

Our regard for others is not simply a product of our temporal, earthly relationships. Ultimately, we ought to regard our neighbors as those for whom Christ died. If Christ counted them worthy of his suffering and death on the cross, then how much more should we consider them worthy of dignified, honorable, civil, well-mannered behavior.

Good manners are not a panacea, but the attention that we give to teaching, reinforcing, and practicing good manners as Christians is a reflection of hope. Our hopeless world may desperately invest everything in a show of civility or toss it out all-together, relishing disorder and dishonor. The children of God, however, have been brought out of chaos and darkness into the marvelous light of their Savior's glory. We are citizens of a better country, a heavenly one. We are learning to love, just as we have been loved by God. We are learning to rejoice in Godly society. Attention to good manners, prompted by humility and a high regard for others, is one of the ways that we show our hope for eternity to the world. ✨

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250 Patrons

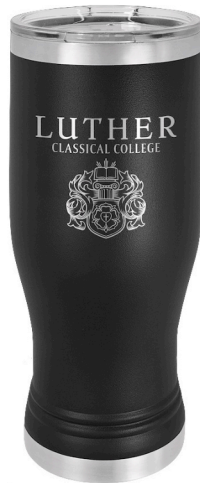
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AD FONTES

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MINDING MANNERS

BY REV. DAVID M. BUCHS

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TAKE A FEW MINUTES SOMETIME TO LISTEN TO Edvard Grieg's "In the Hall of the Mountain King," and while you are listening, picture this: Peer Gynt, a Norwegian outlaw, quixotic and rash, stands in the court of the Troll King. He is seeking refuge among the brutish trolls. They will welcome him on one condition: he must adopt their bad manners. He must wear a tail. He must drink their foul drink. He must give up what is refined for what is ugly and distorted. The Troll King does not care what Peer Gynt thinks or believes. He knows that if he can get Peer Gynt to take up their bad manners, it will be enough to turn him into a troll sooner or later.

His view of things is quite the opposite of Professor Henry Higgins in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Higgins wagered that he could take the coarse flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, and teach her to be mannered like a lady. He believed that manners are purely superficial, and Eliza soon realizes that as lady-like as she becomes, Higgins will always regard her as a flower-girl.

However, as Eliza is transformed into a lady, she learns that manners are seldom purely superficial. Rather, they are reflective of what people believe about one another. "You see, really and

truly, apart from the things anyone can pick up (the dressing and the proper way of speaking, and so on), the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated." Professor Higgins's bad manners towards Eliza are not trivial, as he supposes. It is not she who must become a lady, but he a gentleman.

Manners and character exert a gravitational pull on one another. This reality is analogous to the familiar aphorism within the church: *Lex orandi lex credendi*. "The law of prayer is the law of belief." Our prayers and worship influence what we believe, and vice versa. The style of church music matters as well as its content. Reverence in the sanctuary matters as well as the doctrines that are taught.

The same is true of the relationship between manners and character. Manners are not superficial. They are formative of character, and your character is reflected in your manners. Solomon teaches us that even the manners of other people can affect our own character: "Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare" (Prov. 22:24-25).

There is one particular aspect of character that is especially at stake when it comes to manners: how we think of other people.

The 19th century English pamphleteer, William Cobbett, wrote in his *Advice to Young Men*, "In your manners be neither boorish nor blunt, but even these are preferable to simpering and crawling. I wish every English youth could see those of the United States of America; always *civil*, never *servile*."

He gives a helpful description of the range of bad manners, but more helpful still is his use of the word *civil*. We are always living in an ordered relation to others, as fellow citizens. Our behavior ought to be reflective of that order. Manners are not so much a question of right or wrong, but order and disorder. The disorder that follows from bad manners is uncivilized.

Good manners, on the other hand, are good because they reflect the God-given order of human society. That is, they give honor

where honor is due. They regard others as they ought to be regarded.

Think about the merit of such simple terms of address as "sir" and "ma'am". These are an acknowledgement that there's an order in place, and I am subject to someone else. I'm the child, and he's my father. I'm the student, and she's my teacher. I'm the player, and he's my coach. I'm worker, and he's my boss.

"Please" and "Thank you" can easily devolve into meaningless politeness, but when they are sincere, notice what they acknowledge: I am the recipient of a gift from a gracious giver. I recognize that the person opposite me is worthy of gratitude.



Jesus Mocked, Pierre Eskrich, ca. 1550-ca. 1590.

A firm handshake and looking someone in the eye - these show where my attention lies. They demonstrate that I consider you to be worthy of my attention. You are not just an object or an obstacle, but you are another soul with dignity just like mine.

Even when manners seem arbitrary in their specifics, they have the purpose of recognizing the God-given vocations and relationships. Good manners should be cultivated because they reflect a humility that regards others more significant than ourselves (Phil. 2:3).

Notice how this is at play in Paul's discussion of head-coverings in 1 Corinthians 11. He suggests that nature teaches something about honor and dishonor in the way that you wear your hair (1 Cor. 11:15). Good manners are about giving honor where honor is due. So even how you wear your hair or whether you leave your head covered or uncovered is for the sake of others. Your manners are reflective of how you think about others.