

Soul Stuff: “Reverence as an Act of Gratitude”  
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Today I want to reflect on how reverence is an act of gratitude to God: for divine revelation and personal grace, or in reformed terms, gratitude for God’s sovereignty in creation and God’s gracious providence. I want to begin with a case in point. This story points to some notions we have that may be keeping us from seeing into our own souls to discover our sense of reverence.

It happened in a church where I was preaching while I was in seminary. The little church was a rural church, founded in the late 1700’s. All around the 1840s building was a cemetery, with monuments along the sidewalk from the road into the building. So, just by its atmosphere when you entered you would lower your voice, slow down, walk quietly, and sit very reverently on hardwood pews screwed to a hardwood floor. The room echoed with the least little sound. No need for a sound system there. In the congregation was a flamboyant grandmother who had brought her extremely active little boy into the service. You could see and hear her coming from a long way off. She wore huge hats and vibrant-colored dresses. He was full of life and energy. Congregants looked down every time he jumped, wiggled, slammed books in the hymn racks, or whispered in a loud voice. It was Lord’s Supper day. The culture in that service was for each element to be distributed and upon receiving each one, the congregation would fall silent, bowing their heads in reverence. The pronouncement of the broken bread was made, and the pieces distributed. Heads inclined forward. Some people closed their eyes. The reverence was profound. Just as everyone began to breathe deeply in meditation, we heard a clearly, unreserved yelp of pain. In a voice as loud and clear as any you have ever heard the Grandmother yelled out with a piercing voice, oblivious to the rest of us. “If you do that one more time, I’m going to smack you!” If you think it had been silent in that room before, you could have heard pins dropping all around the room. Afterward we learned that in the silence the little fellow thought it would be a good time to pinch his grandmother on her leg, which startled and hurt her so that she forgot where she was and that was what prompted the outburst.

The story offers some interesting angles on what we think about reverence. As people in each culture adjust what they hold inviolable, each emergent generation makes changes of its own. What once would have been unthinkable in

an earlier culture, may become the norm in the next. The idea of what people thought of as reverence or the lack thereof seemed perfectly clear to everyone there, except Granny Potts and her little grandson, who I suppose, were acting out from their own sense of reverence.

These were the discussions I heard after the incident. In this story some would say that to be reverent the little boy should not have been brought into the service anyway. Others would say that he should be allowed in the service no matter what he might do. Others would say that the answer would be in disciplining the child, so he would know how to act in other worship settings. Still others would say that Granny Potts should have taken him out of the service before it went that far. Others would say that it was not the grandson but the grandmother that was at fault and she should have known better. No one that I know of ever said anything to either one of them. I think that story begs the question about how any of you have defined reverence in your minds. All of the responses to the problem are founded on what each cultural subgroup felt about reverence. Just asking, “Which camp would you be in?” How would you argue for your ideas about what happened?

Since the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century I have read and heard a lot of discussion about what constitutes “reverence” in church. In fact, new church planters say that they choose to start with a handful of people meeting most anywhere because it lets them focus on relationships rather than spending energy on what they see as fixing what has been problematic for church growth for a new generation—church buildings. It is precisely the tension between what is considered culturally reverent for a developing congregation.<sup>1</sup>

What makes this question even more difficult to address is that there are few verses in the New Testament that speak to how someone is supposed to act in worship. Jesus did not say in the sermon on the mount, “Consider the pulpit and the arches, the organ and the clerical robes, and the choir lofts, knowing that your heavenly Father has not adorned any place more elegantly than this architectural wonder.” In fact, his Sermon on the Mount was remembered as a collection of messages given in a field where elegance was defined by the beauty of the wildflowers around them and the sky above. Jesus declared that not even

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<sup>1</sup> What many Christian existing congregations are finding is that they experience more growth when they start new worship services with newly defined cultural expressions of reverence in each meeting at different times in the building they maintain. The idea is that each worship service can be as cross-generational, or generationally specific as required in everything from traditional to non-traditional modes.

Solomon's temple, the finest monotheistic building ever built could not compare to a field full of wild flowers.

But, all of this points to an idea that we need to reflect on about what being reverent means to each of us. What I want to put forward in this sermon is that reverence can not be solely defined by the culture of place but is an expression of the soul. From the soul our attitudes about what is sacred and must be revered arise out of our gratitude from what we have discerned to be greater than and beyond us. Reverence is an act of gratitude to God for divine revelation and personal grace, or in reformed terms, God's sovereignty in creation and God's gracious providence. In other terms, reverence can be described as a respect for the sacred in us and beyond us. The unexplainable and the unknowable rises to the level of otherness, a holy otherness that marks the boundary between the physical and spiritual universe we inhabit. How our minds transcend the physical is closely associated with the feeling of amazement. What we revere sparks awe simply because it is out of the ordinary. Consider scriptures where God spoke in a whirl wind, or Jesus who commanded turbulent seas to calm themselves, or that God called creation into existence in the first place.

When reverence is born of gratefulness, the sacred becomes apparent. Then, we who are the children of God, naturally want to hallow the sacred place where we experienced the divine. It's the reason we build church buildings, employ signs and symbols in our worship services, sing hymns and offer praises to God. It is why we want to put up memorials, pile stones of remembrance in a holy river, or sing songs with lyrics like "here I raise mine Ebenezer" (not the resurrection of Scrooge, by the way) or "in this very room," or "I can only imagine." Each expression of endearment to God begins with gratitude, becomes a form of reverence, rises to the level of amazement, and prompts us to put down a marker to return to where there is a thin, perceivable boundary between heaven and earth. God entered space and time here. Perhaps we can expect God to appear here again. Some markers that call us to reverence can be discoverable in church buildings, while others can only be found in physical places that no longer exist, yet remain in the Christian collective consciousness. Thus, we might sing a rendition of Isaac Watts, "At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light, and the burdens of my heart rolled away. It was there by faith I received my sight and now I am happy all day." Or Chris Tomlin's 2014 praise and worship lyrics,

At the cross, at the cross--I surrender my life--I'm in awe of You  
Where Your love ran red--And my sin washed white--I owe all to You.

Here my hope is found--Here on holy ground--Here I bow down  
Here arms open wide--Here You save my life--Here I bow down

At the cross, at the cross--I surrender my life--I'm in awe of You  
Where Your love ran red--And my sin washed white--I owe all to You—Jesus.

It was a Sunday morning in the new worship center. Upwards of 350 people were in worship. I noticed my six-year-old son leave the sanctuary. I was at the pulpit. His mom was in the choir, so neither of us could make a grab for him when he slipped out through the double doors. As we began to sing the last hymn, I saw through the oversized door windows his head bobbing up and down. Up and down went his smiling face, spinning round and round, then up and down again. What in the world could he be doing, I wondered? Was he all right? I learned after the service that he was in the foyer or narthex by himself, and had decided to do some break dancing to a church song something like “Just as I am.” We did not punish him. It’s hard to know sometimes whether we would have punished a child for being irreverent or punished him for dancing “like David did” before the Lord. He taught me that reverence is an act of gratitude, even when it may not be so apparent to all the others around us. He was in a zone known only to him and God.