



"Humility is the solid foundation of all the virtues."
—Confucius

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What Has Happened to Deference?

In a crowded restaurant not long ago, I noticed that a large number of male patrons entered wearing a hat of some kind, but almost none ever removed it from his head, even after being seated and served. This must be a worldwide tradition because just a few days before this, I had received from a friend across the ocean a picture of family seated to eat dinner, and the young men still had their hats on.

I admit that most people would consider me old, but when I was younger such a thing would have been considered rude and a sign of disrespect of one's host. Even in Western movies, the cowpoke was shown removing his ten-gallon hat as soon as he passed through the doorway of even a humble log cabin into which he had been invited. Removing the hat was a token of respect given to the family who lived there.

[God](#) commanded [Moses](#) to remove his shoes at the burning bush out of deference to the holy ground on which he stood. The ground was holy only because God Himself was present there, so the deference that Moses readily gave was in reality deference to Him. What is interesting is that God insisted on it, which suggests that Moses immediately had to learn his place.

The White House recently announced that men meeting the new President, Barack Obama, in the Oval Office no longer had to wear suit jackets unless they were going to be televised. The jacket had been required out of respect for the office, the highest in the land. During Jimmy Carter's administration, even denim jeans were deemed acceptable! Perhaps this is a signal that these politicians are one with the common man. In reality, it seems to be a put-on humility that has nothing to do with true respect.

The *American Heritage College Dictionary* defines *deference* as "submission or courteous yielding to the opinion or wishes of another; courteous respect." Americans historically have prided themselves on their informality, having been brought up in a nation that operates under the belief that each person is just as good as anybody else. However, great misunderstandings exist regarding what the term "good" means because no one has set a national standard for it. Thus, each person feels free to set his own standard. Interestingly, the same dictionary defines *informal* as "not in accord with prescribed regulations or forms."

Forms of "defer" appear seven times in the King James Bible, and only one of them is in the New Testament. However, the concept is described in different terms frequently in both testaments. It should be because deference is an important virtue for a Christian to have as part of his character. Why? It reveals one's humility—that he is thoughtfully aware of others' well-being and seeking to serve them even in seemingly unimportant and insignificant ways.

Jesus points out its importance: "And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" ([Matthew 23:10-12](#)). Truly, human nature loves to be praised, and then it takes advantage of those who heap the praise. It loves to receive distinction that elevates it above others. It covets being the one directing and controlling others and their opinions. Yet, Jesus makes it clear that His disciples are not to follow that path. Instead, they are to lower themselves in order to serve. In the end, it is God who gives true exaltation, and that will be decided on the basis of the humble service the Christian has given. Thus, a truism arises: The humble heart defers without regret to those it willingly serves.

[Hebrews 13:17](#) provides an example of commanded deference. "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with [joy](#) and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you." From other portions of the Bible, it is clear that the author is not commanding obsequious, fawning, or slavish obedience. The Greek word translated as "be submissive" simply means "to yield." Yielding is synonymous with deferring. The author is simply asking for willing cooperation to help the congregational leaders carry out their teaching and organizational functions.

[James 2:1-4](#) provides an example of a wrong kind of deference:

My brethren, do not hold the [faith](#) of our Lord [Jesus Christ](#), the Lord of glory, with partiality. For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing fine clothes and say to him, "You sit here in a good place," and say to the poor man, "You stand there," or, "Sit here at my footstool," have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

James is obviously saying that the deference given to the rich man at the expense of the poor man is prejudiced and wrong in God's eyes. Nor should solicitous attention be given to the poor man at the expense of the rich. Instead, both should be given equal attention.

The Bible gives many examples of faithful people deferring, usually at some sacrifice to themselves, in service to others. This pattern of exemplary teaching is established for all to learn from. Abraham is a clear example:

And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. . . . So Abram said to Lot, "Please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brethren. Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me. If you take the left, then I will go to the right; or if you go to the right, then I will go to the left." ([Genesis 13:7-9](#))

[Isaac](#) learned this lesson well from his father, applying the same approach over long periods in many disputes, frequently over water rights ([Genesis 26: 18-22](#)). Another fine example appears in [Ruth 1:16-18](#), in which the elderly lady, Naomi, defers to the earnest request of the much-younger Ruth:

But Ruth said, "Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you: for wherever you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge: your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. The LORD do so to me, and more also if anything but death parts you and me." When [Naomi] saw that she was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her.

I Samuel 25 provides a parallel illustration, when David was about to wreak vengeance against Nabal for his stubborn refusal to give him and his group of warriors some food after they had successfully defended Nabal's property and crops. However, upon Abigail's appeal, David deferred. Many more examples appear in Scripture, but in each case, some measure of [wisdom](#) was required to make a right choice. However, if the attitude of humble and respectful submission to God and to each other had not also been present, no deference would ever have been made. This is our choice.

- John W. Ritenbaugh

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by Martin G. Collins

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