

# *One New Book for the Preacher*

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REVERENCE: RENEWING A FORGOTTEN VIRTUE by Paul Woodruff. Oxford University Press, 2001. 248 pages.

Not with great frequency, but with some regularity, conversation in our pastoral staff meetings turns to something like, “What can we do to promote a more reverent atmosphere in the church before the worship service begins?” References are made to the “visiting” that takes place among people sitting in the pews, the “noisy” atmosphere in the vestibule, and the “interference” that often occurs as people try to listen to the organ prelude and/or to pray prior to the call to worship.

So, when the title *Reverence* appeared on a National Public Radio review some months ago, I went on-line and ordered it from Amazon! Upon receiving the book, I soon found that Paul Woodruff, the Mary Helen Thompson Professor of the Humanities at the University of Texas in Austin, wasn’t quite on the same issue as I had first assumed. In fact, it turns out, he was on an even better one, from my perspective.

Rather than moving into a discourse on why people should be quiet in church, he probed to a deeper level, starting on the first page: “Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control—God, truth, justice, nature, even death.” He goes on to offer a schema (not a definition) for this ‘virtue’: “Reverence is the well-developed capacity to have the feelings of awe, respect, and shame when these are the right feelings to have”(8). Something of an agenda appears by the end of his first, introductory, chapter, when he notes that “The voices that call in the name of God for aggressive war have lost sight of human limitations”(14). He then goes on to state, “If you desire peace in the world, do not pray that everyone share your beliefs. Pray instead that all may be reverent” (15).

Okay, enough quotations for a while. How does Woodruff go about his approach to reverence? As noted above, his argument begins with the assertion that reverence is a virtue — not something that one possesses, but a capacity that one has. As a virtue, reverence extends beyond the limitations of a particular religion or culture. Hence, none can claim it as a “possession.” It maintains a consistent character that transcends boundaries of particularity.

To explore and elucidate this overarching constant, Woodruff (as you’d expect a good humanities professor to do!) goes back to trace the concept in two different cultures: ancient Greece and ancient China. Why these two? Because the likelihood of their having any contact with each other is remote at best. Yet both cultures place a high premium on reverence as a cardinal virtue, and their descriptions are strikingly similar. His chapters on these two cultures are simple, profound, and enlightening. And he demonstrates convincingly the transcendent features of reverence.

With his thoroughgoing examination of reverence through cultural analysis, accompanied by down-to-earth observations on present-day indications of the presence of reverence, or the lack thereof, Woodruff unintentionally brings some valuable

insights to the preaching task.

On the one hand, he raises some constructive models, if not critical strategies, for any preacher who is planning to address a present-day controversial issue with both respect and candor. A reverent preacher will have a profound respect for his or her own limitations as a human being, accompanied by equally profound respect and passion for addressing the issue. If some of the charges and counter-charges so characteristic of our religious “culture wars” were tempered with a level of reverence, as Woodruff describes it, conversation might just be possible. A preacher who maintains an attitude of reverence in the preparation and delivery of a sermon will be both clear and respectful in what is said and how it is said.

Second, a reverent preacher possesses an important constituent element of leadership. As Woodruff puts it: “Reverence is the greatest virtue of leaders, because it gives powerful people the strength to listen to those who are weaker than they, and it reminds them that no one, no matter how successful, was ‘born complete, knowing everything’”(94).

Woodruff is a helpful guide for preachers seeking pathways to encourage reconciliation, promote civility, and model openness to learning, while facilitating effective prophecy and instilling faith. I recommend a reverent reading of him!