

Worship Posture

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Does posture make a difference in the way you worship? In the way you sing to God? In the way you pray? Does it affect your mood or level of involvement for good or for bad? Does God have a favorite worship posture? Short answer: yes, He does. It's when the heart of the worshipper is prostrate, beating "in spirit and in truth" (John 4).

In traditional circles, the old adage on worship posture was, "Stand for praise, kneel for prayer, and sit for instruction." That was about it, unless you count "sleeping in" or "snoozing during the sermon" which seemed to affect certain men in particular. Going "prostrate" was much rarer, yet sometimes used in special cases such as ordination or confirmation (or in deep, private prayers of supplication) to indicate complete submission to God. In regular assemblies, however, worshippers kept their eyes forward and didn't shake hands or "pass the peace" or turn to a neighbor and say, "Good Morning." I have a humorous recollection of the first time I saw a church full of people trying to break out of their

invisible but very real, tight boxes of glass space around them. It seemed like glass was shattering all over the place to watch people to turn to someone in the pew next to them and solemnly intone: "The peace of the Lord." It was a major undertaking to get people to move, speak or shake hands and my mind still carries a funny snapshot of the look of horror and embarrassment on some of their faces!

Today, the range of movement has increased depending on the worship style to include expressions such as clapping, raising of hands, even dancing. What would have raised eyebrows and stimulated fodder for gossip at the grocery store 20 years ago is often now embraced or is at least tolerated, depending on the denomination, the church and the style of worship.

Like many of you, I grew up in a "no-clap, no-hands-raised" environment. And like many of you I've learned to be comfortable with expressions that were at one time verboten. As a pre-seminary student I learned that the Hebrew word for worship meant "to bow down" or "to prostrate oneself" and that the NT word for worship (*proskuneo*) also meant "to prostrate oneself" or "to bend the knee (in worship)." But scripture doesn't limit itself to worship that requires bowing and David's dancing in worship comes quickly to mind. In scripture many different body expressions such as standing, laying prostrate, lifting hands, clapping, singing, shouting, bowing, kneeling, dancing and even jumping (see Acts 3:8) are used to worship God. It makes sense that the Good News of Jesus' love and forgiveness for sinners might inspire someone who has been burdened under a heavy load of guilt to want to "jump for joy." Even Tom Cruise jumped for joy on Oprah for his love of a woman. If Katie Holmes deserves that jump, how much more our God, who alone is truly awesome and worthy of our praise?

A lot of us have hidden behind the "let everything be done decently and in order" rubric for a long time. What this can really mean is the "decently and in order" worship expressions we have always

used and become accustomed to, or to put it another way, “decently and in order” really means “no change whatsoever.” To make a change with the past is thought by many to be “not decent” and truly “out of order.”

Personally, I think we put way too much emphasis on the physical and musical aspects of corporate worship anyway. If we’re going to do some “bowing of the knees” it’s really got to be a “prostration of the heart” not the knee or it isn’t real worship – worship in spirit and in truth. The outside stuff just shows what’s going on in the inside: the fruit demonstrates the quality of the root. God clearly explains in John 4 and Romans 12 that our greatest acts of worship are the “everyday” moments of our lives, not just that one hour of the 168 hours each week that we spend together in church doing what we’ve hopefully been doing alone for the other 167.

Perhaps the words we use for worship expression other than those to stand, sit, sing and kneel simply need to be upgraded. After all, we no longer have janitors; we have maintenance personnel. We don’t have secretaries; we have administrative assistants. Companies that desire their employees to see themselves in a positive new light, bearing a portion of responsibility for the company’s success are given the title “partner” or “associate.” You don’t ask for the clerk or the cashier, you look for the “sales associate.” Other companies that wish to underpay and skimp on benefits for their workers may denigrate their status by calling them “permalancers” or “permatemps” to justify in corporate speak the way they are taking advantage of others while building their own coffers.

I’m just thinking out loud what may help our churches open up a bit more. Maybe “dancing” could be upgraded to “Spontaneous Christian Movement” or “clapping” could be upgraded to “Corporate Approval” (to mean applause) or to “Personal Percussion” (to mean clapping along with the beat).

If you’ve ever been in a deaf church and watched them “sing” it goes well beyond communication with the hands and involves whole body movements, not in a “sensual way” but more like the “Spontaneous Christian Movement” mentioned above. Hey, if the deaf can do it, why not those who are not hearing-impaired? 😊

We have a tendency to throw labels (like “charismatic”) at certain actions such as clapping, lifting of hands and dance, just like we used to throw the label “Catholic” at actions such as kneeling or making the sign of the cross. Once something becomes labeled we too easily dismiss it (speaking pejoratively) as – “that,” said with a bit of a sniff of the nose. Critical, biblical thought goes out the window. Never mind that in worship David danced or that the lame man jumped for joy or that countless people in the Bible lifted up their hands or that we are encouraged to still lift up holy hands in the New Testament (see 1 Tim 2:8)! No, raising of hands is – “that”! Ew! Moving your body in worship is – “that”! Ew! Sometimes I wonder how much architectural considerations, and pews in particular, have gotten in the way of simple worship movement, even gentle swaying, that would have come more naturally if we weren’t so hemmed in. I love watching little children who haven’t yet “learned our traditions” go into the aisles of our churches and dance up a storm during the worship music, while mothers reach out desperately with long arms to reign the child back into the solemn sanctity of the pew. Maybe if we want to have the “faith of a little child” we should let a child lead us out of the confines of the pew and into the aisles.

Hey – relax. I’m not advocating revolution, not even reformation. I’m not suggesting you start dancing in worship or lifting hands or clapping with the beat this coming Sunday en masse. All I’m requesting you to do is to think critically, read your Bible on the subject, discuss it with others and pray about it.

Many of our churches have already found the freedom that comes from enjoying the Lord with our whole being and that includes our bodies. For them, it's been like coming out of the desert and discovering an oasis – not just a mirage that only looks like water – but real, running, luscious water coming from the River of Life. You can hardly believe it's real after all that time you've been in the desert but as you cup the clean, cool water to your face and drench yourself in its refreshing wetness you suddenly realize just how parched you actually were and you help yourself to another gulp of water and yet another, until you discover a satisfaction and contentment you didn't even realize existed or that you ever desired.

But for many more churches, the only way for anything different to start is for a new level of honesty to take place. Pastors and Christian teachers will need to patiently deconstruct a lot of our tradition, admit what's merely custom and acknowledge, as wonderful and useful as custom is, it's a far cry from "Thus saith the Lord." Then we can go about the uphill battle of recovering authentic Christian living and authentic Christian worship expression. We can and should stop being satisfied that the prayer posture we were taught at age 2 – with eyes closed, head bowed and hands folded – had everything to do with an age-appropriate way to keep us from being distracted and was not intended as a model for us to carry into adulthood, for instance, while we're talking to someone, looking them in the eye and praying for them at the same time without their knowing about it.

Actually the impetus for this article derived from a worship experience I had a couple weeks ago that made me sad. I was at my eighth grade son's spiritual retreat for junior high students. They had a great worship band, an anointed worship leader, outstanding speakers, cool videos, awesome lighting. It was so good that I had to fight off some feelings of jealousy for the little boy inside me who never got to experience powerful worship like that when I was in 8th grade. We were lucky to have Kum-ba-ya with a three-fingered guitarist at a campfire and maybe "Michael row the boat ashore" with marshmallows in the fire afterwards and a few pretty girls' smiles to keep us interested in yet another day at Camp Wak-ah-choa-bee. Yee-ha!

So with great interest I watched the kids at worship, wondering what profound affect it would surely have on them. Just as I suspected, some of them got wrapped up in the joy of gathering in the presence of the Lord, His Holy Spirit warming their spirits and hearts from the inside. They were soon on their feet, up close to the worship leaders, free to engage in "Spontaneous Christian Movement," "Corporate Approval," "Personal Percussion" and more as they sang and moved with faces aglow! I was happy for them to have learned and experienced this freedom in worship at such a young age.

But about a third of the students stayed in their seats unmoved by the worship music, the videos, the lighting, the messages or the responses of the other youth. They remained seated, many of them with arms crossed, vacant looks on some of their faces and some with sullen expressions. And I thought to myself, "This too, is worship – just another expression of it." Or was it? They sure learn perfectly everything we have taught them early, don't they?

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