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Ten Prayer Postures

MEN'S STAFF RETREAT OCTOBER 2019

"Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to their tent." (Exodus 33:10 NIV11)

10 biblical postures

1. Standing

We are very well used to standing in church services. But have we thought about its purpose? Do we know why we stand?

There are many postures for prayer, but the most common in the Old Testament is standing: Exodus 33:8, 10; 1 Samuel 1:26; Psalm 134; Matthew 6:5; Luke 18:11-13.¹

Jesus stood to pray and expected that his followers would do so (Mark 11:25). The people of God stood to listen to God as he spoke to them (Exodus 19:17; Nehemiah 8:5). Jesus stood up to speak and to read in the synagogue (Luke 4:16).

Why do we stand? I would suggest that we stand to indicate three things:

- i. Respect. It's customary to stand when someone to whom you wish to show respect comes in to a room. Military personnel stand at attention when receiving orders. Those in a courtroom stand when the judge enters.
- ii. Readiness. When standing one is ready to move, to act, to serve.
- iii. Confidence. Quoting Eriksson, "As a posture for prayer, standing signifies the freedom and dignity of the new covenant. Adopted as God's children, Christians may stand before God confident that they have been redeemed. Moreover, standing expresses the confidence of Christians as they await the final coming of the Lord. As the elect, they will be able to stand when God appears (Malachi 3:2). Enraptured in heaven, they will stand before the Lamb (Revelations 7:9; 15:2)."²

With these thoughts in mind, perhaps we should consider more carefully the times at which we stand in a corporate worship context. Should we stand for the reading of Scripture? Would it be helpful to stand together at the end of the service and receive an exhortation to go out into the world to act for Christ? Might it be healthy to vary our prayer postures at different points in the service and include standing as one way to exult in the confidence we have in Christ?

¹ Prayer is our focus here, but these postures can all be applied to personal and collective worship in other contexts

² "Participating in Worship" by Craig Douglas Erickson

2. Uplifted hands

I'll admit it, this one makes me uncomfortable. I occasionally lift my hands during private prayer - when I'm confident no one else can see me. I understand that it is a biblical posture for prayer. But there is something about it to which I find myself resisting. Why is this? Perhaps it is something to do with vulnerability. Nonetheless, let's examine the relevance of uplifted hands in corporate worship.

First of all, the Biblical perspective:

- i. A gesture of invocation - Exodus 9:29
- ii. A plea for God's help - Psalm 27:2; 87:9; 142:6
- iii. A blessing of the Lord's name - Nehemiah 8:6; Psalm 62:4; 133:2.
- iv. A blessing of others - Luke 24:50.
- v. Dedicating things into the Lord's service - 1 Kings 8:22.
- vi. Indicating the offering of one's own self - Psalm 140:2.

The early church appears to have prayed in this way:

"Therefore I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing." (1 Timothy 2:8 NIV11)

Tertullian (an early Christian writer) commented that such a posture recalled Christ on the cross: "Not only do we raise them (our hands), we even spread them out, and imitating the passion of our Lord, we confess Christ as we pray."

To quote Eriksson again, "Through the uplifting of hands the body urges the opening of one's spirit to God's blessings. When the palms are directed forward, it expresses and evokes a reverence before the presence of God. With arms lifted high there is a suggestion of surrender, not as that of a vanquished person but of one who freely submits to the kingdom of God."

These gestures are common in charismatic Christianity and some similar traditions. Not so much in my background or current practice. However, perhaps not only our congregations but I myself should consider the value of this posture in corporate prayer.

3. Raising eyes

According to Jesus, our eyes are windows of the soul (Matthew 6:22). Biblically eyes are connected with:

- i. God's favour (2 Kings 12:2; Isaiah 49:5).
- ii. Human religious knowledge (Genesis 3:6).
- iii. Pride and lust (Psalm 17:27; 2 Peter 2:14).
- iv. Remembrance of the saving acts of God (Exodus 13).
- v. Spiritual blindness or insight (Isaiah 6:9-10; John 12:40; Acts 28:26-27).

What about Jesus? He "looked up to heaven" when praying over the five loaves and two fish (Luke 9:16). He prayed for the oneness of the church with lifted eyes (John 17:1). He lifted his eyes to pray at the raising of Lazarus (John 11:41).

Quoting Erickson, "The lifting up of eyes is a naturally integrating posture for prayer. As eyes are lifted, one's whole being is turned toward God. The lifting up of eyes becomes the look of a child gazing upward into the face of a parent, fully confident of a loving and supportive relationship."

Whilst we all understand that God is not "up there", there's something about looking upward which might benefit us in our corporate worship.

In more traditional buildings, especially cathedrals, where ceilings are so high as to be almost “in the heavens” the opportunity to look up grants an opportunity to consider the transcendent.

How might we achieve this in the various homes, halls and buildings we use?

4. Kneeling

What is the value of kneeling in corporate worship? First of all let’s have a look at Scripture:

- i. Solomon’s prayer of dedication for the temple (1 Kings 8:54)
- ii. Adoration and praise (Psalm 94:6).
- iii. Christ in Gethsemane (Luke 22:41).
- iv. Stephen’s prayer for his persecutors (Acts 7:60).
- v. Peter praying for Tabitha (Acts 9:40).
- vi. Prayers of departure and blessing (Acts 20:36; 21:5).
- vii. Paul in prayer (Ephesians 3:14).

We tend to associate kneeling with an especially powerful awareness of our sinfulness before God. However, this is not particularly biblical. It’s something that came into the church consciousness later.

In many church traditions kneeling is reserved for penitential prayer or acts such as receiving communion. Does this mean that, in our tradition where this is not so common, we should not utilise kneeling in our corporate settings?

We can pray whilst standing, and pray whilst seated. But isn’t there something different about praying whilst kneeling? What might it be like if we listened to Scripture read while we knelt on the ground? How might our experience change if we sang whilst kneeling?

Consider what Paul tells us about kneeling:

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9–11 NIV11)

There is no suggestion in the context that such kneeling is negative, but an appropriate response to our wonderful saviour. If this will be the case on that day, perhaps we should get in training today.

5. Bowing

Yes, bowing. It seems strange. Why do we bow? As an expression of honour and reverence. Psalm 94:6–7 reminds us of the value of bowing as a gesture of reverence.

What does bowing do for us? A number of things:

- i. An expression of thankfulness (Psalm 137:2).
- ii. An acknowledgement of the presence of the holy (Psalm 21:9; 44:11).
- iii. An attitude for worship and adoration (Genesis 24:26; Exodus 12:27; 34:8; 1 Chronicles 29:20; 2 Chronicles 29:29; Nehemiah 8:6).
- iv. Posture of lament (Psalm 34:14;).
- v. Gesture of supplication (Exodus 11:8).
- vi. Reverential greeting (Genesis 33:3, 7; 43:28).

Ultimately, Jesus bows his head on the cross, John 19:30.

To quote Erickson, “The bow is a reverential gesture that acknowledges the presence of God as mediated through objects and people.”

Is there a place for the ‘bow’ in our corporate church settings? Bowing before God in prayer, bowing before the word?

6. Prostration

We might have reached the most challenging of all postures! As uncomfortable as I feel about raising hands, the idea of prostration is on a whole different level. However, the Bible mentions prostration as a posture of prayer more than any other.

Some Old Testament references:

Deuteronomy 9:8; Psalm 37:6; 43:25; Genesis 18:2; 19:1; Judges 13:20; Daniel 8:17; Genesis 17:3; Joshua 5:14; Ezequiel 1:28; Isaiah 49:23; Psalm 94:6; 2 Chronicles 7:3; Numbers 22:31; Genesis 23:7; 42:6; 43:26; 1 Samuel 20:41; 24:8.

The New Testament tends to translate the word for prostration as “worship”. We see that as Jesus prays in Gethsemane he is worshipping/prostrating himself in Matthew 26:39; Mark 14:35.

After his resurrection the followers of Jesus “worship/prostrate” themselves at the feet of Jesus, Matthew 28:9, 17; Luke 24:52.

Paul mentions prostration as part of Christian worship in 1 Corinthians 14:25.

In Revelation the saints in glory are prostrating themselves before the throne of God, Revelation 4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4.

It is appropriate in our corporate worship settings? If so, for what purpose?

7. Sitting

We take sitting for granted, of course. But should we consider that there may be some aspects of our Christian worship that benefit most specifically by the fact that we as a congregation and/or those leading worship might be seated?

Jesus sat among the teachers in the temple (Luke 2:46;) and he taught while seated (Luke 4:16-20; John 8:2). Mary sat at Jesus feet (Luke 10:39). Sitting was permitted during the delivery of prophecy (1 Corinthians 14:30).

Sitting whilst praying is unknown in the Bible. Instead, the many postures recorded for prayer vary from prostration and kneeling to standing. For some reason, sitting seems to have been avoided. It is, however, our most common posture for prayer. Are we missing something here?

There is, clearly, nothing inherently unspiritual about sitting, but should we consider more carefully how much “sitting” there is in our services? Granted, we must pay attention to the people in our midst who have physical challenges, but I wonder if we have too much sitting.

8. Kissing

In many cultures kissing on the cheek once, twice or even three times is a culturally normative method of greeting. It's not how I grew up, but even in my circles close friends would exchange a kiss of greeting.

Peter encourages Christ-followers to: "Greet one another with a kiss of love." (1 Peter 5:14 NIV11) Here the word "love" can also be translated "peace". We see the same activity encouraged in: Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Th. 5:26.

Are we missing something by not incorporating a "kiss of peace" either as part of our services, or in the fellowship? When I first came to the fellowships in which I now serve, we simply shook hands. Later that developed to hugging. I love hugging - now. Not when it started. But the tangible physical experience of getting up close and personal with one another reinforces our sense of family.

Might a kiss on the cheek achieve something similar and be even more biblical? Have we avoided kissing because of the potential lustful effects of such intimacy between men and women who are not married? Is a throwback to our largely student-based origins where energy and hormones tend to run amok?!

I'm not sure, but, it does seem clear that if we are claiming to be brothers and sisters in Christ, there must be some level of physical closeness with which we become comfortable.

My question is, whether this should be incorporated into our services. Is there a place for, at the right moment in the service, asking people to exchange a kiss? We sometimes do this in a different way by asking people to stand up and greet the person next to them. Often that means giving and receiving a hug. Why not a kiss also?

9. Laying on of hands

The most common example of laying on of hands in my fellowships is for the commissioning of elders. It is moving, reverent and meaningful. But do we restrict this act unnecessarily? Could it have other applications in our times of corporate worship?

What are some Biblical instances of the significance of hands?

- i. Hands are very expressive (Psalm 46:1; 97:8; Isaiah 55:12).
- ii. Hands are meant to be pure (Exodus 30:19-21; Psalm 23:4; James 4:8; Matthew 15:2, 20; 27:24; Mark 7:2, 5).
- iii. Hands are involved with sacrifice (Exodus 29:10-25).
- iv. They are laid upon people to confer power and authority (Deuteronomy 34:9; Acts 6:6; 8:17-19; 19:6; 1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6).
- v. Jesus himself lays hands on children (Matthew 19:15) and on people who needed healing (Mark 6:5; 8:23; 16:18; Luke 4:40).
- vi. The apostles laid hands on people (Acts 28:8).
- vii. The early church laid hands on missionaries (Acts 13:3).

Is there a place for laying on of hands in the following circumstances in our services?

- i. Sending out a mission team
- ii. Commissioning someone for a special work of service (teaching children; deacons; elders; taking up a leadership role; involvement in corporate worship leadership).
- iii. Praying over someone with a significant illness.
- iv. Someone leaving the congregation and moving to another church in another city or even country.
- v. Helping people with times of crisis in their lives.
- vi. Restoring people to the faith and/or the fellowship.

- vii. Praying over people about to be baptised.
- viii. Welcoming a new baby into the congregation.
- ix. Praying over a couple about to be married, or having just arrived back from honeymoon.

Perhaps there are other circumstances in which laying on of hands in prayer would be appropriate.

10. Folding of hands

What do you do with your hands when you pray? Do you hold your hands together? Do you interlace the fingers, hold palm to palm, steeple your fingers, pull the hands together and point them to 'heaven'?

As Eriksson says, "Despite modern popularity, the joining or folding of hands for prayer is a posture that is unknown in biblical and early Christian traditions. It likely originated from feudal rights in which vassals joined their hands between the hands of their Lord. Consequently, folded hands may be understood to express submission to God's will."

I rather like this image. As I place my hands together I can imagine God placing his hands around mine. In that posture I am weak. I am surrendered. My hands are within his hands. But, of course, that is where they should be. That is where they belong. In a willing, conscious and wholehearted healthy surrender.

Is there a place in our corporate worship for asking our attendees to put their hands together consciously for this purpose of honouring our Lord?

Concluding thoughts

These 10 points appeared originally on my [website](#) as 10 separate articles. Video versions are on my [YouTube channel](#),³ and podcast versions are available on my [podcast feed](#).⁴

They contain some aspects of teaching, but are primarily designed to stimulate thinking around why we do what we do - especially in the corporate worship arena. The perspective from which I write and record online is not to our members alone, but the wider world. That angle will explain some of the terminology I use.

It doesn't seem right to mandate any particular posture regarding prayer and worship in general. The New Testament does not contain 'rules' on posture. However, it might help us personally and collectively to grow in our worship of God if we were to teach on and practice different postures for prayer and worship.

I would be very interested in your thoughts on these matters. Both the biblical perspective, and the practical application.

God bless,

Malcolm

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³ <https://www.youtube.com/c/mccxmac>

⁴ <https://audioboom.com/channel/mccx>
www.malcolmccox.org