “You will not treat your mother this way!” The rod is a Biblical remedy, particularly effective on young children. Small doses of strict discipline to subdue sin can quickly release a spirit amply capable of the liberty of self-government.

What honor is due to those of a more base character? The Scriptures speak against reviling Satan. A certain degree of respect is required even of the devil. Evil men deserve some degree of respect, if not toward their persons, at least toward their office as the image of God. Jesus requires that we love our enemy. Therefore, short of sinful compromise, children ought to respect all elders.

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To those who fear the Lord, the Scriptures promise knowledge, understanding, wisdom, confidence, wealth, and long life.³ Cultivating an attitude of respect among men, serves to cultivate an attitude of reverence before God.

¹ Rousas J. Rushdoony, *Systematic Theology* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1994), p. 900.

² “Nay, human society cannot be maintained in its integrity, unless children modestly submit themselves to their parents, and unless those, who are set over others by God’s ordinance are even reverently honored.” John Calvin, *Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker House, 1996), Volume III, p. 7.

³ Exodus 14:13; Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10; and Proverbs 1:7; 10:27; 14:26; 22:4.