

Liturgical Body Building: The Formative Role of the Body in Worship

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Worship is formative because it employs our bodies.

We understand from common experiences in daily life not only that our bodies express our thoughts, feelings, skills, and identity but also that our thoughts, feelings, skills, and identity are powerfully formed by what we do with our bodies.

- Sports team: Practices form athletes because they practice the actions of the sport with their bodies, not simply hear a message about the sport. (If talking and understanding the game intellectually were all that mattered, then the ESPN Sportscenter talking heads would be the greatest athletes!)
- Music: Rehearsals form people because the participants actually play music with their bodies, not simply talk about playing music.
- Communication is at least 80% nonverbal; how you hold and move your body reveals your heart and shapes it (e.g., sullen slouching; crossed arms; sitting up straight). Doing actions often leads to heart change (e.g., acting as if you love can lead to loving emotions.)

1. Biblical worship

1.1 Biblical worship is a set of actions that enact the gospel of God's covenant with us

- God teaches us about worship by giving us **examples** and **commands** of specific actions by which he serves us and we respond to him.

God's actions	Church's actions in response
Calling us to worship	Gathering and praising/thanking God.
Convicting and calling us to confession/repentance	Confessing sin to God.
Declaring forgiveness and comfort	Praising/thanking God.
Instructing, correcting, exhorting, and encouraging through his word read and preached.	Listening actively and faithfully. Praising/thanking God. Lamenting sin. Interceding for the church and the world. Professing our faith and loyalty. Offering money as an expression of faith and service.
Serving us his own life at his table	Eating and drinking with joyful thanksgiving .
Blessing us and sending us out to serve.	Receiving in faith and going to serve.

- Worship is not merely communicating the message of the gospel nor merely a presentation of the gospel. Rather, it is *the gospel in action*, the gospel enacted in relationship with God. As Robert Webber once wrote, "worship is a verb."

- These actions embody all aspects of the gospel
 - These actions encompass the whole range of God’s redemption and our life with him, not only for the event of corporate worship on Sunday but also for all of life. Also, this gospel-shaped biblical and historical order of worship matters because it has a relational logic: it is the means by which God restores and nourishes his relationship with us and draws us near to him.
 - Here is an excellent fundamental criterion for evaluating worship: Are you doing all of these actions? In a balanced way that cultivates them all with integrity and purpose?
 - Sins of omission: Truncating worship.
 - While Protestant worship traditions have often been very sensitive to avoid what God forbids, many err by failing to do some things that God commands.
 - If worship is the gospel in action, then *truncating worship truncates the way that the gospel is embodied and communicated.*
 - Remedies that help us preserve the fullness of the gospel in liturgical actions:
 - Pay attention to the teaching of *the whole Bible* (OT and NT).
 - Learn from the fullness of historic liturgies from church history.
 - Pastoral point: Worship demands the response not merely of thought and feeling but also *action*. If our worship minimizes actions in response to God, then it can undermine the call to discipleship by failing to form us for this holistic response in the world.

1.2 Biblical worship stresses the use of the body in the *forms* of worship in which we engage in the actions God commands.

Liturgical Action	Posture/Movement of the Body
Entrance	Procession with dancing and shouting (Exod 15:20; Ps 42:4; 55:14; 2 Sam 6:14/1 Chron 15:25–29)
Praising/thanking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lifting hands (Exod 17:12; Job 1:21; Ps 63:4; 134:2; 141:2) • Kneeling or prostration (Neh 8:6; Ps 5:7; 95:6; 138:2; 2 Chron 7:3; 29:29–30; Rev 4:10; 5:8; 7:11; 11:16) • Clapping (Ps 47:1) • Shouting (too many to number) • Dancing (Exod 15:20; 2 Sam 6:14; Ps 150:4)
Confessing sin	Standing (Lam 3:41; Neh 9:4; Luke 18:11, 13)
Teaching and receiving the word of God.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standing (Neh 8:4–5; 9:2) • Sitting (Luke 4:20) • Lifting hands to Amen the word (Ps 119:48; Neh 8:6).
Interceding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standing (1 Kgs 8:22; 2 Chron 20:5, 13; Neh 9:2,4; Matt 6:5; Mk 11:25; Luke 18:11, 13) • Kneeling (1 Kgs 8:54/2 Chron 6:13; 2 Chron 20:18; Dan 6:10; Acts 20:36; 21:5; Rev 11:16) • Lifting hands (1 Kgs 8:22, 54/2 Chron 6:12–13; Lam 2:19; cf. Ps 44:20; Lam 1:17; 1 Tim 2:8)

Lamenting	Lifting hands (Ps 28:2; 143:6)
Eating and drinking	<p>Sitting and servicing one another (Matt 14:19; 15:35; 26:20; Mark 6:39; 8:6; 14:18; Luke 9:14–15; 22:14; John 6:10)</p> <p>Cf. Matt 8:11/Luke 13:29, where sitting at table with the people of God is a sign of the promised Messianic kingdom; Luke 17:7, where sitting at table is a sign that one is a son rather than a mere servant; Luke 12:37, being served by the master (Christ) while sitting at his table is a sign of being a blessed servant prepared for the coming kingdom.</p>
Blessing	Lifting hands (Lev 9:22; Luke 24:50)

- Note a great number of biblical texts that address the role of the body in worship. The active use of the body in worship is not a minor or occasional theme!
- Active use of the body occurs in worship in both Old and New Testaments, i.e., it is not merely an Old Testament phenomenon that can be dismissed as something only related to the old covenant and eliminated in the new covenant established by Jesus (as some Reformed writers have historically argued about many aspects of worship in the OT, including other kinds of rituals, and even musical instruments).
- Active use of the body occurs in the worship of heaven itself (see the book of Revelation), which is the pattern for worship on earth and for the future of our worship when heaven and earth merge in the new heavens and the new earth.
- These actions *express* and *enhance* the meaning of words being spoken/sung.
 - Lifting hands in expectation expresses desire to receive from God or lament/sadness.
 - Lifting hands in joy expresses a heart full of thanks and praise.
 - Bowing or standing expresses humility, awe, and honor.
 - Sitting at God’s table expresses peaceful friendship.
 - Sitting is Jesus’ command and example whenever he serves food to people in the gospels (including at the Lord’s Supper itself).
 - Sitting is the normal meal posture in both biblical cultures and our own, which is appropriate since the Lord’s Supper is a meal. God meets us in this most ordinary of forms.
 - Sitting is a posture of peaceful relaxation that is most appropriate among friends. Sitting together at a table to share a common meal is a gesture that signifies the kind of acceptance and familiarity found between friends and family. Thus, by reclining at table with his disciples, Jesus established the Lord’s Supper in a setting and manner that implied his close friendship with them. One of the most radical effects of the gospel is that the all-holy, almighty Creator adopts us into his own family and friendship and thus invites us to adopt a posture of familiarity and intimacy with him. While one would expect mere servants always to kneel or stand in the presence of a king, God has given us Lord’s Supper to signify that we are more than mere servants; rather, we are highly honored servants, children, and friends of God because of what Jesus has done (cf. Luke 12:37; 17:7). Sitting at table with God in a relaxed posture of familiar friendship

thus embodies in action the radical position and identity as children and heirs of God that Christians receive because of their union with Christ.

– Sitting enables the church to easily serve one another bread and wine along with words of encouragement and blessing that we can speak to one another in the process to embody church unity and sacramental nature of the church (This form of the sacrament shows that Jesus is present in us and gives himself to us through other Christians).¹

- The postures for prayer modeled and commanded in the Bible are always active postures of standing or kneeling.

2. Historical Traditions

So why don't many Protestant churches (and especially Reformed churches) do it?

2.1 Medieval focus: Worship through sight and movement.

Gestures/actions were often the only way that many could actively participate. The mass was a social action consisting primarily of a series of actions that enacted and renewed one's loyalty to God and the church in ways that paralleled protocols for expressing loyalty to nobility and royalty.

- Processions on special days around and into the church and/or community.
- **Standing** at the gospel reading and **removing hats** as a sign of greeting with respect (like gestures toward nobility and royalty).
- Procession with **offerings** (candles, bread, money; as done in gift-exchange ceremonies of public oaths/vows).
- **Bowing** at elevation of consecrated bread and wine.
- Kiss of peace.
- **Sharing and eating** unconsecrated bread.
- Private devotions outside of mass: Bowing to altar and consecrated bread (eucharistic adoration); kissing and bowing toward icons and statues.

Understanding the words of the liturgy was less important than the actions involved and the virtues of faith and humility that they were supposed to cultivate.

2.2 Reformation worship: Worship with voice, ear, and mind.

The Protestant Reformation resulted in a major shift toward worship as receiving and responding to the reading and preaching of the word of God with understanding and faith.

¹ My comments advocating sitting to receive the Lord's Supper should not be taken as support for the common practice of personal, somber, private meditative prayer that is often the focus of communion when done seated. Precisely because the Lord's Supper is a corporate, social event in which we receive the blessings of Christ's death and resurrection life, the emotional tone should be focused on joyful thanksgiving and celebration of Christ's victory. In the Bible, sacred meals in God's presence are always occasions of supreme joy and never times for quiet, somber, private prayer (see e.g., Deut 14; Isaiah 25; the wedding Supper of the Lamb in Rev 19). Therefore, churches that receive communion while seated must do so in a way that makes it a festive, joyful occasion that genuinely *celebrates* the victory of God in Christ in his death and resurrection that he shares with us in communion as well as the blessed hope we of his second coming that he promises in communion. This can be done by singing joyful songs of thanksgiving and praise during the distribution of communion and speaking words of encouragement and blessing to one another during the serving and distribution time.

- Biblically based objections to medieval practices
 - General objection: Ritual action without faith or understanding must be avoided.
 - Specific objections: Some medieval rituals were contrary to biblical teaching.
 - kneeling to venerate icons, statues
 - kneeling for communion as an act of venerating the consecrated bread and wine

- Biblically based reforms
 - Emphasis on the *voice* and *ear* in proclamation and song. (Martin Luther: the church is a “mouth-house”)
 - *Kneeling* for prayer, which many Reformed churches did throughout the 16th century.
 - *Sitting* for communion to stress different theology about the Lord’s Supper, namely, that to emphasize conformity to biblical ritual in the gospels; to highlight that the event is a corporate/social meal; and to stress that Jesus’ special presence is received by the Spirit throughout the church as a whole in the act of receiving communion and not locally focused or contained in the bread and wine on the altar-table as a result of merely consecrating prayer.
 - Mostly reform by simplification and subtraction: Eliminating postures and gestures of medieval worship (genuflection, kneeling for communion).

- Tendency over time: Reformed churches eventually came to *deemphasize the role of bodily motion* in worship for increasingly *reactionary* reasons. Reformed writers wrote much critique of specific ritual actions to avoid, but they paid much less attention to the positive, active role of the body in worship.
 - No kneeling because Catholics and Anglicans kneel. (Modern version: No raising hands because Pentecostals and charismatics do that.)
 - Song and prayer became cumbersome: Sitting for song and intercessory prayer because both became so long (in American Puritan churches, 1 psalm could last for 20 minutes and intercessory prayers could take 20–40 minutes).
 - Sermon became supreme: The more focus placed on the sermon, the less other kinds of actions in worship mattered. If worship is fundamentally an event in a *lecture hall*, then sitting passively to receive a message is the most appropriate posture and the main thing to be done.

3. Putting Biblical Worship into Action

- Recognize that the use of the body influences heart.
 - Learn from the Bible: The body matters!
 - Learn from church history: Most of the church throughout most of time has worshiped in a bodily expressive manner. Historically, opposition to bodily movement has often been based on very bad reasons.
 - Learn from daily life

Therefore: Not only does God give us numerous examples and commands in Scripture, but lessons from history and daily life help us understand some of the reasons for those biblical commands. God wants us to be formed into the image of Christ, and thus he wants to inscribe the gospel into our hearts and minds through the habits and reflexes of our bodies.

- Practice is the only way to discern the full meaning and value of postures and movements.

Try some experiments with posture to see how it affects one's experience of prayer and creates subtle differences in the meaning of the action and the prayer:

(1) Lord's Prayer

- Try praying while seated.
- Then try praying while standing with hands raised.
- Then try praying while kneeling with hands raised and heads up.

(2) "Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow"

- Try singing while seated
- Then try singing while clapping on beats 2 and 4.
- Then try clapping on every beat and with dance-like movements.

- Keep heart, mind, and body united:
 - Teach about the purpose of the body in worship.
 - The goal is not ritual action for its own sake but rather action as a formative means of expressing and shaping the response of our whole person to God.
- Get help from other Christians
 - Interpret others' actions charitably. Don't assume that the bodily expressiveness of others (or the lack thereof) is a sign of immaturity or a lack of love for God.
 - Talk with those who have different church cultures and practices in this area. Find out why they do what they do, what they consider its strengths and weaknesses.
 - Worship with others who have different practices and sensibilities.
- Pursue reformation with care
 - Explain principles from the Bible, and make this the major goal of teaching.
 - Modeling openness to change and humility: Pastors and elders have to model growth.
 - Experiment with corporate movements so the whole church can learn together and feels uncomfortable together. This prevents individuals from feeling like they stick out or draw attention to themselves.
 - Choose one thing that is easy. Don't go for dancing or installing church kneelers as your first new idea! Try standing in a place that you don't normally do so (perhaps for the corporate prayers of the people) or raising hands for the benediction or Lord's Prayer.
 - Encourage patience. It will feel awkward at first. Developing any new habit is going to take time to appreciate (e.g., learning to shoot a basketball, or swing a golf club, or positioning one's fingers to play piano or guitar). Tell people this from the beginning.

- Give it at least many months or longer to become a settled part of the church's worship life before adding other new postures or movements.
- Help people process their reactions to it along the way. Seek out feedback, be approachable, listen very carefully to people's responses, and help them understand.