

HOW SHALL WE WORSHIP GOD TOGETHER

Part 3

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Third time “How shall we worship God together?” I have the message divided into three portions. I want to reiterate again our foundational principles for worship we shared the first time.

Our authority for worship is the scripture. We take an attitude towards the scripture that whatever the scripture prohibits we prohibit. Whatever the scripture encourages we encourage. Whatever the scripture does not explicitly speak on we exercise caution. And sometimes if the scripture doesn't band some particular practice we may proceed with it. Other times we may feel ill at ease with it. And momentarily or sometimes permanently put it aside.

Our goal in worship is to give service to God. God has many people in the outer court, quite another thing to come into the inner court and really in a time of worship meet with him and render praise to him and open our hearts to the living God.

The effect of worship is that we are built up. I came to this service tired this evening. It's been a long week. Tomorrow morning at 7:30 a new week gets under way. The agenda is packed. I have found that being in the presence of the Lord in these moments has been a tremendously exalting experience for me. I am ready again to face three more weeks of whatever is in store.

The manner of worship is that decency and order is our constant watchwords. In great times when the Spirit of God is moving the temptation in the name of spiritual revival and renewal is to lay aside decency for some sort of fanatic kind of behavior. When the Spirit of God works deeply it is not of a fanatical three ring show circus kind of variety. Some of the things that happen may be spectacular but they strike the heart as deeply from God.

There are some facets of teaching that I did not complete development in parts 1 and 2. I want to focus on them for a moment.

We spoke in the first evening of worshiping God with words. Like silence, singing, speaking, shouting. I didn't talk at that time about unison responses with words. I want to spend a moment on that.

There are three different ways when we in worship that we may respond to God with unison, praise and prayer. All of us praising and praying at the same time.

One way we do this is through unison praise and prayer, which uses the same words. This would be a responsive reading for example. Or saying the Lord's prayer together. The Lord taught us to pray in unison through the Lord's prayer. The psalms are full of what we might call liturgical responses to worship. Where the entire people of God together at one time share a portion of praise to God or prophecy of God to man together.

By the way, the word “liturgical” which is often used to describe churches, which are more formalistic in their worship, comes from a Greek word that means to render service to God. It's one of the words in the New Testament simply mean in to worship. So when you hear the term

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“liturgical” rather than simply reacting to it, recognize it as a good biblical word. A word which most often can be used to describe our corporate speaking to God together.

Another way of unison praise and prayer is when we all are speaking to the Lord at the same time and we’re all using different words. Some are saying, I thank you God! Some are saying, Praise the Lord. Some are saying Alleluia. Some are giving a run down of the titles of Jesus Christ in praise. There is no specific reference that I can point to in scripture that so explicitly says beyond a shadow of a doubt that says when God’s people gather together they may all each in different ways say something that is different from one another. But I think there’s enough indication in scripture that it gives me the freedom to go ahead. I can surmise that both the Old and New Testament saints worshipped in this manner.

Let me tell you why I can surmise that. Isaiah 56:7 and Mark 11:27 both declare the temple as a house of prayer for all nations. If it’s a house of prayer for all nations then in the temple area itself I would suspect in the outer courts as you were walking along you could hear people in many, many different languages praising and exalting God. Saying different things about God. In Acts 3:1 Peter went up to the temple at the hour of prayer. What was the hour of prayer? Just one person that stood up and prayed for everybody. There was a priest that no doubt gave a prayer for the people. But the hour of prayer was something evidently in Old Testament history and New Testament experience was a moment when everyone participated together. People coming up to worship God at that hour in the temple were each praising God and speaking to God in their heart.

Luke 1:10 affirms this view of temple prayer. When the time for burning of incense came, this was in reference to Zecharia, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside at the hour of prayer. In 1 Chronicles 23:20 “They [the Levites] were to stand every morning to thank and praise the Lord. They were to do the same in the evening.” Corporate praying.

Acts 1:14 the early church. “They all joined together constantly in prayer.” Acts 4:24 “They raised their voice together in prayer.” Acts 12:12 “Many people had gathered and were praying.” Psalm 100:4 “Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him and praise his name.” Psalm 109:30 “With my mouth I will greatly extol the Lord. In the great throng I will praise him.” It has pleased the Spirit to give us this form of worship especially in charismatic and Pentecostal circles where we have the liberty to begin to express to God in our way in a public setting.

I think it’s important for us when we do this not to put our spiritual consciousness in automatic. I find it very easy to slip into sort of a meaningless chant to God. I think to expand our consciousness of God when we’re all praising him together launch out in some areas of praise to God that you haven’t previously expressed to him. Begin to say sentences and phrases that really have meaning and can stand all by themselves even if you weren’t in a group. God somehow picks our prayers and our praises individually even though we’re offering them in a group. So when we come together it’s all right to really begin to praise the Lord. If you are the kind of person who is very quiet in these times of public praise let me encourage you to step out and begin to speak audibly to the Lord as an expression of offering to him fruit or praise from your lips. Picture yourself, if you need some imagery, of going up to the temple of the house of prayer for all nations. You’re beginning to say praise to God as you’re in that setting.

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There is yet another form of use of praise and prayer that is practiced in Pentecostal and charismatic circles. That is unison praise and prayer in other tongues. This may be commonly called at times, singing in the Spirit. Or there may be a time when simply a number of people begins praying in other tongues. We know from scripture that there is precedent for this occurring. Acts 2:4, "They all began to speak with other tongues." Each of them speaking differently from the other. Acts 10:46 at Cornelius' house "they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God."

However there is a caution to this area in 1 Corinthians 14. Paul lays down guidelines about Christians meeting together and avoiding a kind of a speaking in tongues which leaves the uninitiated person having the impression that they're lunatics. He says "Let one of you speak and then another. No more than three." I must frankly tell you I wrestle with this theologically and scripturally with this example in Acts of all speaking in tongues which is an evidence of the baptism of the Spirit in Acts versus Paul's instruction in Corinthians about one, two and at the most three. The only sense that I can get out of this that permits the kind of practice that we've indulged in freely is what Paul is referring to there is a specific utterance in tongues that is parallel to the utterance of prophecy. That if 45 people tried to start prophesying at one time it would be bedlam. We'd have to declare, "Order! One at a time!" But if 45 people are all praising God together and extolling him in individual worship we're in a different category.

It may be that the answer to this is found in Paul's instructions in Ephesians 5:19 and the parallel passage of Colossians 3:16 where he says to the believers, "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord." The word "psalm" is from the Hebrew and simply meant "to pluck." It stood for striking a musical instrument with a finger. Therefore a psalm was a sacred song that was accompanied by an instrument. Thus the psalms in the Old Testament were all at one time or the other sung accompanied by instruments. We've lost the tunes. We just have the words.

The next category Paul says is hymns. Hymns are songs composed by believers on Christian subjects. Like for example we sing a psalm when we sing "Bless the Lord O my soul and all that is within me. Bless his holy name." That's directly out of scripture. But when we sing, "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness" we're singing a hymn. The Christian message that is formulated by Christians on a Christian theme.

There has been that other category called "singing to one another with spiritual songs." What is this as compared to songs and hymns? We could perhaps engage in debate as to what it specifically means. I chose to take two reputed non-Pentecostal authors for their interpretation of that phrase. Simpson and F. F. Bruce. They say this about spiritual songs. "They may be unpremeditated words sung in the Spirit, voicing holy aspirations." Isn't that eloquent?

Unpremeditated words sung in the Spirit, voicing holy aspirations. It would be possible then that these kind of songs could be instantaneously composed on the spot in language that is understandable to the listener or perhaps even with Paul's phrase "I will sing with the Spirit."

Paul it seems to me in 1 Corinthians 14 is not ruling out the whole congregation singing in the Spirit as he is laying out guidelines against disharmonic kinds of speech that ultimately result in confusion and repudiation of the gospel message by unbelievers. The church as a body by the way never goes into a state of ecstasy. The word "ecstasy" in the New Testament is "out of

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being.” It’s literally go outside oneself and there are some individuals who have an ecstatic experience. Peter had a trance while he was at Joppa praying on the rooftop. Paul had a trance when he receives his call to go to the gentiles. But groups are never described as being in ecstasy where we’re all in the Spirit and for a while are out of our senses, all floating around in an ethereal, spiritual world. And true worship to the Lord, never in a congregation does this.

I think that how I may describe praying together in unison whether it is each of us praying in English, different things or each of us praying in the Spirit in sort of a harmonic way, I’d like to refer to Revelation 5:8 which talks about the prayer of the saints are in golden bowls of incense before the throne. God regards our prayers and our praises as very treasured in his presence.

Often I have found that unison praise and prayers in other tongues is a doorway in which other people enter to receive the baptism in the Spirit. It promotes the kind of freedom that allows one to enter in. I think however we must be exceedingly careful that when we are together we do not violate the greater rule of doing things together when there are unbelievers present that could cause them to walk away from the gospel.

Have I not stated this clearly? I hope I have not. I want to project the fact that sometimes there is a moment when we should abstain from unison praying in other tongues. Other times when the Spirit would have us enter it because of the safety we have in a shared group together and the edification that will come to saints. It seems to me the scripture is somewhat silent in respect to this harmonic praising in other tongues. Whereas if a number of people attempted to give different utterances as a message that there would then be a complete ban on more than three.

I want to just do a footnote of what I said last week on that. I mentioned dancing. One of our brothers noted to me after the service that dancing in the Old Testament always occurred outdoors. I thought through that this week and he is really right. Dancing never occurred in the synagogue or to my knowledge in Christian meeting places. That is in New Testament context. On the other hand I operate on the principle what is not forbidden is allowed. I think if something is not of a fanatical variety but it’s for people in jubilation to begin jogging in place, that may be acceptable to God.

Worshipping God with actions. We looked last week at sitting, standing, leaping and dancing and walking. Let’s add some tonight.

Other ways we worship God with actions. Clapping.

Clapping has at least three significant meanings to it. One is clapping is a sign of joy. Psalm 47:1 “Clap your hands, all ye people. Shout to the Lord with a voice of praise.” Isaiah 55:12 “You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace. The mountains and hills will burst into song before you and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.” That’s a metaphor of joy.

Nahum the prophet, in Nahum 3:19 tells of the coming destruction of the world empire Assyria. He is joyfully giving this prophecy against Assyria. He says, “Nothing can heal your wound. Your injury is fatal. Everyone who hears the news about you claps their hands at your fall for who has not felt your endless cruelty.” 2 Kings 11:12. Joash the 8-year-old boy is spared from being killed. His wicked mother the queen finds out about this rebellion that occurs. The high priest brought out Joash and put a crown on him. He presented him with a copy of the covenant

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and proclaimed him king. They noted him as the people clapped their hands and shouted, “Long live the king.”

Clapping is simply a straight out sign of joy. And again in Pentecostal worship it can become something extraordinarily mechanical. You get the right song with the right cadence everybody starts clapping. What ought to happen in Christian worship is when we come to a song and it seems right to clap and a lot of people start clapping, we all clap together. A sign of joy. If you're not joyful sometimes your body ought to be ahead of your emotions and your emotions will follow your body in getting into joy. There is a sense in which worship is togetherness. So clapping is all right from the scripture. Never in the scripture does it say, “Thou shalt not clap unto the Lord thy God.” Never in the scripture does it say, “When thou enterest into the house of worship, thou shalt set upon thy hands.” It's ok to clap.

Another sign that clapping can have and it's one that we do not use in Christian worship but it is a legitimate use of clapping. Clapping can on occasion be a sign of judgment. Ezekiel 6:11 “This is what the sovereign Lord says, ‘Strike your hands together and stamp your feet and cry out, ‘Alas!’ because of all the wicked and detestable practices of the house of Israel for they will fall by the sword, famine and plague.’” God himself speaking in Ezekiel 21:17 says “I too will strike my hands together and my wrath will subside. I the Lord have spoken.”

Maybe there ought to be a period at some point we're talking about the defeat of Satan and all of us clap a clap of finality. A sign of judgment.

Another way that I found in Christian worship we use clapping I find no precedent for it in scripture. It may be there but I've looked at all the references of clap hands and strike and I cannot find it. But in our culture clapping is a sign of appreciation.

It's funny what different cultures do to show appreciation or disapproval. Here if you're at a basketball game to show disapproval everybody will hoot and hiss. In Yugoslavia, they whistle. That is the European sign of disapproval. So in some cultures clapping wouldn't be a sign of appreciation, in ours it is.

Sometimes in a worship service, clapping is very appropriate as a sign of appreciation. But not necessarily always. It can become mechanical. Sometimes what can happen when you clap after somebody has sung it may be a weak clap where people aren't certain what to do and it creates a confused reaction in the person. Also it can begin to sort of build up the flesh. The people who get good claps are the good singers and people who don't get the good claps must not have done so well. Sometimes people don't clap because they feel thoroughly edified and feel that at that moment it would be inappropriate to edify a person when God has been so edified.

Clapping when it's a sign of courtesy can always be appropriate. When it interrupts worship and becomes obtrusive then it is not good.

Another way we can worship God with actions – lifting up hands. Why do we do this in worship? Why should we? What does it represent? It can represent in the part of leadership a sign of authority. Often in the scriptures, persons who were in leadership positions raised their hands as a sign of authority. Moses did this in Exodus 9:29. “He replied to Pharaoh ‘When I have gone out of the city I will spread out my hands in prayer to the Lord. The thunder will stop

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and there will be no more hail so that you may know that the earth is the Lord's.'" No doubt who is in command. When that man lifts up his hands to God, things happen even in the heavens.

Lifting hands can also be a sign of respect and adoration. God wants our body involved in worship, not just our words and thoughts. 1 Kings 8:54 finds Solomon dedicating the temple. "When he had finished all these prayers and supplications to the Lord he rose from before the altar of the Lord where he had been kneeling with his hands spread out to the heavens." A sign of respect and adoration to God. The bent knees showing respect, the raised hands showing adoration.

Psalm 63:1-4 "O God, you are my God. Earnestly I seek you. My soul thirsts for you. My body longs for you in a weary and dry land where there is no water. I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. Because your love is better than life my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live and in your name I will lift up my hands."

Psalm 134:1-2 "Praise the Lord all you servants of the Lord who minister by night in the house of the Lord. Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the Lord."

Lifting up hands also can be a sign of hunger and surrender. Psalm 119:48 "I reach out my hands for your commandments which I love and I meditate on your decrees." Psalm 141:1-2 "O Lord I call to you. Come quickly to me. Hear my voice when I call to you. May my prayer be set before you like incense. May the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice." The evening sacrifice stood for complete committal of life to God. The lifting up of hands – surrender and sacrifice to God.

Then a fourth sign of lifting up hands can be a sign of blessing. Jesus did this in Luke 24:50. "He led the disciples out to the vicinity of Bethany. He lifted up his hands and blessed them and then he ascended upon the heavens." 1 Timothy 2:8 "I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands without anger or disputing." Lifting the hands in blessing to God.

Again, in worship when the Spirit is moving and a number of people are beginning to respond and lift their hands in worship, it is all right not to raise your hands. So it's no big thing that says you must raise your hands every time other people do. But here is a sense that when all of us do something together, we all enter in. One of the things that ought to be happening in worship is a few people standing out. It ought to be all of us melted together in the Spirit. It's a wonderful way letting our body in body language speak to God.

I'm amazed how contemporary culture catches up with the scripture. For example a lot of books have come out on body language. The theory behind that being here are two ways you communicate – verbally and non verbally.

Another way we worship God with actions is through bowing down or kneeling. They're synonymous. Most commonly when the word "bow down" is used it is in reference to kneeling. When it specifically relates to prostration the scripture will generally employ another word with "bow" - bow the face completely down or to bow the face down. Most generally bowing down is a sign of kneeling.

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Psalm 95:6-7 “Come let us bow down in worship. Let us kneel before the Lord our maker for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.” What is kneeling a sign of? Again, it’s a sign of respect. And on occasion a sign of petition. 1 Kings 1:13. Ahab has just found out about Elijah and he orders a group of 50 soldiers to go get Elijah. The 50 soldiers come and fire comes out of heaven and burns them up. King Ahab sends another 50 soldiers. Fire comes down and another 50 soldiers are gone. The third group of 50 soldiers comes and the third captain comes up and falls down on his knees before Elijah. “Man of God, he begged, please have respect for my life and the lives of these 50 men your servants.” When Elijah got proper respect he came. Kneeling is a kind of tip off to the act that respect and petition are associated with kneeling.

Another one. Mark 1:40. A man with leprosy came to Jesus and begged him on his knees. “If you are willing you can make me clean.” 2 Chronicles 6:13 “Solomon still on the platform and then knelt down before the whole assembly of Israel and spread out his hands toward heaven.” Then followed his prayer of dedication.

Ezra 6:5 had the same experience of kneeling for a lengthy prayer as a sign of respect and petition. Peter 9:40 had an experience where he is brought into a room where Dorcas has died. He chases everybody out of the room and then the scriptures say “He got down on his knees and prayed.” Why on his knees? He was at that moment petitioning God in an earnest kind of way.

When we come before the Lord in a kneeling fashion it is out of this Spirit of respect or request that we have for God.

Another thing that kneeling represents is it is a sign of submission to God. The bended knee is something in ancient times and I think even in modern times when someone has been conquered by another and they present their sword, they kneel before the general that has conquered them. That is the sign of submission. Isaiah 45:23 “God says, ‘Before me ever knee shall bow.’” Philippians says, “At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow in heaven, on earth and under the earth.” What we’re doing now by kneeling is we’re just getting advanced practice. We know the day is coming when every knee shall submit to Jesus Christ. We’re saying we’re already in the submitted company.

Then kneeling is also a sign of worship and adoration. Luke 5:8 “When Simon Peter saw that his nets were full he fell down at Jesus’ knees.” Daniel 6:10 “When he heard that the decree had been published he went home to his upstairs room with the windows open to Jerusalem and three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed.”

What about group kneeling? This is an example of kneeling that has no precedent in scripture. No where in scripture does this form of kneeling occur. That’s not to say it didn’t happen, it’s just not related in the scripture. There are only two times in the New Testament where we have an example of early Christians kneeling in groups. The two times are in Acts 20:36 and Acts 21:5. Both of them are farewell experiences. 20:36, Paul is with the Ephesian elders at Miletus and he kneels down with them all and prays. And Acts 21:5 Paul is with the believers at Tyre getting ready to go to Jerusalem to be imprisoned. “All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city and there on the beach we knelt to pray.”

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The last form of worshipping God with action – falling down prostrating. We find very little precedent doing this in a group setting. But it is perfectly appropriate in a personal setting. There are times in prayer we need to get down literally on our faces, spread out before God. It could be in a form, sort of hunched over like we've seen Moslems and our heads are touching the ground and our legs are bent or it may be directly flat on our face with our heads out and our forehead touching the ground – in complete abject prostration before God.

What does this represent? It represents a sign of supplication or obedience to a superior. It has human precedence in 1 Samuel 25:23 Abigail when she saw David she quickly got off her donkey and bowed down before David with her face to the ground. She was in a lot of trouble because her husband had been inhospitable. She got down with her face to the ground to show her abject humiliation before David.

David on the other hand when he slipped in on Saul when Saul was asleep in the cave of En-geidi and cut off part of his robe and then woke Saul up he felt guilty for what he had done to God's anointed. David came and prostrated himself before Saul with his face to the ground.

Esther in 8:3 pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. A sign of obedience to a superior.

Being prostrate also can be a sign of intense worship to God. Genesis 17:3 "Abraham fell face down," then God gave him a great revelation.

When the people of God in Exodus 4 learned that God was going to deliver them from their task masters in Egypt they all fell down on their face and then when later learning in Exodus 12 that God was going to spare their first born, again, they fell down on their face and worshipped.

1 Chronicles 29:29 when David introduces Solomon as the new king. "David said to the whole assembly, 'Praise the Lord your God,' so they all praised the Lord, the God of their fathers. They bowed down low and fell prostrate before the Lord and the king." When Jesus was born the wise men came, Matthew 2:10 and fell down and worshipped him. Matthew 17:6 when Jesus was transfigured before the disciples, the disciples fell face down to the ground terrified." Matthew 26:39 Jesus himself in a time of intense prayer, going a little further he fell with his face to the ground and prayed.

John sees the risen Lord in Revelation 1:17 and says "I fell at his feet as though dead." Intense worship to God.

Clapping, lifting up hands, bowing down, kneeling, falling down prostrating are all ways we can worship God with action.

What is more important than worshipping God with action? More important than worshipping God with action, more important than worshipping God with words is worshipping God from our heart. It is not ever just getting the form correct. David knows this when he says, "I would offer thee sacrifices if thou wouldst accept them. A broken and a contrite spirit O God, thou wilt not refuse." Jesus says, "They who worship the Father must worship in Spirit and in truth."

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My teaching on worshipping God with words and worshipping God with actions is not given in order that we might become better robots at worship. But rather that our worship from the heart might have greater content because our language and our actions are responding to God in ways that best glorify him and best edify and build us up.

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