

Body postures in prayer and worship

Additional study material

A discipleship training to equip Christians for works of service, so that the Body of Christ may be built up (Ephesians 4:11-16).

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In the Bible various body postures are recorded in connection with prayer and worship. Although these postures have significance and express certain attitudes, nowhere in the Bible are Christians taught, commanded or prohibited to make use of these postures in prayer and worship! Believers in Jesus Christ *may* therefore make use of these postures, but these postures are not prescribed in the Bible! Therefore Christians *may not* be forced to make use of these postures.

1. EYES WHEN WORSHIPPING.

Because “the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears attentive to their prayer” (1 Peter 3:12) and because God says, “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eyes (LXX: fixed firmly)¹ upon you” (Psalm 32:8), Christians look up into the eyes of God. Prayer, worship and guidance happen through face to face eye-contact with God. There is an awareness of God’s nearness, presence and full attention.

In the Bible eyes are not closed during prayer or worship, but are lifted up towards the LORD who is enthroned in heaven. “I lift up my eyes to you, to you whose throne is in heaven. As the eyes of slaves look to the hands of their master, as the eyes of a maid look to the hands of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, till he shows us his mercy (Psalm 123:1-2; cf. Psalm 121:1-2).

2. CLAPPING HANDS WHEN WORSHIPPING.

“Clapping hands”² expresses joy and accompanies singing. ‘Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy.’ “Sing praises to God” (Psalm 47:1,6). Christians do this because God is the King of all nations on earth. “Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy”, because the Lord will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity (Psalm 98:8). “The mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and the trees of the field will clap their hands”, because the word that goes out from his mouth will achieve the purpose for which he sent it (Isaiah 55:11-12).

3. SPREADING HANDS WHEN WORSHIPPING.

▪ To lift up, to offer³

“Lifting up the heart with palms” (probably forward with palms closer together)⁴ expresses submission and rededication (Lamentations 3:41).

“Lifting up palms” towards the Lord (probably forward with open palms)⁵ expresses a request, an appeal, an intercession (Lamentations 2:19).

“Lifting up palms” toward God’s commandments (probably forward with open palms)⁶ expresses asking for understanding during meditation of God’s Word (Psalm 119:48).

“Lifting up palms” during the evening prayer (probably forward with open palms)⁷ expresses praying in general (Psalm 141:2).

“Lifting up hands” (probably upward with open hands facing forward) toward the Most Holy Place⁸ expresses prayer in general: for help (Psalm 28:2; 1 Timothy 2:8), to praise (Psalm 63:4; 134:2) or to bless (Luke 24:50).

¹ LXX means ‘70’ and is a symbol of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

² Hebrew: tiq>u kaf

³ Hebrew: nasa<

⁴ Hebrew: Pi nisa< kapajim

⁵ Hebrew: nasa< kaf

⁶ Hebrew: nasa< kaf

⁷ Hebrew: nasa< kaf

⁸ Hebrew: nasa< jad, Greek: εφαιρω χειρ

- **To stretch out, to spread**⁹

“Lifting up palms (probably upward with open palms facing forward) towards temple in Jerusalem, the earthly dwelling of God during the Old Testament period¹⁰ expresses pleading for forgiveness and help in disaster (1 Kings 8:38).

“Stretching out (spreading) palms” (probably forward with open palms making ‘a stop sign’)¹¹ expresses anxiety (Jeremiah 4:31).

“Stretching out palms”¹² and “stretching out or sending hand”¹³ (probably forward with open hands somewhat downward) to the poor and needy ((Proverbs 31:20) expresses offering help.

“Holding out hands” (probably sideways with open hands)¹⁴ to an obstinate people (Isaiah 65:2; Romans 10:21) expresses an invitation or welcome to unworthy people.

- **To hold up**¹⁵

“Holding up hands”¹⁶ expresses victory in the LORD’s battle and “lowering hands”¹⁷ expresses defeat (Exodus 17:11).

4. LAYING ON OF HANDS.

- **A sign symbolising the transference of sins**

The laying on of hands symbolised God transferring the sins from the sinner to the sacrificial animal which would make atonement of sins.

The burnt offering. The believer had “to lay his hands on”¹⁸ the head of the animal, which symbolised on the one hand the transference of the sins of the believer to the animal and on the other hand the complete reliance of the believer on this means of making atonement for atonement. Sacrificing a burnt offering symbolised the self-sacrifice of the believer which would make him ready to serve God. “He is to lay his hands on the head of the burnt offering and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him. He is to slaughter the young bull before the Lord and the priests shall bring the blood and sprinkle it against the altar on all sides at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting (Leviticus 1:4-5).

The sin offering for the whole Israelite community. To make atonement for the sins of the whole Israelite community, the elders as representatives of the community had to “lay their hands on”¹⁹ the head of a young bull. The Levites had to slaughter it at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. Then the anointed priest had to dip his finger into the blood and sprinkle some of it seven times before the Lord in the front of the curtain of the sanctuary, put some blood on the horns of the altar of incense and pour the rest out at the base of the altar of burnt offering. This sin offering would make atonement for all the Israelites and they would all be forgiven (Leviticus 4:15-21).

The sin offering for a leader in Israel. To make atonement for the sins of a leader (the head of a tribe or the leader of a part of the tribe), the leader had to lay his hands on the head of a *male goat* without defect and slaughter it himself at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. Then the anointed priest had to dip his finger into the blood and put some blood on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour the rest out at the base of the altar of burnt offering. This would make atonement for the man’s sins and he would be forgiven (Leviticus 4:24-26).

The scapegoat which carries sins away. On the Day of Atonement the high priest would bring forward the live goat, “lay both his hands (plural) on”²⁰ the head of the live goat and confess over it all the sins, wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites, thus symbolically laying all their sins on its head. He would then send this scapegoat away into the desert in the care of someone appointed for the task. Thus the scapegoat would symbolically carry on itself all the sins of the Israelites to a solitary place (Leviticus 16:20-22).

- **A sign symbolising the transference of a blessing**

The laying on of hands²¹ is a sign symbolising God blessing children (Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:16).

⁹ Hebrew: paras

¹⁰ Hebrew: K paras kapau

¹¹ Hebrew: K paras kaf

¹² Hebrew: kaf paras

¹³ Hebrew: jad shalach

¹⁴ Hebrew: Pi paras jad; Greek: εκπετασα from εκπεταννυμι

¹⁵ Hebrew: jadah

¹⁶ Hebrew: jadim jad

¹⁷ Hebrew: K nuach

¹⁸ Hebrew: samak jado (singular) al, but the meaning is “both hands”

¹⁹ Hebrew: samku <et-jedemem al

²⁰ Hebrew: samak <et-shete jadau (plural: two hands) al

²¹ Greek: καταλογει τιθεις τας χειρας επ αυτα

▪ **A sign symbolising the transference of authority and a spiritual gift when commissioning someone**

The laying on of hands is a sign symbolising God transferring an office with responsibility and authority and ability to a believer when he is commissioned.

The appointment of the Levites for service in the temple in the place of the firstborn sons of the Israelites (Numbers 8:10-19). The Israelites had “to lay their hands on”²² them (verse 10).

The appointment of Joshua as the (military) leader of Israel (Deuteronomy 34:9; Numbers 27:18-23). The instruction of laying one hand on him (verse 18) was understood as laying both hands on him (verse 23).

The appointment of deacons and elders in the congregation²³ (Acts 6:6; Acts 14:23).

The appointment of Paul as apostle (someone sent out by Jesus Christ).

His appointment was accompanied by the return of his sight and by being filled with the Spirit (Acts 9:15-17).

The appointment of Timothy as a commissioned worker or apostolic representative probably happened at Lystra during Paul’s second missionary journey (Acts 16:1-3), because also Paul had laid his hands on Timothy (2 Timothy 1:6). “The body of elders”²⁴ (at Lystra)(Acts 14:23) and the apostle Paul laid their hands on him symbolising the Holy Spirit conferring his special favour upon Timothy enabling him to carry out the duties of his office. Timothy’s appointment was accompanied by prophetic utterance of inspired bystanders at Lystra speaking words of instruction and encouragement (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:3-4,29-33). Timothy was not a modern ‘pastor’, but rather a modern ‘missionary’ (one sent out by a congregation) who helped Paul to plant and build up new congregations in the Middle East and Europe. The functions of shepherd-overseers, managers and teachers were executed by the elders of the congregation (Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 4:14; 5:17; 1 Peter 5:1-2).

In Ephesus Timothy probably functioned as one of the elders (cf. 1 Peter 5:1-2). Paul instructed him to command certain Jews to stop teaching false doctrines (1 Timothy 1:3,4,7), to make intercessions for every group of people (1 Timothy 2:1), to instruct the members how to conduct themselves in the congregation (1 Timothy 3:14-15) which included the appointment of elders and deacons in the congregation (1 Timothy 3:1-13), to set an example in the congregation (1 Timothy 4:12), to devote himself to the public reading, preaching and teaching of the Bible (1 Timothy 4:13) and not to neglect his God-given spiritual gift which he received at his commissioning (ordination), but rather to stir it up into a living flame (1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6-17). Timothy had to fight the tendency towards fearfulness and rather avail himself of the limitless power, love and self-control (mental balance in which his trust in God’s abilities and ever readiness to help overcomes his natural fear for Satan’s persecuting power).

▪ **A sign symbolising the transference of the Holy Spirit**

The laying on of hands is a sign symbolising God giving (transferring) the Holy Spirit to new believers and incorporating them into the Body of Christ²⁵ (Acts 8:14-17; Acts 19:6; cf. 1 Corinthians 12:13). It is also a sign symbolising God *filling* the believer with the Holy Spirit, that is, the believer submits every part of his life to the rule or government of the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17). However, the laying on of hands by Christians does not bring about the baptism or the filling with the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 5:18 has the passive voice indicating that the Holy Spirit has the active part. The only One who baptises people with the Holy Spirit is Jesus Christ (Mark 1:8).

▪ **A sign symbolising the transference of healing**

The laying on of hands is a sign symbolising God giving (transferring) healing to the sick²⁶ (Mark 6:5; Luke 4:40; Acts 28:8), the blind (Mark 8:23-25; Acts 9:12) and the crippled (Luke 13:11-13). However, the laying on of hands does not bring about the healing, because all healing, whether by prayer, doctors or medicines, is divine healing!

5. KNEELING AS A SIGN OF SUBMISSION AND RESPECT.

The posture of “prostrating or kneeling”²⁷ before someone and kissing his feet, the seam of his robe or the ground on which he stood (thus with head and hands on the ground) was an ancient custom in several nations as a symbol of submission and respect. It was the sign of the lesser bowing before the greater, the posture of a slave before his master and of a citizen before his king. The Persians bowed down before their divine king and the Greeks before their idols.

From early times people kneeled and bowed with their face and hands on the ground as a sign of submission and respect before a high official. Examples in the Bible: Leah and her children bowed down before Esau (Genesis 33:7)(before 1877 B.C.). David bowed the nostrils (i.e. face)²⁸ to the earth and prostrated himself²⁹ before king Saul (1 Samuel

²² Hebrew: samku <et jedehem al

²³ Greek: επεθηκαν αυτοις τας χειρας

²⁴ Greek: το πρεσβυτεριον

²⁵ Greek επιθεσαν τας χειρας επ αυτοις και ελαμβανον πνευμα αγιον

²⁶ Greek: επιθεις τας χειρας εθεραπευσεν

²⁷ Hebrew: jishtachu (Hitp shachah); Greek: προσκυνεω

²⁸ Hebrew: wa-jiqqod (K qadah= to bow) a<fajim (2x nose) artsah

²⁹ Hebrew: wa-jishtachu (Hitp shachah)

24:8)(before 1011 B.C.). King Saul bowed the nostrils (face) to the earth and prostrated himself before the evil spirit that pretended to be the departed spirit of the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 28:14). Bathsheba bowed and prostrated herself before king David (1 Kings 1:16). A captain of fifty soldiers fell on his knees before³⁰ the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:13)(before 845 B.C.). All the royal officials in the Medo-Persian Empire knelt down and prostrated themselves³¹ before Haman, but Mordecai did not prostrate himself³² (Esther 3:2,5)(before 465 B.C.).

Jesus says that the Jews (and people like them who oppress and persecute Christians) would fall down at the feet of³³ Christians and acknowledge that Christians are the beloved of Jesus Christ (God) (Revelation 3:9).

6. KNEELING AS A SIGN OF WORSHIP.

From early times people bent their knees (bowing their faces and hands to the ground)³⁴ and kissed with their mouths³⁵ the (feet of the) idol as a sign of worshipping the idol (1 Kings 19:18)(860 B.C.).

Those who were believers in the LORD, the God of the Bible, also prostrated themselves and bent their knees before³⁶ the LORD when they worshipped him. “Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker” (Psalm 95:6).

Examples in the Old Testament: The servant of Abraham bowed and prostrated himself³⁷ before the LORD (Genesis 24:26)(before 1992 B.C.), translated as “The man bowed down and worshipped the LORD”. Moses bowed to the earth and prostrated himself (before the LORD) (Exodus 34:8)(about 1447 B.C.). Balaam bowed and prostrated himself (falling flat) on his nostrils (face)³⁸ before the Angel of the LORD (Numbers 22:31). Believers in the LORD may never prostrate themselves before³⁹ other gods because the God of the Bible does not tolerate the worship of any other god besides him (a god revealed in other holy scriptures)(Exodus 20:4-5)(1447 B.C.). Believers in the LORD, the God who revealed himself in the Bible, may also not prostrate themselves⁴⁰ before the sun, moon and stars (Deuteronomy 4:19)(1407 B.C.). In spite of these clear commandments Israel (Jacob’s descendants) filled the land with idols which their hands made and prostrated themselves before what their fingers made (Isaiah 2:8)(about 740 B.C.).

At the dedication of the first temple (961 B.C.), when the Israelites saw fire coming down from heaven which consumed the burnt offering and saw the glory of the LORD filling the temple, they bent their knees earthwards (knelt) with their face on the pavement, prostrated themselves before (i.e. worshipped) and gave thanks to (praised) the LORD (2 Chronicles 7:3). At the cleansing of the temple in the time of king Hezekiah (713 B.C.), during the burnt offering, the whole assembly⁴¹ of the Israelites prostrated themselves (i.e. bowed their heads and hands onto the ground in worship)⁴², while the singers sang and the trumpeters played). When the offerings were finished, the king and everyone present with him knelt down and worshipped (i.e. they bent their knees and prostrated themselves)⁴³ (2 Chronicles 29:28-30).

The custom to pray on one’s knees was also combined with the custom to pray with uplifted hands. At the dedication of the first temple king Solomon first stood with spread out hands (1 Kings 8:22)⁴⁴ and then knelt with spread out hands before the LORD (2 Chronicles 6:13)⁴⁵. During the evening sacrifice, Ezra (458 B.C.) tore his clothes, fell on his knees and prayed with hands spread out to⁴⁶ the LORD. But he was too ashamed of the sins of Israel to lift up his face to the LORD (Ezra 9:5-6).

Examples from the New Testament: A man with leprosy “knelt or prostrated himself before”⁴⁷ Jesus (Matthew 8:2). A ruler of a synagogue knelt before Jesus (Matthew 9:18). A Canaanite woman knelt before Jesus (Matthew 15:25). A father of a boy with a demon “knelt before”⁴⁸ Jesus (Matthew 17:14). The soldiers of the Roman governor “knelt in front of”⁴⁹ Jesus to mock him (Matthew 27:29), etc.

³⁰ Hebrew: K kar>a al berek le

³¹ Hebrew: kor>im (K kar>a) u-misggtachauim (Hitp shachah)

³² Hebrew: lo< jishttachauh (Hitp shachah)

³³ Greek: προσκυνεω ενωπιον των ποδων

³⁴ Hebrew: kol-ha-birkajim eshar lo<-kar>u la

³⁵ Hebrew: ha-peh eshar lo<-nashaq

³⁶ Hebrew: nishttachauh (Hitp shachah) we-nikra>ah (Niph kar>a) nibrekah (berek=knee) li-fne (panim=face)

³⁷ Hebrew: wa-jiqqod (K qadah) wa-jishttachu (Hitp shachah) la-JHWH

³⁸ Hebrew: wa-jiqqod (K qadah) wa-jishttachu (Hitp shachah) le-appau (on his nose)

³⁹ Hebrew: lo< tishttachaweh (Hitp shachah) la

⁴⁰ Hebrew: hishttachawita (Hitp shachah) la

⁴¹ Greek: εκκλησια (Church)

⁴² Hebrew: mishttachewim (Hitp shachah)

⁴³ Hebrew: jishttachewu, kar>u wa-jishttachawu

⁴⁴ Hebrew: ja>amod ... qa-jifrosh (K parash to spread or stretch out) kappau ha-shamajim

⁴⁵ Hebrew: ja>amod >alauha wa-jibreka >al birkau ... wa-jifrosh kappau ha-shamajimah

⁴⁶ Hebrew: wa-<ekre>ah (K kar>a) >al birkai wa-<efresah (K paras) kappai >el

⁴⁷ Greek: προσκυνει αυτω

⁴⁸ Greek: γονυπετων αυτον

⁴⁹ Greek: γονυπετησαντες επροσθων αυτου

In the New Testament period Jesus Christ (in his human nature) “prayed on his knees”⁵⁰ in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:41). The apostle Paul and the Christians in Ephesus “knelt and prayed together”⁵¹ on the beach (Acts 20:36). From prison in Rome Paul wrote to the Ephesians that he “bent his knees”⁵² in worship before God the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and one earth (the Church) derives its name (Ephesians 3:14-15), that is the name ‘children of God’ (John 1:12; Romans 8:16).

The Roman centurion “fell at the feet and prostrated himself”⁵³ before the apostle Peter, but Peter disapproved and said that he was only a man (Acts 10:25-26).

Jesus Christ clearly teaches that this posture in worship (of kneeling and bowing the face and hands on the ground)⁵⁴ should only be employed in worship to the God of the Bible (Matthew 4:10; cf. Exodus 20:5)⁵⁵. But Jesus allowed his disciples to prostrate themselves before him (in worship) as ‘the Son of God’ (which means: ‘truly God’) (Matthew 14:33), because Jesus Christ is God (cf. John 5:18; John 8:24; Exodus 3:14-15)!

⁵⁰ Greek: θεις τα γονατα προσηυχετο

⁵¹ Greek: θεις τα γονατα αυτου συν πασιν αυτοις προσηυχατο

⁵² Greek: καμπτω τα γονοτα μου προς

⁵³ Greek: πεσωνν επι τους ποδας προσεκυνησεν

⁵⁴ Greek: proskuned

⁵⁵ Hebrew: I<o tishttacheweh le; Greek: κυριον τον θεον σου προσκυνησεις κει αυτω μονω λατρευσεις