

Reverence: The Act of Showing Respect

EDWIN G. AUSTIN, JR.

My dear brothers and sisters, I am grateful to be here with you this day, and I pray for the light of our Father in Heaven to direct my thoughts and to enlighten our minds.

I feel honored each and every day to be numbered with you here at Brigham Young University. Our university community is unlike any other community in the world. Here, in a relatively small area, there are thousands of young adults who believe in the Savior—even Jesus Christ—who live each day of their lives striving to emulate His example in an effort to become more like Him. Do you realize just how peculiar and unbelievable this must seem to the rest of the world?

Arise and Shine Forth

Indeed, we are a peculiar people. President Gordon B. Hinckley explained it this way:

Of course, we're different from the world. If the world continues to go the way it is now going, we will become even more peculiar. We will stand for truth. We will stand for right. We will stand for honesty. We will stand for virtue. We will stand for personal cleanliness. We will be more and more a peculiar people. (Miami Florida Fireside, November 17, 1996.) [TGBH, 676]

The Lord has declared, “For thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God: the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth” (Deuteronomy 7:6).

In a world founded upon opposition, we, as Latter-day Saints, must distinguish ourselves among nations through our expressions of total respect toward one another, our reverence for deity, and in glorifying all that is sacred and holy. “Verily I say unto you all: Arise and shine forth, that thy light may be a standard for the nations” (Doctrine and Covenants 115:5).

Brothers and sisters, we are a special people unto the Lord, and we have been chosen to set a standard for the rest of the world. Today I would like to speak of a true principle that the world would deem strange or foolish: the importance of understanding and demonstrating proper reverence and respect for one another, for deity, and for all that is sacred and holy.

A concern for our lack of reverence and respect is not at all new. Let me share with

Edwin G. Austin, Jr., was artistic director of the BYU International Folk Dance Ensemble when this devotional address was given on 21 May 2002.

you a short sermon given by President Wilford Woodruff:

I have heard President Young and President Taylor a great many times from this stand ask the people to keep quiet until the meeting was dismissed; but as soon as the sermon ends there are a hundred of them [who] rush for the doors. I do not like it. It pains me to see the President of the Church make this request, and the people pay no attention to it.

Now, in this fast age we are passing from a polite age to a very rude one in many respects. When I was a boy sixty-five years ago, and went to school, I never thought of passing a man whom I knew in the street, or a woman, without taking off my hat and making a bow. I never thought of saying “yes” or “no” to those that were placed over me. I was taught to say “yes, sir,” and “no, sir”; but today it is “yes” and “no,” “I will,” “I won’t,” “I shall” and “I shan’t.” Now, when I see this rudeness amongst us, I sometimes wish that the spirit of the New England fathers was more among the people. But I do hope, brethren, sisters and friends, when a man stops talking and the choir rises to sing, that you will keep your seats. You can afford to do this as well as the President of the Church, the Twelve Apostles, or others who are sitting on this stand. You don’t see us jump and run for the door the moment a speaker is done. The Lord is displeased with any such thing. [The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff, sel. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946), 183]

It almost sounds like President Woodruff has attended some of our BYU devotionals!

Respect Is Expressed in Many Different Ways

While serving a mission to the people of the Samoan Islands, I quickly learned about the importance of showing respect. The traditions of Samoa, locally known as “Fa’asamoa,” are very specific as to what is correct or not correct for a given situation.

For example, when walking through a village, it is common to be invited into a person’s home

to rest and share a meal. A person will call to you from their home (and I do not mean on a telephone), and there is a special way that this is done. In return, the prospective guest knows the proper way to politely refuse or accept this invitation. If accepted, footwear is first removed before entering the person’s home or “fale.” Then, before casual conversation begins, formal speeches are exchanged. In each speech a person’s position within the community and also their appropriate rank or title within the Samoan system of chiefs are recognized. Each person present in the home and their status within the village is acknowledged, beginning with the highest chief and concluding with the children. There is a special way to do this. Every person must be knowledgeable of this procedure in order to function appropriately within the village. In addition, a special form of language is employed during these speeches. Words are selected carefully. This “chief’s language” accords due respect to the recipients of the speech, and the knowledge thereof brings respect in turn to the person who articulates it correctly.

Here at home in the United States we also have many simple practices whereby we demonstrate respect for one another, an office, or a position. For example, when a woman walks into a room of seated men, they commonly stand to acknowledge her. We are also taught from a very early age that it is polite to first knock on the door of someone’s home before entering. And when we are being addressed by another, we know the importance of turning our attention away from other distractions to focus on the person speaking to us. We have learned to open doors for one another. In many communities of our southern United States, individuals address their elders as “Sir” and “Ma’am.” We address the president of the United States as “Mr. President.”

In the Church we have also preserved particular traditions of respect. When our prophet enters a room, we show our love

and respect by standing. As we worship together, the presiding authority is always offered the sacrament before the rest of the congregation. We do not refer to our Church leaders by their casual names but instead address them as “President,” “Bishop,” “Elder,” “Brother,” or “Sister.” When Christ appeared in the Americas, “the whole multitude fell to the earth” (3 Nephi 11:12).

By displaying this type of respect, we are not necessarily esteeming the person. More often we are expressing respect and reverence for the position or calling they hold. In the Church these callings are considered holy and sacred.

By Definition

The secular world defines the word *respect* in the following manner: to “esteem,” “to acknowledge the . . . integrity or worthiness of; . . . to show consideration for” (*Reader’s Digest Illustrated Encyclopedic Dictionary*, 1987, s.v. “respect,” 1430). *Reverence* is the “act of showing respect.” It is “a feeling of profound awe and respect, and often of love” (s.v. “reverence,” 1435). The world and the Church do not differ on these definitions.

By Commandment

Through the ages men have been taught the principle of reverence through commandments. All of us are familiar with the account in Exodus of the Lord’s appearance to Moses at the burning bush. When the Lord called, Moses answered, “Here am I” (Exodus 3:4). And then the Lord commanded, “Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5).

The Ten Commandments instruct us further regarding this subject: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain”; and, of course, “Honour thy father and thy mother” (Exodus 20:7, 12).

Five Ways to Increase Our Reverence

Today I would like to examine five suggestions for improving the ways in which we demonstrate respect.

1. Develop an Attitude of Reverence and Respect in Your Personal Life

Make a list of those things in your life that deserve your respect. Consider those people you love the most: your parents, your children, your husbands, and your wives. Consider those things that are sacred. This list should include the laws and covenants of the gospel and the holy priesthood (see *MD*, s.v. “reverence,” 651). Consider the people who have been placed over you in your family, in school, in the workplace, and in the organization of our Lord’s Church. Remember, it is the position, office, or calling that deserves our reverence and esteem. For example, we should always address the bishop with the title “Bishop” preceding his surname to show proper respect for his office.

In a world where we have too frequently allowed casual attitudes to dictate our dress and our language, we who are members of the Lord’s church must not become casual concerning those things that we consider sacred. We cannot allow the popular fashion of improper dress and language to lead us from the “strait and narrow path” we have chosen to follow.

2. Avoid the Too Frequent Repetition of Sacred Names

Christ set this example as He prayed: “Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name” (Matthew 6:9).

Joseph Fielding Smith taught:

The great lesson for us to learn, in all our preaching, writing, and conversations, is to use the titles of Deity sparingly, not with familiarity, or with lack of reverence. . . .

There is nothing that should be held in more sacred reverence and respect than the name of the

Supreme Being and the name of his beloved Son, our Redeemer. . . .

Even in the preaching of the gospel, the elders of Israel should exercise great care not to repeat these sacred names too frequently and needlessly when other terms of designation will suffice. [Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 1:16, 3:121]

In the revelation on priesthood given March 28, 1835, the Lord teaches us this important principle:

There are, in the church, two priesthoods. . . .

Why the first is called the Melchizedek Priesthood is because Melchizedek was such a great high priest.

Before his day it was called the Holy Priesthood, after the Order of the Son of God.

But out of respect or reverence to the name of the Supreme Being, to avoid the too frequent repetition of his name, they, the church, in ancient days, called that priesthood after Melchizedek, or the Melchizedek Priesthood. [D&C 107:1–4; emphasis in original]

3. Learn Prayer Language

Elder Didier of the First Quorum of the Seventy (and who, by way of interest, is personally fluent in seven languages) states that “language is of divine origin” (Charles Didier, “Language: A Divine Way of Communicating,” *Ensign*, November 1979, 25). And Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught us about what he refers to as “the special language of reverence and respect.” He wrote, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches its members to use special language in addressing prayers to our Father in Heaven” (“The Language of Prayer,” *Ensign*, May 1993, 15).

A friend of mine recently related to me the way by which he had discovered the

importance of prayer language. When he was younger he had felt a desire to speak to Heavenly Father in the same manner he would speak to his earthly father. He was very sincere as he strove to further this type of relationship with his Father in Heaven. However, with increased understanding and a few more years of wisdom—and a wife who unabashedly corrected him—his understanding of prayer language has changed. He can no longer contemplate how any individual could justify speaking to Heavenly Father—who is King of Kings—in the same fashion he or she would talk to an ordinary man.

President Spencer W. Kimball taught, “In all our prayers, it is well to use the pronouns *thee, thou, thy, and thine* instead of *you, your, and yours* inasmuch as they have come to indicate respect” (*Faith Precedes the Miracle* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978], 201).

Scripture has recorded three beautiful prayers offered by the Savior during His earthly ministry. They are found in Matthew 6:9–13; John 17:1–26; and 3 Nephi 19:20–23. They are models by which we all can emulate our Savior when He prayed.

Modern revelation also gives us important instruction in prayer. If we review carefully the few prayers that we are instructed to pronounce word for word while performing such sacred ordinances as baptism and the sacrament, we will immediately recognize many of the correct principles of showing proper respect to deity.

Elder Oaks reminded us:

Literary excellence is not our desire. We do not advocate flowery and wordy prayers. We do not wish to be among those who “pray to be heard of men, and to be praised for their wisdom.” (Alma 38:13.) [“The Language of Prayer,” 17]

However, this is not a valid excuse for not learning prayer’s divine language.

President Joseph Fielding Smith was clear when he said:

The Father and the Son should always be honored in our prayers with the utmost humility and reverence. . . .

. . . The changing of the wording of the Bible to meet the popular language of our day, has, in the opinion of the writer and his brethren, been a great loss in the building of faith and spirituality in the minds and hearts of the people. [Answers to Gospel Questions (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1958), 2:15, 17]

Our Church leaders produced a special issue of the *Ensign* in January of 1976 that was dedicated to prayer (see Don E. Norton, “The Language of Formal Prayer,” *Ensign*, January 1976, 44–47). It affords us tools that instruct us in the use of formal prayer language, and I encourage each of you to study its contents.

As parents, part of our stewardship is to teach our children to pray (see D&C 68:28). “We should give our children the privilege of learning this language by listening to their parents use it in the various prayers offered daily in our homes” (Dallin H. Oaks, “The Language of Prayer,” 18).

4. Avoid Vain Repetitions

Being attentive to what we say in our prayers and testimonies is necessary to avoid the use of vain repetitions. We then are better able to carefully consider and construct the thoughts we wish to communicate (see Matthew 6:7 and 3 Nephi 13:7).

One common misuse of language among some members of the Church today often occurs as they conclude a testimony, talk, or sermon. Unthinkingly, people sometimes close by saying, “I testify of these things in the name of Thy Son.” But the group being spoken to is still the congregation. This common mistake is probably due to the fact that members of the Church regularly use this phrase in their personal prayers when speaking directly to our Father in Heaven. In that case it is very appropriate. However, it is not correct usage when

speaking or testifying to others. In a testimony or talk we should close with such phrases as “in the name of our Savior,” “in the name of the Son,” or, simply, “in the name of Jesus Christ.”

The important principle here is that we become more attentive to and selective of the words we employ and not allow ourselves to use vain repetitions when speaking of deity in our testimonies and prayers.

5. Become Sensitive to the Whens and Wheres of Proper Behavior

The temple, our chapels, and our homes are sacred sanctuaries. We should treat them as such. In the Bible Dictionary we learn:

A temple is literally a house of the Lord, a holy sanctuary. . . . A place where the Lord may come, it is the most holy of any place of worship on the earth. Only the home can compare with the temple in sacredness. [Bible Dictionary, s.v. “temple,” 780–81]

President Marion G. Romney wrote:

Our reverence for [the Lord] increases as our love for him grows.

*. . . When one recognizes the house in which he is meeting as the dwelling place of the Lord, whom he loves with all his heart, then it is not difficult for him to have reverence for it. [Marion G. Romney, “Reverence,” *Ensign*, September 1982, 3–4]*

In speaking of our sacrament services, Joseph Fielding Smith said:

I think this is an occasion when the gospel should be presented, when we should be called upon to exercise faith, and to reflect on the mission of our Redeemer, and to spend time in the consideration of the saving principles of the gospel, and not for other purposes. Amusement, laughter, light-mindedness, are all out of place in the sacrament meetings of the Latter-day Saints. We should assemble in the spirit of prayer, of meekness, with devotion in our

hearts. I know of no other place where we can gather where we should be more reflective and solemn and where more of the spirit of worship should be maintained. [Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 2:342]

President Gordon B. Hinckley observed:

Socializing is an important aspect of our program as a Church. We encourage the cultivation of friends with happy conversations among our people. However, these should take place in the foyer, and when we enter the chapel we should understand that we are in sacred precincts. . . .

We do not ask our people to remove their shoes when they come into the chapel. But all who come into the Lord's house should have a feeling that they are walking and standing on holy ground and that it becomes them to deport themselves accordingly. [Gordon B. Hinckley, "Reverence and Morality," *Ensign*, May 1987, 45–46]

Often we just need to remind ourselves of where we are and why we are there.

Members of BYU's The Dancers Company, Living Legends, Young Ambassadors, and the International Folk Dance Ensemble had the privilege of performing in the Church's production of *Light of the World* during the recent Salt Lake City 2002 Winter Olympic Games. One evening at the conclusion of a special preview for a majority of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, members of the cast awaited with anticipation as the apostles approached the stage. No one instructed even the youngest members of the cast as to how they should act in the presence of these holy men. No one had to. Everyone quickly and quietly sat down. Not a word was spoken. The feelings of the

Spirit were very strong and unmistakable. Love, admiration, and respect for these special witnesses of Christ filled the air. All attention was focused on Elder Packer as he addressed us. There was total concentration. No one wanted it to come to an end. When these Brethren finally did leave, the Spirit remained with us. Our behavior had changed in their presence.

I believe that if we will approach all our meetings with a desire to become one with the Holy Spirit, our feelings of the Spirit will dictate our actions, and without prior thought or instruction we will act and speak accordingly. We do change in the presence of deity.

Blessings Await Us

Finally, in a prayer offered at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, the Prophet Joseph Smith referred to blessings that are "ordained to be poured out upon those who shall reverence thee in thy house" (D&C 109:21). Each one of us may be recipients of those blessings that are waiting to be poured out upon those who sincerely emulate the qualities of our Elder Brother. His actions and words define the deep respect He has for His Father. May we also learn to glorify our Father in Heaven and His Son Jesus Christ through deeds and words that are pure and undefiled.

Our Heavenly Father lives. Jesus is the Christ, and He has atoned for our sins. President Gordon B. Hinckley is a true prophet, seer, and revelator appointed to lead Christ's restored church today. We all can be partakers of the fullness of His gospel and its blessings if we will reverently continue in faith and choose to live such that the Holy Ghost will be our constant companion. Of this I testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.