

Faith Pulpit

Customary Restraints

“And whatsoever things are ...lovely...of good report,...think on these things” (Phil. 4:8).

“For the mystery of lawlessness doth already work” (2 Thess. 2:7).

In Western culture an aspect that helps make life tolerable comes under the heading of manners. We live under a whole complex of accepted ways of doing things, of introducing people, of eating, of choosing clothes, and of carrying ourselves. All these are part of culture, and in the more limited sense of that word, all tend to limit and guide the cultured person.

Even by our standards, we may take it that Jesus never did anything in bad taste. It appears that only at the extremity of Israel’s spiritual insensitivity did God startle them with Ezekiel’s strange diet, Hosea’s marriage, or Amos’ choice of clothes. While the priests ministered in a prescribed ritual while wearing prescribed apparel, the New Testament knows no detailed church liturgy or any prescribed ceremony for the church’s meetings or its observance of the Lord’s supper.

With the passing of the centuries we have received certain traditions guiding personal conduct, traditions in line with those observed in previous cultures.

I. How did we get them?

Two generations ago, the social arbiter was one Emily Post, whose book on etiquette was taken as an authority. She and all the others who write on etiquette are to be taken, not as lawgivers, but as observers, describing what they have seen as the expressions of good taste among community leaders. Manners then are a sort of consensus of what constitutes decent living. (That is how dictionaries are written.) The writers stress two basic principles that underlie the traditions, thoughtfulness and common sense. In any age, to interrupt a conversation requires an apology for a breach of

thoughtfulness. A table setting may seem arbitrary, but there is a commonsense logic in the placing of every piece. Custom then is what codifies thoughtfulness, and common sense in action.

The traditions trace to a deeper impulse, the desire to express the importance of certain of life's moments. We now see that in the rented apparel at weddings and graduations. In other ages nobility wore their best velvets and gowns, not only to banquets and balls, but also to their own executions at the block. The ceremony imparts something of transcendence to the events of fallen humanity. The bearing, the decorum, expresses something of the respect we feel for the moment or the person. The elders around the throne not only worship; they worship in appropriate apparel. One may listen to a symphony in living stereo; but it is not the same thing as to experience a concert.

True, the customs slowly change, and manners do not prescribe quite the same procedures that they did one or two centuries before. But manners remain, informed by the experience of centuries, and slowly modified within the limits of thoughtfulness and common sense.

II. Why the current attack on manners?

In the last generation it has been regarded as cool to throw off restraints, to mock at formalities, to wear orange socks at commencement, or to belch during a wedding.

Part of the attack has been in the name of personal liberty. The mystery of lawlessness doth already work. In the end times we expect to see a revolt against authority; men find any restraint irksome, especially those restraints that seem to have ethical or Biblical implications. With that notion of freedom comes the rejection of the wisdom of the past; not many of the now generation like to read books, especially traditional ones. Rules are irksome. Manners are a bother, sometimes even to those who are familiar with them.

The big turning point coincided with the jazz age, when Western culture finally accepted Darwin. No longer bound by blue laws or Victorian ideas of morality, people enjoyed a musical idiom that expressed that. Freedom moved further when the naughty music of the jazz era gave way to the raw vulgarity of the 1960's and since. So much for table manners, dress codes, and virginity. Leading the way, the youth culture gained erotic freedom, and the middle-aged got something to lament.

III. What does it matter?

Are we prepared to say that it is a sin to interrupt, to throw food, or to wear a cap indoors? Hardly. It is just that the rejection of restraint only begins with the social graces and clothes. The more serious rejections follow inexorably.

Decorum conveys a certain respect. In a mission setting I was once told that when I went into a government office I was to wear suit and tie, even though it was in the tropics. A missionary might

exercise his liberty in Christ by wearing a sweaty sport shirt in such a place, but he would probably be the last person to be waited on. Manners and appearance are a form of communication, telling among other things one's respect or contempt for the Person or entity he meets.

Our loss of manners may convey even more. It coincides with our loss of the meaning of life, and is it any great surprise that it seems almost normal to abort babies, get a divorce, or commit suicide? What is left to be treated with reverence? Who is there left to respect? We used to address ministers as "Reverend." Not so easy if he is wearing grubbies in the shopping center.

Some Reflections

We will not reverse our culture, nor do we have any mandate to try. We do have a mandate to give people the Word of God. We do have a duty to put no unnecessary barriers between them and the Gospel (Rom. 2:24, 1 Cor. 9:19–23).

In throwing off restraints our young people have hardly enriched their souls. They have doubtless increased their erotic activity, but it would be hard to persuade anyone that they have retained the magic of romance or that they are happier for the change. Witness the widespread despair among teens.

What people wear to church does have implications. In a worshipping church with everyone dressed like the middle-aged, a bearded stranger is unlikely to stay if he sees not one Person he can identify with (1 Cor. 14:24,25). On the other hand, if the whole church comes dressed for a picnic, can we expect anything like awe in the presence of the Holy One? We will need to do some hard thinking to find the balance, if indeed we believe that we need a balance between those two considerations.

If our services are to entertain, with a little worship thrown in, let us not deceive ourselves that the energies of the flesh are going to do anything meaningful for the spirit. In the 300's the church accommodated the pagans, and the mass was one of the results. For the Medievals the Church invented morality plays and indulgences. Modernists installed juke boxes in their church activity rooms so as not to lose their young people. It will likely appear that the implications for true evangelism will continue to follow that pattern, that accommodating to the pagans in fact has a way of shutting them out of heaven, as surely in this era as in past ones.

In no way do decorum, manners, and dress codes insure spiritual reality, much less do informality and vulgarity. Let us give ourselves to the kind of evangelism and Christian service that puts people in awe of God. But let us be assured that reverence for holy things and awe of God are in increasingly short supply.

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A prolific author, he wrote several books and articles, leaving a lasting legacy of theological insight and pastoral wisdom. Dr. Delnay's deep love for God's Word and his dedication to training the next generation of Christian leaders impacted countless students and ministries worldwide. He went home to be with Christ in 2023.