

BODILY WORSHIP

Introduction: Overture on Bodily Posture

In 2014 the Presbytery of Limpopo sent to the Assembly an overture proposed by Mathemba V. Tati, one of its ministers. The overture noted that:

- the Hebrew practice was to stand during the reading of the Torah, whereas
- in the UPCSA some congregations stand for the entry of the Bible (followed by the Minister and the Elders), some for the reading of the Old Testament, some for the reading of the Gospel, and some for none of these.

Recognizing that the UPCSA allows liberty of opinion and practice in what does not affect the substance of the faith, the overture asked the Assembly nevertheless to evaluate the theological basis for standing during worship and to standardize whether and when congregations should stand.

One of the members of what is now called the Worship Task Team was already giving attention to the general issue of bodily posture and movement in worship, including the more specific concern of the overture, when it was presented. The present document covers this broader issue. In sum it sets out:

1. the Greek, Hebrew, New Testament, Christian and African views of the body and the soul, or mind, and their relation to each other;
2. other factors influencing Protestant worship to be subdued and relatively passive or immobile (and largely to reject the use of colour);
3. Scripture's view of bodily worship;
4. John Calvin's view of bodily worship;
5. body postures for prayer in Scripture;
6. body postures for prayer in the early and the later Church;
7. body postures for other liturgical acts;
8. what Pentecostal and African worship can teach us; and
9. practical suggestions.

The General Assembly endorsed the contents of a synopsis of the document in 2016 and directed that the full document be sited on the website.

Body and Soul: Different Views

The role we assign to our bodies in worship depends on *how we perceive and feel about them*, particularly in relation to God. In this regard we need first to realize that the western European, the Hebrew and the African cultures differ greatly in their underlying perception of, and attitude towards, the body. This profoundly affects us all, whether consciously or unconsciously.

1. The Greek and Modern Western Views

Western (European) thinking has traditionally and endemically been dualistic. That is, it has perceived the human person as consisting of the mind, or soul, and the body as two distinct, even antithetic, parts of a human being. Dualism is thought to have originated partly from the ancient Egyptian belief that human beings had an indestructible and permanent aspect akin to the divine. But it was especially the Greeks who influenced the thinking and culture of the Roman empire and so subsequent western thinking in this regard. Homer already held that the soul escapes the destruction that death means for the flesh and bones.¹ Pythagoras (570–c.490 BC) developed the notion of the soul (*psychē*) as the essential core of the individual that thinks, wills and experiences emotion. After death, instead of sharing in the body's dissolution, the soul transmigrates into an animal. In the wake of Pythagoras Plato (428/27–348/47 BC) taught that the real person is a mind or soul that inhabits the physical body but is superior to, and distinct from, it. On the basis of his theory that knowledge is recollection² he maintained that the soul pre-exists the body and is intellectual, unchangeable and immortal, in "the very likeness of the divine"³. It is then temporarily "fastened and glued" to the body⁴. The soul is concerned with reason and the realm of ideas and is the seat of all moral and spiritual qualities; the body is interested in the pleasures of the senses, such as eating and sleeping, which impede intellectual pursuits. Indeed, unless

¹ *Odyssey* 11.219-222. Scholars date the *Odyssey* as having been composed near the end of the 8th century BC.

² *Phaedo*, 91f.

³ *Phaedo*, 80.

⁴ *Phaedo*, 82.

resisted, the body's demands corrupt the soul by dragging it down into "the region of the changeable" where it "wanders and is confused"⁵ or even take it over completely. But death, while decomposing the body, releases the soul from "the chains"⁶ and erring ways of the body. Some sensual souls, which are polluted by the "desires and pleasures of the body"⁷, then transmigrate into "asses and animals of that sort" or into hawks and kites. But if a soul is morally pure from having "lived well and piously"⁸, abstaining from the body's "pleasures and desires" and is a lover of knowledge⁹ "in communion with the unchanging"¹⁰ world of reason, it returns to the world of Forms, a higher, rational, unchanging, eternal and divine level of reality, and so to "the joys of the blessed"¹¹.

Thus the real identity of the person is with the soul: we may say I *have* a body, but not I *am* a body. Soul and body are in dichotomy as two separate substances: they interact but often oppose each other. The effect of this view was to exalt the mind, or soul, and disparage the body. Middle Platonism (1st century BC to 3rd century AD), Gnosticism¹² (2nd to 6th century AD) Manichaeism¹³ (3rd to 5th centuries) and Neoplatonism (3rd to 6th century AD) all emphasized this contrast between the soul and the body. The last three of these were for periods all serious rivals of Christianity in seeking to become the dominant religion to replace classical paganism. Because Greek culture became normative in the intellectual world of the Roman empire, dualism came to dominate middle-eastern and western culture

⁵ *Phaedo*, 79.

⁶ *Phaedo*, 67.

⁷ *Phaedo*, 81f.

⁸ *Phaedo*, 113.

⁹ *Phaedo*, 80-83.

¹⁰ *Phaedo*, 79.

¹¹ *Phaedo*, 115.

¹² Gnosticism even held that the soul was, or contained, a divine constituent.

¹³ Mani (216-276/7 AD) was a Persian who was influenced by gnostic and Mesopotamian religious ideas. He developed an elaborate dualistic cosmology that depicted a good, spiritual world of light struggling against an evil, material world of darkness. In this struggle light is gradually removed from the world of matter and returns to the world of light from which it originated. Before being converted to the Christian faith Augustine was a Manichaean.

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and to exercise a profound and widespread influence on Christianity.

In the wake of the Renaissance, or rebirth of classical culture in western Europe, the influential 17th century philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) in line with Greek thought separated the mind, or soul, as “a thinking thing”¹⁴ from the body and categorized the two as distinct substances. Some later philosophers like Hobbes, Hegel, Feuerbach and Marx did relate the mind and the body in different ways (Marx, for instance, saw “consciousness” as the product of a person’s economic situation), and neurologists and modern philosophers tend to see the mind as indistinguishable from the physical brain. But much popular, or ordinary, western culture has remained essentially dualistic.

2. *The Hebrew View*

By contrast Hebrew anthropology was monistic, not dualistic.¹⁵ It thought of a human being as consisting not of body and soul in antithesis to each other but of body and life as complementary and inseparable.¹⁶ The Hebrew way of thinking was that the body was made from the dust of the earth, with God’s own hands (Gen. 2). God then breathed the breath (*nephesh*) of life into its nostrils “and the man became a living being” (Gen. 2:7 cf. Ezk. 37:1-14). This did not mean that God planted a soul in the body: the breath was not a soul but the life, the vital principle¹⁷, of the body (Gen. 35:18, I Ki. 17:21, 19:10, Ps. 35:4 etc.). “The deciding mark of the living creature is breathing, and its cessation means the end of life.”¹⁸ Thus when the prophet Elijah prayed for the child of the widow of Zarephath to be restored to life, “the *nephesh* of the child came into him again, and he revived” (I Ki. 17:22). Hence “the body,

¹⁴ R. Descartes: *Discourse on Method and the Meditations* (Penguin Books, 1974), p.132. Other philosophers, like Hobbes, Feuerbach and Marx, of course, had quite different views.

¹⁵ H.W. Robinson: *The Christian Doctrine of Man* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 3rd ed.152), p.21.

¹⁶ E. Jacob: ψυχή κτλ. in TDNT, vol. IX, p.631.

¹⁷ H.W. Robinson: *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, p.15. Interestingly, this was also the *original* meaning of *psyche*. See TDNT, vol. IX, p.609.

¹⁸ E. Jacob: ψυχή κτλ., p.618.

not the soul, is the characteristic element of Hebrew personality."¹⁹ "The Hebrew idea of personality is that of an animated body, not (like the Greek) that of an incarnated soul."²⁰ A Hebrew did not think, I *have* a body, but I *am* a body. And when the body died, the person returned to dust (Gen. 3:19, Job 7:21). Indeed the *nephesh* had no existence apart from the body.²¹ What survived of the human person after death was no more than a *rāpneh* ("shade, phantom") in *Sheol*, without vitality or strength, beyond God's beneficent rule, cut off from God, unable to praise or thank God, no longer remembering or even being remembered by God (Ps. 6:5, 22:30, 88:4-7,10-12, 115:17, Isa. 14:10, 38:18).²² Thus when the Old Testament does contrast flesh and spirit (*ruach*, e.g. Gen. 6:3, Isa. 31:3), it is not making the Greek antithesis of body and soul but contrasting the weakness of human beings in their creaturely existence with God's strength.²³

In time the meaning of *nephesh* was extended to include the inner consciousness or emotional life of the person (e.g. Deut. 6:5, I Ki. 17:22).²⁴ Moreover God's power came to be seen as not limited even by *Sheol* (I Sam. 2:6, Am. 9:2, Deut. 32:39, Ps. 49:6, 88:6, 11-13, 139:8, Job. 14:13-17). Indeed God would finally conquer death itself (Isa. 25:7f.). This meant that the dead would rise from the dust again (Isa. 26:19, Deut. 12:2). Later, in reaction to the martyrdom of many devout and righteous Jews in the struggle against the pagan Syrian emperor Antiochus Epiphanes, some Jews came to believe that "many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament above." (Dan. 12:2f. See also I Enoch 61:5, II Baruch 50:2, 51:5, II Esdras). The Pharisees took over this idea of the resurrection; the Sadducees, who limited their canon of

¹⁹ H.W. Robinson: *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, p.12.

²⁰ H.W. Robinson: *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, p.27.

²¹ E. Jacob: ψυχή κτλ., p.620.

²² H.W. Wolff: *Anthropologie des Alten Testaments* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1974), p.160f.

²³ E. Jacob: ψυχή κτλ., p.630, R. Meyer: σάρξ in TDNT vol. VII, p.114..

²⁴ H.W. Robinson: *The Religious Ideas of the Old Testament* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1923), p.80.

Scripture to the Pentateuch, did not. But in line with the Old Testament both saw the human being as a psychosomatic unit, made up of the complementary elements of body and *nepesh*, not the antithetic concepts of body and *psychē* (soul). "*Ethical dualism of soul and body is remote from Hebrew thought.*"²⁵ Only in late writings of Hellenistic Judaism like the Wisdom of Solomon did the Greek view begin to prevail.²⁶

This very different Hebrew perspective led in contrast to the Greek-Hellenistic perspective to historical dynamism, joyous acceptance of the world, the body, and life, hunger for justice and orientation to the future reign of God.²⁷

In the words of Eduardo Galeano:

The Church says: The body is a sin.

Science says: The body is a machine.

Advertising says: The body is a business.

The body says: I am a fiesta.²⁸

3. *New Testament View(s)*

The New Testament was written and needs to be understood against the background of Old Testament and Jewish thought.²⁹ Interpreters who read it against another background misinterpret it. Like the Old Testament the New Testament understands both creation and salvation as essentially material, or fleshly, events. As for the Old Testament, so for the New: this world is the real world, the world God intended, the world that God will restore and make right. Thus the New Testament takes the bodily nature of humankind very seriously, not least in the person of Jesus Christ. The Gospels describe every stage in the life of Christ as an event of the body, from his conception to his death and resurrection. Jesus is no docetic being; his bodiliness is central to what he is and does.

²⁵ H.W. Robinson: *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, p.25. Italics original.

²⁶ See A. Dihle: ψυχή κτλ. in TDNT, vol. IX, p.632-635.

²⁷ H. Küng: *On Being a Christian* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1976), p.171.

²⁸ Eduardo Galeano: *Walking Words*, quoted in Matthew Fox: *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1983).

²⁹ For the following see Kittel: *TDNT*, *psyche*, and the works cited below.

Every stage in the life of Christ is...described in the Gospels as an event in the body: conception, birth, growth, fasting in the desert, immersion in the River Jordan, treks to the mountain or walks along the water's edge, meals, festivals, the laying-on of hands, the draining of physical strength after a healing, transfiguration, trials, suffering, death, resurrection, ascension....³⁰

A human being was created as a body. The Son of God appeared on earth for our sakes in the body; he was raised in the body. In the sacrament the believer receives the Lord Christ in the body; and the resurrection of the dead will bring about the completed community of God's spiritual-bodily creatures.... Where he [Christ] now is, he bears our flesh, he bears us. Where he is, there we are also, in the incarnation, in the cross and in his resurrection. We belong to him, because we are in him. That is why the Scriptures call us the body of Christ.³¹

Christianity's teaching that God in some sense assumed a human body and used it to redeem the world indeed attaches more value to the body than any other of the great world religions have done; it implies that the body is both sacred and sacramental.³²

The New Testament does use the term *psychē*. In most cases it follows the Septuagint in using *psychē* to translate *nepshesh*, meaning simply "life"—physical life, as given by God (e.g. Matt. 2:20, 6:25, 10:39, 16:25, 20:28)—and is so translated even by the KJV. In other cases the meaning is not quite so clear, and older translations like the KJV sometimes rendered it as "soul" where modern linguists prefer "life" (e.g., cf. Matt. 16:26 and Lk. 12:20 in the KJV and the NRSV).³³ In still other cases it has the related meaning of "self" or "inner self", which *nepshesh* also

³⁰ Luce Irigaray: "Equal to Whom?" in G. Ward (ed.): *The Postmodern God. A Theological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p.203.

³¹ D. Bonhoeffer: *Gemeinsames Leben. Das Gebetbuch der Bible. DBW vol. 5* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1987), p.17, 20, cf. *ET Life Together. Prayerbook of the Bible DBE 5* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p.29, 33.

³² K. Armstrong: *The Spiral Staircase* (London: HarperCollins, 2004), p.249.

³³ KJV likewise spiritualizes some texts in the Old Testament by translating *nepshesh* as "soul" instead of "life", e.g. Ps. 35:4.

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sometimes had (e.g. Matt. 10:28, 11:29, 12:18, 22:37, 26:38³⁴). But nowhere does the New Testament think of life hereafter as the soul's escape from the body, as the Greeks and the Gnostics did (and many Christians do³⁵); instead it thinks of it as something that essentially involves *the resurrection of the body* (I Cor.15).³⁶ For human beings possess no capacity of their own to survive death and attain eternal life. The basis of hope for Christians is not any inherent immortality of the human soul (Matt. 10:28) but only the grace of God that triumphs over death in and through the resurrection of Jesus.

Paul uses *psychē* in the sense of physical life (e.g. Rom. 11:3, 16:4, Phil. 2:30, I Th. 2:8) and the related meanings of self (II Cor. 1:23) or person (Ro. 2:9,13:1). He speaks of dead Christians as being asleep (I Thess. 4:14), but asleep "*in Christ*" (I Cor. 15:18). In prison and in the face of possible execution he declares that his own desire is "to depart and be with Christ" (Phil. 1:23). This presumes some form of continuing (disembodied) existence between death and the resurrection. The Old Testament concept of *Sheol* may be in the background here, but Greek notions had penetrated into Hellenistic Judaism and so may possibly also have influenced Paul. Nevertheless Paul does not think in terms of any inherently immortal soul: for him life after death is a gift of pure grace.³⁷ And he never uses

³⁴ In Matt. 10:28 *psychē* means some form of continuing life after death, but the verse also opposes any idea of an inherently immortal soul! In 11:29, 12:18 and 26:38 it means "inner self". In 22:37 it translates *nephesh* in Deut. 6:5, where it means the inner self as the seat of yearning (H.W. Wolff: *Anthropologie*, p.35, 319).

³⁵ Dramatic examples of this are to be found, for instance, in the courageous letters of Christian martyrs under the Third Reich (Helmut Gollwitzer *et al.*: *Du has mich heimgesucht bei Nacht*, p.51, 54, 63 etc.).

³⁶ See O. Cullmann: *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (London: Epworth, 1958).

³⁷ Lightfoot pointed out that Paul describes the dead as in a state of sleeping from which they will arise (I Thess. 4:14-16, 5:10, I Cor. 7:39, 11:30, 15:6,18,20,51) and argued that this must qualify what Paul writes here (*Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*, London: Macmillan, 1888, p.93). On the other hand some modern exegetes, like J.H. Houlden, point out that Hellenistic as well as Hebrew anthropology influenced Hellenistic Judaism (e.g. II Esdr 7:25, Jn. 12:25) and think that it also Paul here (J.H. Houlden: *Paul's Letters from Prison*, Penguin, p.63f.). Cf. II Cor. 5:8; but v.1-5 in this passage are about the eschatological body.

psychē in connection with life after death; instead his focus is on the resurrection.³⁸ Thus the New Testament perceives human beings in a much more unitary way and correspondingly views the body *in a much more positive way* than the Greeks did.³⁹

Already in the time of the New Testament, however, Greek dualism influenced some Christians. As a result some could not accept the notion that the Son of God really became flesh: instead he could only have *seemed* to become incarnate, or take on flesh, in Jesus (I Cor. 12:3⁴⁰, I Jn. 4:1-3 cf. 5:1). Such docetists⁴¹ also denied the resurrection as a future event (I Cor. 15:12ff., II Tim. 2:18). A party in the church at Corinth that sharply distinguished between spirit and body held that only the spirit, not the body, mattered. Therefore as long as one's spirit was right with God, it did not matter what one's body did, to the extent that it was permissible to sleep with prostitutes (I Cor. 6:12-20).

But the New Testament itself repudiates all these views. Paul and the author of I Jn. specifically repudiated this whole dichotomy between body and spirit. The body is an integral part of the human person, and will be raised from the dead. Indeed the bodies of Christians constitute the physical, or concrete, dimension of Christ's presence in the world. It is through the body and its actions that a person's commitment becomes real and effective (I Cor. 6:20b). Spirit and body belong together in the service of Christ. Faith binds us to love in spirit and in truth, but it is the body that concretely manifests that love. Hence physical intercourse is designed for the covenanted union we

³⁸ Even in Rev. 6:9 and 20:4 *psyche* "does not carry with it any clear distinction between a non-corporeal and a corporeal state" (E. Lohse: "ψυχή κτλ.", p.654): the "souls" wear white garments and *come to life* (6:11, 7:9,13f.).

³⁹ The Gospel of Thomas contrasts the *psyche* and the flesh in a very clearly Greek way. See saying 114.

⁴⁰ This verse apparently refers to docetists who polarized the transcendent, spiritual Christ over against the human, or bodily, Jesus: the former had alighted upon Jesus (presumably at his baptism), but the latter could be cursed. Origen later attested that the Gnostic Ophites did not admit converts until they cursed Jesus (Origen: *Contra Celsum* VI..27-28, written 248 AD, cited by R.M. Grant: *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, New York: Harper & Row, rev. ed. 1966, p.118, 215 n.29.)

⁴¹ The Greek verb *dokein* means "to seem".

call marriage, to express the love that binds two people together in mutual commitment and unity (6:16b). Coitus with a prostitute is wrong because it lacks this commitment and reduces a person to a mere object of self-gratification (v.15)—whereas love for one another belongs to the essence of being Christian. To be authentic means for body and mind, or spirit, to act in concert. A commitment to obedience or to love that remains merely spiritual or mental is meaningless.⁴² Cf. Matt. 7:21f., 12:50, 21:29-31, Lk. 6:46, Rom. 2:13, Js. 1:22-25, 2:14. Likewise the author of I Jn. repudiated a docetic group in his community as manifesting “the spirit of the antichrist” (4:3).

According to the New Testament Jesus did not come to take us out of this world, as the Gnostics thought, but to bring God’s rule *to this world*. Salvation does not mean being taken out of this world to dwell in heaven. Salvation (“eternal life”) is the coming of the Messiah to inaugurate the life of the age to come, the Messianic age, an age of peace and justice. Salvation in the book of Revelation is the merging of the new heaven with a renewed earth. It will be complete when the kingdom comes: then God’s will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven.

4. *Christian View(s)*

Elaine Pagels contrasts the orthodox view of early Christianity with the gnostic view that the “inner spirit” was the only essential part of every person, the only part that mattered:

Rejecting the gnostic view that Jesus was a spiritual being, the orthodox insisted that he, like the rest of humanity, was born, lived in a family, became hungry and tired, ate and drank wine, suffered and died. They even went so far as to insist that he rose *bodily* from the dead. What one does physically—one eats and drinks, engages in sexual life or avoids it, saves one’s life or gives it up—all are vital elements in one’s *religious* development.⁴³

⁴² J. Murphy-O’Connor: *Becoming Human Together. The Pastoral Anthropology of St. Paul* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 2nd rev. ed. 1982), p.208f.

⁴³ E. Pagels: *The Gnostic Gospels* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), p.101.

This approach is expressed in the Nicene Creed when it speaks of “the resurrection of the dead” and in the Apostles’ Creed of “the resurrection of the flesh”⁴⁴ As Wendell Berry points out, “Nothing could be more absurd than to despise the body and yet yearn for its resurrection”!⁴⁵

Christians thus make a serious mistake when they fall into the Greek or gnostic trap of speaking as though the spirit is good and matter is bad or as though what we do in the spirit is important but the physical or outward aspect is irrelevant—or follow Plato’s notion that the real world is not this world but the ideal realm above. Christians are properly first of all Jewish—and only secondarily Greek or Western.

Despite this—despite even what the incarnation implied about the human body—the Platonic attitude that split apart soul and body and disparaged the material world and in particular the human body continued to infiltrate Christian thinking, so that it developed a negative view of the body. In the 2nd to the 4th centuries this view became characteristic of powerful Christian Gnostic sects. It was this too that influenced the early Christian hermits to take their ascetic attitude towards the body. More generally the Church in the Roman empire as a whole gradually took over a dualistic understanding of the relation between body and soul. This led to the dissociation and retreat, or emigration, from the world characteristic of the anchorite and monastic traditions in Christian history that was quite unlike the attitude of Jesus; for Jesus was no ascetic (Matt. 11:18f.), healed people in body as well as mind or spirit and never called for any withdrawal from the world.⁴⁶ Even after his conversion, Augustine, the great theologian of the western Church, still showed the influence of Platonism, Neoplatonism and Manichaeism in his thinking. And Francis of Assisi disparagingly called his body “Brother Ass”, as though it were a stupid beast of burden.

Nor did the Reformation free Protestants from Platonic or

⁴⁴ *carnis resurrectionem.*

⁴⁵ Wendell Berry: *the Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, Avon Books, 1977, p.107f., quoted in Matthew Fox: *Original Blessing*, p.58

⁴⁶ See H. Küng: *On Believing in Christ*, p.192f.

dualistic assumptions. Luther's basic distinction between the two kingdoms, an inward kingdom under the rule of Christ and an outward kingdom under the rule of the State,⁴⁷ though more directly based on faulty exegesis of texts like Matt. 5:39-41, Mk. 12:17 and Jn. 18:36, also depended on basic Platonic assumptions. Likewise Melanchthon, Luther's great colleague, and Calvin were influenced by the Greek tradition, even by Neoplatonism or Gnosticism. In contrast to Plato's notion of the soul as an element akin to the divine, Calvin saw it as deeply involved in the fall of humankind and so as "a place where every sort of filth lurked"⁴⁸. Nevertheless he, called the soul "an immortal yet created essence" which is the "nobler part" of a human being and "separate from the body", so that at death it is "freed from the prison house of the body".⁴⁹ In the same way Melanchthon spoke about death as the soul departing "from its earthly prison".⁵⁰

A Platonic view of body and soul is often displayed in sermons at funerals still today: some ministers (like some funeral leaflets) preach as though in contrast to the body the soul is immortal. Some modern Protestant scholars, like the old Gnostics, also seek to reduce Jesus' Resurrection to something spiritual or metaphorical and "existential".

5. *The African View*

Traditional African thinking has had its own myths of creation, different from the Hebrew, or biblical, myths. It has also thought of the spirit as surviving death (and requiring sacrifices from still-living relatives). Yet African culture has thought of the living individual in a less static way than Western culture, and not in terms of such a dichotomy of body and mind, or soul. Instead it has defined personhood in relation to others and indeed as acquired from the community and relationships within

⁴⁷ See, for instance, Luther's tract *On Secular Authority*.

⁴⁸ J. Calvin: *Inst.* I.xv.5.

⁴⁹ J. Calvin: *Inst.* I.xv.1f., III.vi.5.

⁵⁰ P. Melanchthon: letter to Calvin dated 14.10.1544, quoted in J. Calvin: *Letters of John Calvin. Selected from the Bonnet Edition* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1980), p.159f., n.2.

it: obligations, responsibilities, norms and achievements.⁵¹ African culture has thus viewed living people in a more social and unitary way that is closer to the Hebrew perception.

A dramatic example of the contrast between the biblical and African attitude view of worship and the western "European" view, infected as this is by the Greek view, is in people's attitude to dancing in church. The Bible in various places speaks of dancing as a way of praising God and actually calls us to dance in praise to the Lord. Some examples are Ex. 15:20, I Sam. 6:14-23, Ps. 30:11, 141:2, 149:3, 150:4. And African worship is characterized by rhythmic dancing. By contrast some white Christians are uncomfortable with spontaneous or even liturgical dancing in church, and see it as inappropriate and irreverent or even "unsophisticated". Without their realizing it, what really influences them to feel this way is an endemic western Platonism. African culture by contrast is much closer to the Hebraic and biblical mind-set in this matter. Hence in many African Churches and in African revivals there is much dancing before the Lord—though the example and attitude of their more inhibited white colleagues seem to be influencing some African congregations in the mainline Churches to refrain from such bodily movement.

Factors that have Affected Protestant Worship

Like most of Christendom Protestantism too inherited the dualistic view of the relation between body and soul in western culture. This provided the basic context within which other factors also developed and together with it contributed to a negative attitude towards the bodily and material aspects of worship and so to a subdued and relatively immobile style of worship.

1. Protestantism was in essence a *reaction to what the Reformers saw as the Catholic tradition's perversions* of the original biblical approach and emphases. It was natural therefore for Protestants to derogate the more elaborate

⁵¹ M. Michael: *Christian Theology and African Traditions* (Cambridge; Lutterworth, 2013), ch.7, "The Nature of the Human Person", esp. p.113ff.

rites of Catholicism as “popish superstitions” and “outward show”. To an extent the criticism was justified, because some elaborations did distract from the essential rites, and much church pageantry has been triumphalistic and incongruous with the simplicity of “the man on the borrowed donkey”. But because of the unconscious dualism from which it proceeded, some of the criticism was unnecessarily radical in opposition to the bodily and material aspect of worship.

2. Along, and indeed in line, with this dualistic de-emphasis of what is bodily and material has been the Protestant, and specifically the Reformed, *emphasis on the cerebral*. The Protestant tradition has often placed an almost exclusive emphasis on salvation through *the word*, and so on *hearing* (Rom. 10:14-16) and receiving the gospel with *the mind*. This has led many Protestants to see the sacraments as mere outward symbolic expressions of the devout mind or spirit and so to downplay their role. This is in contrast to the New Testament understanding of them as bodily acts with material elements through which too God acts in saving and blessing the people of God. Despite what their confessional statements may say, most Protestants’ understanding of the sacraments is in fact deeply Zwinglian, in a way that splits apart or divorces the material elements and their spiritual aspect or effect. Many think of baptism as merely a symbolic ritual in which the central aspect is the baptized person’s *repentance and confession of faith*. That is part of the reason why some today push for rebaptism as adults. Reformed and other Protestant liturgies of the Lord’s Supper traditionally give a central place to the reciting of I Cor. 11:23-26 but translate the words in v.24c as “Do this in remembrance of me.” These are the words most often carved on Communion tables as well. This translation reduces the central act to one of mere *mental remembrance*. In fact, however, the Greek word *anamnēsis* and the Hebrew *zikāron* that it translates mean not mere remembrance but a (bodily and material) *act of commemoration*.⁵² This misunderstanding of the

⁵² See J.-J. von Allmen: *The Lord’s Supper. Ecumenical Studies in Worship No. 10* (London: Lutterworth, 1969), ch. 1 and ἀνάμνησις in *TDNT*. Hence the

sacrament as essentially merely an intellectual and spiritual remembrance has also led most Protestants to feel no need to celebrate Holy Communion frequently, in contrast to the New Testament Church in which the sacrament was the central act of worship every week. (The downplaying of the sacraments as compared to the rational or intellectual Word that is *heard* has also entailed a downplaying of the use of colour in worship as well as of the role of the physical senses of sight, touch and taste.)

3. One must recognize as well that the move away from patriarchy towards *liberté, égalité, fraternité* and liberal democracy and the growing impact of secularization, both in the wake of the Enlightenment, have led to a *general lessening of respect for authority* in modern western culture. However positive this may be in political terms, it has also contributed, even among Christians, to the loss of a sense of the holiness and majesty of God (the loss of “the fear of the Lord”) and so to the loss of the feeling that we should show such fear or awe. Whereas biblical people would demonstrate a reverence for God by standing for prayer, it is almost as though today we say, We’re going to address God now, so sit back and relax in your pews. Indeed sitting itself has the effect of teaching us to take God’s holiness and glory less seriously by neglecting to *show* awe or reverence in the presence of God. It means acting as though Christian worship and Christian existence itself do not involve the whole of us—body as well as mind. (This is not to deny that some people do sit forward and bow their heads for prayer, which is a kind of bodily compromise.)
4. Despite the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, many church people today have come to share in the general ethos of being “a *generation of spectators*” who avoid “subjective” or active participation and prefer just to *observe*. Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) already in the 19th century, in his *The Present Age* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, brilliantly diagnosed the contemporary age in

Worship Task Team’s Orders for Holy Communion use the term “commemoration”, not “remembrance”.

western civilization as one in which people suffer from a "spiritual malaise" that lacks all passionate inwardness and commitment, a state of passive and passionless "repose" devoid of purpose and participation, in which they have forgotten what it means really to *exist*.

5. Lastly there is *the human tendency anyway to opt for the least necessary effort* and whatever is most comfortable—in what we may call a social equivalent to the law of inertia—that makes some people want to be as passive as possible in worship.

All this has contributed towards mainline Protestantism's negligence of, and indeed negative attitude to, the bodily aspects of worship (and also its neglect of the use of seasonal colours).

The first two factors numbered above influenced especially, for instance, the English Puritans, in their version of Protestantism. Already in his tract *on The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther began his critique of the Catholic Mass by asserting:

The first thing we must do in order to come certainly and joyfully to a true, free and proper understanding of this sacrament is to see to it that everything that human devotion and zeal have added to the original, simple institution of this sacrament is set aside, like human vestments, ornaments, hymns, prayers, organs, lights and the whole pageant of visible things. We must turn our eyes and our minds to Christ's unadulterated establishment of it and set nothing else before us than Christ's word through which he instituted, fulfilled and commended the sacrament to us. For in that same word and in no other reside the power, the nature and the whole essence of the mass.

The Puritans took this approach to mean that "the whole pageant of visible things" must be stripped away, not only in "our minds", or thinking, but in practice. They reacted to everything that looked or smelled Catholic, built simple, undecorated churches with pews and began the custom in England of sitting instead of kneeling or standing for prayer and for Communion. Indeed so much did a negative attitude to the body and to Catholic rites affect some early Reformed Churches that they did away with services for the deceased. The English

Genevan Service Book (1556) and the *Westminster Directory for Public Worship* (1645) both called for the body to be carried reverently to the grave and buried "without any ceremony"⁵³!

The Puritans justified their approach by interpreting the text in Jn. 4:23f. to mean that we are to worship God in spirit but the physical and outward aspects of worship were unimportant.⁵⁴ But unconsciously they were following the Platonists and the Gnostics in disparaging the body in contrast to the soul.

The Puritan attitude spread to Scotland and elsewhere. The result in the broader Reformed Church is that many Reformed Christians have been leery about traditional bodily aspects of worship, or what the Swiss Reformed scholar J.-J. von Allmen calls "kinetic"⁵⁵ worship", which he defines as worship that includes "attitudes, gestures and movements". Examples are the traditional Christian sign of crossing oneself as an accompaniment to prayer, lifting one's hands in prayer or praise, placing one's hand on one's breast while confessing one's sins, processions, dancing before the Lord etc. In our congregations today most church members will sing the words, "we lift our hands before you as a token of our love" but think it quite unnecessary to do so! And few Ministers call on their congregations to stand except for the hymns or songs. Indeed modern Reformed Churches and Christians tend to take the line that our bodily posture is irrelevant for prayer. Some therefore derogate the raising of hands in prayer and distinguish Reformed worship from Pentecostal or charismatic worship in this regard.

Because many Christians in the traditional Protestant Churches have thought, and understood their faith, in terms of the spirit-body dichotomy for so long, they tend at a subliminal level to regard the bodily and the material aspects of existence as much

⁵³ P. Bradshaw (ed.): *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (Louisville: WJK, 2002), p.218, 226.

⁵⁴ In Jn. 4:23f. Jesus is talking not at all about whether the body should be involved in worship but about whether corporate worship needs to take place at a particular sacred site. As Matthew Henry puts it, "The stress is not to be laid upon the place where we worship God, but upon the state of mind in which we worship him."

⁵⁵ From the Greek word *kinēsis*, meaning "movement, moving, motion".

less important than the spiritual. This has consequences not only in worship but also in their understanding of salvation and ethics. Hence much Protestantism has focused almost exclusively on the salvation of "souls" and on the interior life of people as what is important. It has given less attention to the fact that human beings are *bodily beings* that therefore always exist in concrete historical, social and political settings. Indeed some Protestants have regarded care for the bodily well-being of people as to be left to the State.

Bodily Worship in Scripture

To worship God is to honour, revere and adore God. Of course, such worship *is primarily* a matter of the heart and mind. Although not with specific reference to worship the text stands: "the LORD does not see as mortals see: they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (I Sam. 16:7). More specifically Jesus quotes Isa. 29:13 against the Pharisees and scribes:

This people honours me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me;
in vain do they worship me.... (Matt.15:8f.)

He also exhorts us to pray with the right attitude towards others (Matt. 6:12||Lk. 11:4, Matt. 5:23f., Mk.11:25).

God *is more* concerned with the attitude of our hearts and minds than with the attitude of our bodies And no particular posture is essential for prayer. A person can pray in any position, at anytime, anywhere, even driving a car or lying in bed, with eyes closed or open. The psalmist himself speaks of meditating or praying on his bed (Ps 4:4; 42:8, 63:6). Indeed Paul exhorts us to pray without ceasing and give thanks in all circumstances (I Th. 5:17f.), and one cannot stand or kneel all day long! The important thing is that one's heart is in submission to Christ. Pascal went so far as to say, "God looks only at what is inward."⁵⁶ And one Protestant on the internet has stated that false religion is concerned with external behaviour, whereas true Christianity is concerned only with the

⁵⁶ *Pensées* 905 (Pelican ed. 923).

heart. (This is important, of course, also for those for whom it is physically difficult to move or to stand or kneel.)

Nevertheless such statements are too simplistic, unless they are qualified. For it is a mistake to conclude, as many Protestants do, that all attention to physical posture or position or action is irrelevant. What Pascal said is only one side of the matter: taken as the whole truth, it would lead to ethical quietism. Scripture by contrast views Christian existence and therefore also worship as something that involves *the whole human self* and thus both the inner and the outer person, both the "heart" and *the body*. Our bodies are after all part of our being; we are created as holistic beings with intellects, emotions and bodies and these all work in concert to express our feelings. Indeed we express a lot about what we think and feel with our bodies, sometimes without saying anything. Social studies suggest that 70-95% of communication is non-verbal.

Thus if we sit with our arms folded or mouth responses or hymns with a blank or bored look on our faces, that is a sure indication that our hearts are not in it, that we feel no adoration, wonder or awe and are not truly worshipping God. Our bodies express our inward attitudes; indeed our inward attitudes are influenced by our bodily attitudes. For instance, praying with one's hands in one's pockets expresses and conveys an inappropriately casual attitude. The very notion that God pays attention *only* to the spiritual component of our being is rooted in Greek dualism rather than biblical realism. To honour God with our bodies is also to honour God for creating our bodies. Precisely because in the Bible prayer is seen as involving the whole person, it is expressed bodily as well as in spirit, particularly in corporate worship. "O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the Lord our maker" (Ps. 95:6).

At the beginning of the paraenetic section of the Epistle to the Romans Paul declares:

Therefore by the mercies of God, I call on⁵⁷ you, brothers and sisters, to present *your bodies* as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. This is the worship that is

⁵⁷ Or "appeal to" or "admonish".

spiritual and in all reason appropriate for you. (Rom. 12:1).

Paul sets this forth as a basic principle for Christian ethics, but he does so in the language of worship: he uses an act of worship as a metaphor for ethical obedience and indeed identifies ethics as a form of worship. The Greek verb here translated as "present" is a cultic term that means bringing and presenting a sacrifice. What applies to ethics therefore applies in the first place to *worship*. The noun translated as "bodies" means people's bodily existence, their physical being in the world.⁵⁸ In both worship and ethics we are to offer our whole selves, body as well as spirit, to God. "The body of man is included in the spiritual response which the human being makes to the event of revelation" (Peter Brunner).⁵⁹ Nor is the word translated here as "spiritual and in all reason appropriate" intended to limit either worship or obedience to the mental or spiritual sphere. The Greek adjective used is *logikos*, which is derived from *logos* ("reason, rationality") and means "logical, rational, spiritual". The phrase "rational/spiritual worship" had its origin in Stoic and philosophical polemic against the bloody animal sacrifices of traditional popular worship. It thus meant *worship that is in line with God's rational nature*, not worship confined to a spiritual sphere.⁶⁰

Paul is insisting that being "transformed" through the renewing of our minds (12:2) must issue in presenting our whole selves, body and spirit, both in worship and in a transformed way of life. It means worshipping and living out our obedience with our whole beings in the world, "the offering of bodily existence in the otherwise profane sphere" (Ernst Käsemann)⁶¹!

Consistently with this, when Paul is in prison (probably in Ephesus) and facing trial and the possibility of execution, his concern is not just that he will remain inwardly loyal, or loyal in

⁵⁸ E. Käsemann: *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p.327, 329.

⁵⁹ Quoted by J.-J. von Allmen: *Worship*, p.94.

⁶⁰ See the long discussion of this phrase in Käsemann, E.: *Comm. on Romans*, p. 328f.

⁶¹ E. Käsemann: *Comm. on Romans*, p.329.

spirit, to his Lord "but that by speaking out in all boldness now as always Christ will be exalted [more literally, magnified] *in my body*, whether through life or through death" (Phil. 1:20). Thus whereas we think of the spirit as the primary sphere, in which we should worship God, "Paul thinks of his body as the scene or sphere in which his Saviour would be honoured"⁶² (Phil. 1:20, I Cor. 6:20, II Cor. 4:10). What matters to him is that his bodily existence in this world may promote the glory of Christ. Likewise in I Cor. Paul pleads, "Glorify God *in [or with]⁶³ your body*" (I Cor.6:20).

In all these texts Paul writes as he does because his thinking is Hebraic, not Greek. He emphasizes the role of the body in worship and obedience like this because he has *a quite different attitude to the body* from ours, one that sees the body as necessarily involved in all of Christian existence, and therefore in Christian worship and Christian obedience.

Of course, in all of these texts Paul means more than offering our bodies in acts of worship; he means the offering to God of *our whole bodily existence* in the world. For him as for the other writers of the New Testament just as salvation is something that Christ accomplished in his bodily existence (Col. 1:21f., Heb. 10:10 I Pet. 2:24,) so it is something that affects us in our bodily existence (II Cor. 4:10). That is why Paul, for instance, castigates bodily sin as well as spiritual sin (I Cor.6:13-20). We are to be "holy in body and spirit" (I Cor. 7:34, cf. II Cor. 7:1), to be kept blameless in our "whole spirit and soul *and body*" (I Thess. 5:23 cf. Rom. 6:12f., 19, 7:5). Gerrit Brand, a deceased professor of theology at Stellenbosch, put it well: "Christ does not save us *from* life in the body but so that we may *have* life, and 'have it abundantly'" (Joh 10:10)." Or to quote William Temple, the great Archbishop of Canterbury, "worship is the submission of *all of our nature* to God."⁶⁴

⁶² J.H. Michael: *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians. Moffat New Testament Commentary* (London: H. & S., 1928), p.51.

⁶³ The Greek preposition can be translated either as meaning 'in' or as instrumental and meaning 'with'.

⁶⁴ W. Temple: *Readings in St. John's Gospel* (London: Macmillan & co., 1952), p.68. Italics added.

God, in other words, wants us to be worship and serve God with the whole of our selves—with our hearts *and* our bodies. We are to manifest the life of Jesus, the new life we receive, not only in our spirits but also “in our bodies” (II Cor.4:10). “For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in (*literally* through or with) *the body*, whether good or evil” (II Cor. 5:10 cf. Heb. 13:1-5 etc.). Biblical religion, as against Platonic religion, is very much also a bodily matter. For, from a biblical point of view, we are essentially *bodily beings*, and so *what we do in and with our body matters*.

Hence when we look at the Bible, we see that its perception of the role of the body in worship contrasts very much with that of modern mainline Protestantism. The Bible takes the body seriously in worship to the extent of positing specific bodily postures as appropriate for specific acts of worship.⁶⁵ On the other hand the more we remain passive in worship, the more we encourage or inculcate the attitude that it is really only our minds or spirits that need to be involved in worship. This in turn unconsciously but inevitably to some extent inculcates an attitude that to serve God with our bodies—i.e. in concrete ways—is less necessary than to serve with our minds or spirits, contrary to Paul’s teaching that we must present “our *bodies* as a living sacrifice” to God.

It is as though God shares the sentiments of Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*: Don’t just tell me; show me!⁶⁶

Words! Words! Words!
I'm so sick of words!
Don't talk of stars
burning above;
if you're in love,
show me!

⁶⁵ We may compare the characteristic prostration of bodies in Muslim worship, which is meant to teach Muslims at a deeper level than the rational the existential surrender of one’s entire being to God that the very word *islam* means.

⁶⁶ The analogy is not inappropriate, if we remember that in Scripture the people of God are God’s betrothed.

Bodily Worship in John Calvin

What may surprise some is that John Calvin was in basic sympathy with *both* sides of this approach. In the *Institutes* and his commentaries he agreed that the chief thing in prayer is our inward affection or attitude; without inward submission of the heart, the ceremony is hypocritical. For all true religion is aimed at the communion of our hearts with the God who made us and remade us. Exercising the body in worship is thus worthless, even pernicious, if the heart does not participate. All "counterfeit worship" is to be condemned.⁶⁷ Human inventions in worship are to be avoided.⁶⁸ Gestures and ceremonies may be foolish and empty; indeed if they do not lead us to Christ, they are corrupt and harmful.⁶⁹ Simplicity accords with the apostolic example, in contrast to elaborate gesticulations and ornaments, "theatrical props", empty pomp and senseless superstitions.⁷⁰

On the other hand Calvin also emphasized that to act as though we have no bodies or to think that our bodies have no role in worship is to be misled. We are to worship God not only with inward gratitude but also with the outward profession of godliness. The very first rule of prayer is reverence.⁷¹ But this means that we are to glorify God with our *whole* selves, body as well as mind. We should follow the way in which "the Lord has faithfully and fully instructed us how he is to be worshipped" in Scripture.⁷² Thus bodily gestures such as kneeling and uncovering the head⁷³ are "exercises whereby we try to rise to a greater reverence for God"⁷⁴. The Lord's people must present themselves as a sacrifice to God in public, kneeling and lifting their eyes to heaven. And just as falling down on our knees is a

⁶⁷ J. Calvin: *Inst.* IV.x.11. In his commentary on I Tim. 2:8 Calvin cites Isa. 1:15 and adds that hypocrites and idolaters who lift up their hands in prayer and so exhibit what fails to be in their hearts "bear testimony against themselves".

⁶⁸ J. Calvin: *Inst.* I.iv.3, xi-xii, IV.viii.3f.,8f.,11,13, xi.8, x.8,16-18.

⁶⁹ J. Calvin: *Inst.* IV.x.18,15.

⁷⁰ J. Calvin: *Inst.* IV.x.19,29,23f. For instance, in baptism Calvin scorned Catholic "incantations" over water to consecrate it, candling, exsufflation and the priest's use of spittle (IV.xv.19).

⁷¹ J. Calvin: *Inst.* III.xx.4f.,14.

⁷² J. Calvin: *Inst.* IV.x.8.

⁷³ Calvin meant men uncovering their heads, not women, in line with I Cor. 11:1-16.

⁷⁴ J. Calvin: *Inst.* III.xx.33.

symbol of our humility, so lifting up our hands is a symbol of confidence and longing.⁷⁵ When done sincerely and without hypocrisy, such things are helps to devout and zealous prayer. "God has planted in people's minds...the principle that their prayers are lawful only when their minds are uplifted. Hence the rite of lifting up the hands."⁷⁶ Such outward ceremonies are signs of true spiritual service and worship; they are an aid to worship and themselves part of worship.

In sum, Calvin agrees that "the inward attitude certainly holds first place in prayer", but outward signs such as kneeling, uncovering the head and lifting up the hands serve three ends, or purposes:

- a) by means of them we testify to our humility before God and "employ all our members for the glory and worship of God";
- b) they help to rouse or "jolt" us out of our sinful slothfulness and sluggishness in praising God; and
- c) by such bodily profession of godliness we "inflare" one another to reverence God.⁷⁷

The 20th century Swiss Reformed liturgical theologian J.-J. von Allmen stated:

Faith must proceed to the use of [bodily] gestures, and it is rather a docetic tendency than spiritual modesty which at this point prevents us modern Reformed Protestants from agreeing. "Public prayer must be uttered with a very special turning of the heart towards God" say the church ordinances of Julich and Berg dating from 1671, but they at once add: "by kneeling, or standing upright or other external signs of humility". ... To be sure, the attitude, the gesture, the movement can be devoid of content (just as doctrine can be devoid of faith); but without the attitude, the gesture, the movement, Church worship also risks becoming emptied of its content, for it has no longer a vessel to contain it, or has one that belies the content (as faith runs dry if it is not defined and sustained by doctrine). Thus this concord and harmony between

⁷⁵ J. Calvin: Comm. on Ac. 20:36.

⁷⁶ J. Calvin: *Inst.* III.xx.16.

⁷⁷ J. Calvin: Comm. on Ac.20:36.

liturgical feeling (faith, repentance, thanksgiving, supplication, adoration) and the kinetic expression of that feeling is...a liturgical necessity and it is time that we learnt this truth afresh. "It is curious to note that the kneeling [we might add or standing] of the congregation...is regarded as wrong in almost all Evangelical churches.... We have become enslaved to a false shame, a shame which is rooted in the fact that we no longer dare to confess openly our faith," observes with justice H. Asmussen.⁷⁸

Many other modern theologians also point out that the Church should recognize that the dichotomy between the spiritual and the material is a false one, and that the incarnation demands that we see the spiritual and the bodily aspects of life as bound up together and take both seriously.⁷⁹

The point then is that we need to re-evaluate our attitude to the role of the body in worship to bring it into line with the whole understanding of salvation, worship and Christian existence in the Bible. We need to recover the full Hebraic, or biblical, heritage in which worship involved offering the whole person, body, mind and spirit, to God. Thus, if we are physically able, we should adopt appropriate bodily movement and postures in our worship together.

Particular Body Postures

Beginning with the Puritan tradition, the Platonic disjunction between mind, or soul, and body has led much of the Reformed Church to replace standing or kneeling both for prayer and for Communion with sitting. Thus whereas Catholics and Anglicans often kneel, in English-speaking Protestant Churches it has long been a habit for Protestants just to sit for prayers in church. In other ways too, while Catholics and Anglicans traditionally use outward actions and gestures, and also the appropriate liturgical colours, in worship, many Protestants disparage these things, along with kneeling, as part of the "outward show" that Catholics and Anglicans "put on" or at least pay them little

⁷⁸ J.-J. von Allmen: *Worship*, p.93f.

⁷⁹ See, for instance, J. Moltmann: *The Experiment Hope* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), p.1ff.

attention. Indeed many Anglicans today also sit for prayer: the person leading worship will now often say, "Please kneel or sit, as you feel comfortable"!

We need to ask, however: Is this not profoundly incongruous? Would we sit or remain sitting if any human person of rank or status, say the king or queen or president of a country, walked into a room and we wished to address him or her? So is it not strange that Protestants sense no anomaly, or indeed blasphemy, when after the hymn or song at the beginning of the service the minister says, "Please sit"? To address the Prayer of Praise *to the Creator and Lord of the universe* we sit casually in our pews! Why do we not feel profoundly uncomfortable at such an incongruity, even if we adopt the so-called "Nonconformist crouch" or "shampoo position"? Is it not as incongruous as a person standing in front to lead in prayer with his hands deep in his pockets! Do we not feel the need to kneel when we say our prayers at home? Do we not feel a profound anomaly then when we declare in the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving at Communion that the angels and archangels cry out "Holy, holy, holy" in the presence of the holy and almighty One, while we sit or even lounge in our pews as we pray these words? What could be more anomalous? Do we imagine the angels sitting when they cry out their praises?

What then does Scripture say and exemplify about different postures and movements?

1. *Sitting*. Kings and rulers sat to indicate their authority to rule or judge, and teachers and their pupils sat (II Ki. 4:38; Ezek. 8:30-31, Lk. 10:39). Jesus often taught from a seated position (Matt. 5:1, Lk. 4:20). Sitting thus expressed authority, to rule, judge or teach. Hence the Old Testament and ancient Jewish literature speak of God alone being seated in heaven, the New Testament of God and Christ alone. This symbolizes their sovereignty over all the cosmos. Indeed the Book of the Revelation stretches this picture language by speaking of God and Christ sharing *one* throne to symbolize their united sovereignty. By contrast with God and Christ, Scripture never portrays the angels as sitting. As later rabbinic tradition put it: "on high there is no sitting." Instead the angels *stand* in attendance on God (e.g. Dan.

7:10, Lk. 1:19, Tobit 12:15), hover in worship (Isa. 6:2), or else move to do God's bidding. The one seeming exception is in Rev. 4, where the twenty-four heavenly Elders (cf. Isa. 24:23) have thrones to symbolize their (lesser) authority. In practice, however, they spend their time on their knees in worship casting their crowns of authority before God (Rev. 4:8,9f.)! As the Bible sees it, when we worship God we join the angels in their worship, a worship that precedes and accompanies ours, and we should therefore show the same reverence as they do in the presence of God.

A few texts in the Old Testament do speak of "sitting before the Lord" for prayer (Jdg. 20:26, II Sam. 7:18). This did not mean on benches or chairs, however: it was an extension of bowing to the ground or kneeling and meant crouching, or sitting on one's haunches with one's knees and face to the ground (Ex. 34:8, I Ki. 1:13, 18:42, II Chr. 20:18, Neh. 8:6, Ps. 95:6).

Eph. does state that we are seated with Christ in the heavenly places, at the right hand of the Father (Eph. 1:15–23, 2:4–7); but this describes the royal status that Christ conveys on us, not a posture for prayer.

Thus people in the Bible did not pray sitting in pews or chairs. Indeed they would surely have regarded that as blasphemy, or not far short of it, because for them it was not a position that expressed reverence. In Scripture when coming before someone to whom respect is due, one expresses that respect in one's bodily posture as well as, say, with one's voice, and that applies *a fortiori* when one comes before God's majesty. What then is the biblical position, or posture, for prayer? Several different postures are in fact adopted.⁸⁰

2. *Standing*. Standing was, and still is, a way of showing respect. Lev. 19:32 stipulated. "You shall stand up before the grey head and honour the face of an old person" (Lev. 19:32). Even more this applied to the worship of God, as

⁸⁰ See, e.g., the website <http://www.kencollins.com/worship/pray-20.htm>

this text immediately adds: "...and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD." Standing also symbolized that one was given the privilege of an audience with the king or emperor (Est. 5:2)—or with God, as a member of the justified people of God (I Jn. 2:1-2, Eph. 2:18, Heb. 10:19ff.). Standing also symbolized a person's alertness and readiness to serve the king or a master, or to engage in battle (Eph. 6:13-18).

The Old Testament thus portrays standing as the normal posture for public prayer for both men and women, as a sign especially of reverence before God (Gen. 18:22, 24:12ff., Ex. 8:22ff., Lev.9:5, I Sam. 1:26, I Ki. 8:22, 19:13f., I Chr. 23:30, II Chr. 20:5ff., 13, 19, 34:31, Neh. 9:2-5, 12:40, Job 30:20, Ps. 106:23, 135:2f., Jer. 15:1, 18:20. The normal posture was with outstretched or uplifted hands, with palms up, looking up "to heaven" in acknowledgement that that was from where their help must come (Ex. 9:29, 17:11f., I Ki. 8:22f., 28f., Ezr. 9:5, Neh. 8:6, Ps. 28:2, 63:4, 77:2, 119:48, 134:2, 141:2, Isa. 1:15, Lam. 2:19, 3:41, Hab. 3:10). (This is called the *orans* position, from the Latin word for praying.) Whereas some Protestant ministers say, "Let us bow our heads in prayer," the Psalmist said, "I will lift up my hands" (Ps. 63:4). Such standing was the normal attitude for prayer in the Temple and later in the synagogue. Jesus himself, as a good Jew, adopted this posture (Mk. 6:14, Jn. 11:14, 17:1a) and clearly assumed that at prayer people would stand (Matt. 6:5, Mk. 11:25, Lk. 18:11, 13).

People sometimes stood to pray with hands clasped at the waist, looking down with averted or closed eyes. This posture imitated that of a shackled prisoner of war brought before a conquering king. Such a prisoner averted his eyes, because looking directly at one's captor was regarded insolent and could result in being executed on the spot! This submissive posture was adopted in penitential prayer or special petitions (Lk. 18:10-13).

In the tradition of the Jews and following Jesus, therefore, the first Christians normally stood for prayer in corporate worship. I Tim. 2:8 urges that in every Christian meeting-place (cf. Mal. 1:11, I Cor. 1:2, II Cor. 2:14, I Th. 1:8) "I desire then [expressing a note of apostolic authority, almost

imperiousness, as in 5:14] that in every meeting place the men (*tous andras*) should pray, lifting devout (*hosious*) hands without anger and strife". That is, their hearts had to be purified of all quarrelling and ill-will (cf. Matt. 5:23-25, 6:12||Lk. 11:4, Matt. 6:14, Mk. 11:25), but at the same time it is taken for granted that they would stand with uplifted hands.⁸¹

3. *Beating one's breast*. The tax collector in Jesus' parable stood in the Temple and beat his breast. This was a gesture of deep penitence in Jewish custom (Lk. 18:13).
4. *Bowing down*. Bowing from a position of standing is also a posture of homage or obeisance towards human beings (Gen. 37:7,9, Ex. 11:8) or towards God in prayer and worship (Jdg. 7:15, I Chr. 29:20, Neh. 8:6, Ps. 5:7, 138:2). When Abraham's servant's prayer was answered, he "bowed to the ground before the Lord" (Gen. 24:52). The Israelites bowed to the ground in worship (Ex. 4:31), and Moses in supplication "bowed his head towards the earth and worshipped" (Ex. 34:8). The Psalms especially describe bowing for prayer (Ps. 5:7, 95:6). Bowing is a way of expressing respect or reverence. Even today we may bow toward a king or dignitary to express that. Cf. Luke 5:12. The rabbis prescribed bowing for the Eighteen Prayers (Petitions) in the synagogue.⁸²
5. *Kneeling*. This could be with eyes looking up and hands uplifted with the palms up or looking down with the hands folded and the eyes averted or closed (I Ki. 8:54, II Chr.

⁸¹ The text apparently refers to the vocal offering of prayer. It then indicates that, as in the synagogue, all male members of the Church had a right to offer public prayer and were expected to exercise it. Women by contrast were expected in this epistle to be silent, for modesty's sake (v.9ff.)—and for the same reason may have been expected to remain seated. It is presumably on the basis of this text in I Tim. 2:8ff. that in Dutch Reformed Churches until the last quarter of the 20th century the men stood for prayer, while the women remained seated.

⁸² M. Barth: *Ephesians 1-3. The Anchor Bible*, vol. 34 (New York: Doubleday, 1974), p.378 n.51.

6:13ff., Ezr. 9:5, Isa. 45:23, Dn. 6:10). Kneeling primarily expressed homage⁸³ but was also used in entreating favours from a king or a person of high standing (Matt. 18:26, 27:29||Mk. 15:19). (Further movements could include embracing a person's feet and/or kissing the hem of his garment or the ground on which he stood.) Hence kneeling came to be used in prayers of homage or repentance or supplication. Comparatively few texts in the Old Testament refer to people praying on their knees, however, and most of these are late, which may indicate that kneeling was originally a pagan custom that the Hebrews later took over (I Ki. 19:18, Rom. 11:4). "Perhaps only in exceptional cases did individuals or the whole congregation kneel down for prayer" among the Hebrews.⁸⁴ In emphasizing the universal sovereignty of the Lord, Isa. 45:23 declares that all people will pay homage to and worship God on their knees. In the New Testament Lk. 22:41-44 states that Jesus knelt to pray in Gethsemane. This too was with his face to the ground, if "fell upon his face" in the parallel passage Matt. 26:39 refers to kneeling and not prostration (cf. Mk. 14:35:"fell upon the earth"). Other people also knelt for prayer (Ac. 7:60, 9:40, 20:36, 21:5, Eph. 3:14). And Paul reiterates Isa. 45:23 in declaring that all things in heaven, on earth and under the earth will kneel in homage before God (Rom. 14:11, Phil. 2:10f.).

6. *Prostration*. When people wished to show especially deep respect or homage to someone, they fell on their faces and prostrated themselves on the ground, with closed or averted eyes. Primarily this expressed awe or fear (Josh.5:14f.). It was the traditional posture for expressing obeisance or for begging a favour from a king, when the favour was great and the petitioner was desperate or had no standing before the king. A man might fall to the ground before a person who had power of life or death over him. Prostration before the gods was very common throughout the ancient Near

⁸³ J.H. Houlden: *Paul's Letters from Prison* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), *ad* Eph.3:14, p.302.

⁸⁴ M. Barth: *Ephesians 1-3*, p.377. See the whole comment on kneeling, p.377-379.

East, but is infrequent in the Bible. But people prostrated themselves before the glory of God in theophanies (Gen 17:3,17, Nu. 16:22, 20:6, Jos. 5:14, Isa. 49:7, Ezk.1:28f., 3:23f.), in repentance (I Esd. 8:91) and in especially earnest supplication (Num. 20:2–6, Josh. 7:1–6, Judith 9:1, II Mac. 13:12). It signified utter reverence or being overcome by a sense of God's glory; it was also a sign recognizing one's unworthiness and need of mercy, especially in a crisis. The tragedies that befell Job led him to fall on the ground in worship (Job 1:20–21). (See also Num 16:45; Josh 7:6; 2 Sam 7:16, I Ki. 1:47, II Chr. 20:18, Matt. 26:39||Mk. 14:35). The angels and Elders and living creatures who pray before God's heavenly throne fall on their faces (Rev. 4:10, 5:14, 7:11). Sometimes worshippers prostrated themselves before the Lord as an act of homage and then assumed the posture of kneeling to pray (Ps 95:6).

In the New Testament in special cases people prostrated themselves (Matt. 8:2||Lk. 5:12, Matt. 9:18). Matt. 26:39||Mk. 14:35 may describe Jesus as prostrating himself in the Garden of Gethsemane. Both these texts use the Greek verb *proskyneō*. The etymological meaning of this was to fawn (like a dog)⁸⁵. It was used for the custom of prostrating oneself before a person and kissing his feet or the hem of his garment or the ground on which he stood (as Persians did before their deified king and Greeks before a divine or venerated being) or blowing a kiss as a sign of veneration. In the New Testament it basically means "to prostrate oneself or fall down before" someone. Normally the object is God or someone or something to whom or which divinity is attributed (Matt. 4:10||Lk. 4:8, Jn. 4:20–24, 12:20, Ac. 7:43, 8:27, 12:20, 24:11, I Cor. 14:25, Heb. 1:6, Rev. 4:10, 5:14, 7:11, 9:20, 11:1,16, 13:4,8,12,15, 14:7,9, 11, 15:4, 16:2, 19:4,10,20, 22:8f.)⁸⁶—and some of these texts speak explicitly of falling down. Hence in Matt. 28:9,17 and Lk. 24:52 the implication is that the resurrected Lord is

⁸⁵ The word is derived from the prefix *pros*, meaning motion towards, and *kyōn*, a dog.

⁸⁶ Cf. H. Greeven: in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol.VI, p.763.

divine. But sometimes the word has the more general meaning of "worship" or "do obeisance" or possibly "kneel before" or even just "implore" without actual prostration and the object is not necessarily divine, but could be a ruler, creditor or the master of a slave—or even the devil (Matt. 2:2,8,11, 4:9||Lk. 4:7, Matt. 18:26, Mk. 15:19, Ac. 10:25, Heb. 11:1, Rev. 3:9). In Christian practice prostration became the posture for complete submission or desperate penitential or intercessory prayer. It is still used in Eastern churches that have no pews and plenty of room. In the Catholic and Anglican traditions the ordination of a priest has included prostration as a symbol of complete surrender, in the Catholic tradition with the arms spread out, in the Anglican tradition not.

7. *Dancing, Leaping, Skipping and Clapping.* Scripture speaks of David dancing before the Lord with all his might (II Sam. 6:14), of mountains and hills leaping or skipping and of trees and floods clapping their hands (Ps. 29:6, 98:8, 114:4,6, Isa. 55:12) in celebration of God's power or triumphant liberation. (Cf. Matthew 5:12b). We may presume that this allegorical language imitated what human worshippers did at Hebrew festivals.

Standing remained the *normal* posture for prayer in the early Church: "the congregation prayed standing, not with the hands placed together but with their arms outstretched in the position of the cross."⁸⁷ The earliest Christians in Rome met in the miles of catacombs under the city, because the city police were under orders not to go into the catacombs to arrest people. Many pictures on the walls or pillars of the catacombs show Christians at prayer; all are standing with their arms lifted up. On early sepulchral monuments too Christians are shown with arms stretched out to the Lord in prayer.⁸⁸ I Clement 2 states, "You stretched out suppliant hands to almighty God."⁸⁹

Justin Martyr c. 155 AD describes the Sunday worship of the

⁸⁷ E. Simon: *The Saints* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1972), p.60.

⁸⁸ J. Bulloch: *op. cit.*, p.254.

⁸⁹ I Clement 2.3, LCC I, p.44.

post-apostolic Church as follows: "When the reader has finished [reading "the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets"], the president in a discourse urges us to the imitation of these noble things. Then *we all stand up together and offer prayers...*", after which the eucharist followed.⁹⁰ In about 200 AD the great African theologian Tertullian wrote that Christians knelt for prayer with bowed heads and clasped hands (in church or at home?), but on Sundays at the eucharist always stood for the prayers⁹¹ and throughout the Easter season stood in joyful celebration of the resurrection.⁹² Origen, Jerome and Augustine also bear witness that Christians stood. They stood for prayer as a sign of reverence, but in time this came to be interpreted as also a sign that they had arisen with Christ. "He who has risen, stands", declared a 4th century work.⁹³ Augustine wrote that Christians stood as "an Easter people" incorporated by their baptism into the resurrection of the Son, counted worthy to stand in the presence of God and ready to greet the Lord Jesus when he comes again in glory.

Nevertheless kneeling for prayer also became common in the early Gentile Church, perhaps partly because it was normal in pagan worship. Eusebius appears to be the first to assert that kneeling was "our normal attitude when praying".⁹⁴ But the ecumenical Council of Nicaea in AD 325 forbade kneeling during the Sunday (eucharistic) services, on the ground that it was the posture for penitential prayer and therefore inappropriate in services celebrating the Resurrection. The Council's canon stated:

Since there are some persons who kneel on the Lord's Day and in the days of Pentecost, in order that all things may be observed in like manner in every parish, the holy Synod

⁹⁰ Justin Martyr: *I Apology*, 67, LCC I, p. 287. Italics added.

⁹¹ Tertullian: *Apology* XXXIX, cited J. Bulloch: *From Pilate to Constantine*, p.254.

⁹² Tertullian: *De oratione*, 23, cited in P. Bradshaw (ed.): *The New Westminster Dictionary*, p.378.

⁹³ *Constitutiones Apostolorum*, VII, 44, 1, cited in J.A. Jungmann: *The Early Liturgy* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1963), p.27.

⁹⁴ Eusebius: *History of the Church* V.5, Penguin ed. p.207, M. Barth: *Ephesians 1-3*, p.378.

has decreed that all should at those times offer up their prayers to God standing.⁹⁵

Copying the biblical precedent, in the early Church the bishop or his deputy sat, when preaching or teaching. In time seats were provided for presbyters who flanked the bishop and later for the elderly and infirm.

In the Middle Ages people stood. In fact in the cathedrals they stood for the whole service, because there were no chairs or pews. Kneeling became common in church only in the 9th century, when people began to kneel as the priest pronounced what were taken as the decisive words in the eucharistic liturgy: "This is my body, this is my blood."⁹⁶ J. Haselock states that the change from generally standing to kneeling took place as the liturgical role of the congregation diminished and its sense of being the community of the redeemed made worthy to stand at the Lord's Table was replaced by a primary sense of being a penitential community, unworthy to gaze on the eucharistic elements.⁹⁷ In western Christianity kneeling, as a posture of humility and submission, then came in time to be the norm for prayer. Hence some western Churches have kneelers in the pews and/ or at the altar rail. In the Eastern Church kneeling is still used for penitence or special supplication. In the Middle Ages, then, whether by standing or by kneeling, the physical and the spiritual were still "intimately...and exuberantly fused".⁹⁸

The Catholic Church invented pews in the 14th century, shortly before the Protestant Reformation. Because the Reformers preached long sermons, Protestants were glad to keep the pews. But we must not think that in the Reformation people sat for prayer. On the contrary the consistent practice in the early Reformed Church was kneeling —in Zurich, Strasbourg, Geneva, France and Scotland. Both the minister and the people knelt for prayer.

⁹⁵ J. Stevenson (ed.): *A New Eusebius* (London: SPCK, 1965), p.364.

⁹⁶ M. Collins and M.A. Price: *The Story of Christianity* (London: Dorling Kindersley, 1999), p.41.

⁹⁷ J. Haselock in P. Bradshaw (ed.): *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (London: Westminster John Knox, 2002), p.378

⁹⁸ D. MacCulloch: *The Reformation. A History* (New York: Viking, 2004), p.6.

John Calvin, in line with his observation that the Lord has faithfully and fully instructed us how he is to be worshipped” in Scripture⁹⁹ Calvin pointed out that the apostle commends kneeling, so that it is “of God”¹⁰⁰, and Scripture also commends the lifting of one’s hands in prayer. Hence Calvin nowhere approves sitting for prayer; instead “we pray with knees bent and head bare”.¹⁰¹ It is the attitude of the heart that is essential in worship, but our bodies should express that attitude. Because what we do with our bodies affects what happens in our hearts, so the posture of the body serves to form the posture of the heart. Hence kneeling is not just a sign of submission; it also aids in producing submission. By kneeling and men uncovering their heads we help ourselves to venerate God. Likewise raising the hands is a universal practice that helps to raise the heart from earth to heaven: it is both a “sign” of lifting one’s heart to heaven and a means to accomplish that. Such “ceremonies” are not “necessary to salvation” and are not the focus of piety; they are not magical motions that automatically effect what they signify *ex opere operato*. But they are external rudiments and helps for human infirmity; they are pious means to an end in that they help us to increase our “veneration of God” and train us in the exercise of it. At the same time love, not legalism, should be our guide in matters. People who cannot kneel for prayer can stand. “Nothing prohibits a man who cannot bend his knees because of disease from standing to pray.”¹⁰²

The Book of Discipline of the French Reformed Churches (1559) stated:

That great irreverence which is found in diverse persons, who at public and private prayers do neither uncover their heads nor bow their knees, shall be reformed; which is a matter repugnant unto piety, and giveth suspicion of pride, and scandalizes them that fear God. Wherefore, all pastors shall be advised, as also elders and heads of families, carefully to oversee, that in time of prayer all persons,

⁹⁹ J. Calvin: *Inst.* IV.x.8.

¹⁰⁰ J. Calvin: *Inst.* IV.x.30.

¹⁰¹ J. Calvin: *Inst.* IV.x.29.

¹⁰² J. Calvin: *Inst.* IV.x.31.

without exception or acceptance, do evidence by these exterior signs the inward humility of their hearts, and homage which they yield to God; unless anyone be hindered from so doing by sickness or otherwise.¹⁰³

In the early days of the Reformation in Scotland "kneeling was the common posture in prayer." The Glasgow Session in 1587 admonished "all persons in time of prayer to bend their knees to the ground," and Presbytery of Glasgow in 1595 stipulated that all should "humble themselves upon their knees in the kirk in times of prayer".¹⁰⁴ In time, however, this changed, and *standing* for prayer became the custom among all Presbyterians in Scotland. Indeed when Robert Lee later introduced into his church in Greyfriars the practice of standing to sing and kneeling for prayer, he was charged before the Assembly in 1858 with introducing forbidden innovations!¹⁰⁵

But then, gradually, the Church of Scotland copied the Puritans in sitting for prayer. The Scottish liturgical scholar W.D. Maxwell comments: "it was in a decadent age that the practice changed."¹⁰⁶ In time, then, sitting in the pews for prayer, looking down with the hands folded and the eyes averted or closed, became the norm for prayer.

Meanwhile in Lutheran and the Dutch Calvinist traditions people, or at least the men, stood for prayer in church.¹⁰⁷ This remained the attitude for prayer in Reformed Churches on the Continent and thus also in the Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa until the latter half of the 20th century. Since then, however, the Dutch Reformed Churches have gradually abandoned it and copied the English-speaking Protestant Churches, so that in DRC churches the congregation now sits. This illustrates the fact that if people forget the point of any action that takes any effort, they will just tend to stop doing it. But in broader perspective it also illustrates the continuing effect of Platonism in our culture.

¹⁰³ W.E. Maxwell: *The Liturgical Portions of the Genevan Service Book* (Westminster: Faith, 1965), p.199f.

¹⁰⁴ W.E. Maxwell: *The Liturgical Portions of the Genevan Service Book*, p.200.

¹⁰⁵ J.T. McNeill: *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York: OUP, 1962), p.402.

¹⁰⁶ W.D. Maxwell: *The Liturgical Portions of the Genevan Service Book*, p.200.

¹⁰⁷ See the footnote above on I Tim. 2:8.

Ministers should encourage their congregations to stand for all the prayers or *at the very least* for the prayer of praise at the beginning of the service and the Great Thanksgiving during Holy Communion. An appropriate time to stand for the latter is in saying the response to the versicle in the *Sursum corda* (which after the time of Cyprian became the invariable introduction to the Great Thanksgiving, calling the people to join in it¹⁰⁸). In that way we act out what we say:

V/ Lift up your hearts.

R/ **We lift them up to the Lord.**

For Calvin the *Sursum corda* was an essential part of the Communion service, because it expressed his basic doctrine of the sacrament: that Christ's body is not lying on the Table but is in heaven, from where the Holy Spirit comes to make its presence real for us and unite us to it.¹⁰⁹ To observe the sacrament "rightly", then, "we have always to raise our thoughts on high, to seek our Redeemer."¹¹⁰

Presbyterian blogger Tim Bayly states that it is about time that Reformed Christians realized that the reason they do not raise their hands and kneel in worship "is that somehow, somewhere, we lost our way and now think we're honouring Scripture and our spiritual fathers, when in fact we're directly contradicting them".

One final point about standing: it should, of course, be made clear that anyone who for any reason, whether age or physical debility or frailty, finds it difficult to stand for prayer or for any of these other acts of worship should feel free to remain sitting. One suggestion is for the worship leader, in calling people to prayer, to say, "Please stand in body or in spirit." But it is neater just to make the matter clear in the notices. Likewise if any people present find it difficult to come and stand in front to receive the sacrament, an Elder should be designated to take the bread and wine to them in their pews.

¹⁰⁸ W.D. Maxwell: *An Outline of Christian Worship Its Development and Forms* (London: OUP, 1958), p.15.

¹⁰⁹ E.g. J. Calvin: *Theological Treatises*, p.159.

¹¹⁰ J. Calvin: *Theological Treatises*, p.159.

3. *Standing for Lections*

The Book of Nehemiah tells us that after the exiles returned to Jerusalem, Ezra brought the *Torah* before the assembly of Israel to read it. As he opened the book,

all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground (Neh. 8:5f. cf. 9:3).

The people stood (and then bowed down) to convey their reverence and their readiness to obey.

It is presumably on the basis of Neh. 8:5f. that a few congregations in the UPCSA are reported to stand for the reading of the Old Testament. In the synagogue today, however, the congregation stands when the scroll of the Torah is fetched from the "ark", but not while it is read.

Whereas for the people of Israel after the exile the *Torah* (the first five books of our Bibles) stood at the centre of what they understood as God's revelation, for Christians it is Christ who stands at the centre. For this reason it is traditional, and appropriate, for the congregation to stand to hear the reading of the Gospel, which is normally the last of two or three lections in church, on the ground that in it the Lord addresses his people most directly.

4. *Standing for a Creed or Confession of Faith.*

When people were required to confess their faith before baptism, they must from the beginning have stood for this and for their baptism, whether that was by immersion or by pouring. Likewise, then, when in the 5-6th centuries AD the "Nicene" Creed began to be recited at Holy Communion in congregations in the East,¹¹¹ congregations must have stood for this. And when a modern congregation recites any Creed or a short confession of faith like the Declaration of Faith (which we should

¹¹¹ J.N.D. Kelly: *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longmans, 3rd ed. 1982), p.348-350.

recite together at least occasionally in church), it should stand. It is after all declaring a standard of faith before the world.

5. *Standing for Baptism*

It is in the first place God who baptizes a person, but God does so through the Church, and the Church does so through its ordained representative. The congregation should therefore stand when the minister or ministers perform such an act as its representative, for instance, in administering baptism or praying the prayer of ordination or induction (for ministers or Elders) or welcoming new members. It should do so to symbolize concretely that it is the *Church* that baptizes, ordains, inducts or accepts and welcomes a new member—with the minister merely acting on its, and ultimately God's, behalf. (It has been objected that if a congregation stands for baptisms, the shorter people in it cannot see the baptism. In that case, however, they should be encouraged to position themselves nearer the front beforehand.)

6. *Posture in Holy Communion*

What posture should we adopt at Communion? The original disciples, of course, followed the common custom of reclining together at meals, including at the Last Supper (Matt. 26:20||Mk. 14:18||Lk. 22:14), and, we may assume, at the earliest celebrations of the breaking of the bread (Ac. 2:42). The Suppers were thus *communal*, or *fellowship*, meals with one another as well as *sacramental* meals with the Lord.

When the sacramental part of the meal was later moved to Sunday morning, as the time of the Resurrection, the liturgical tradition became for people to come forward and stand at the Holy Table to receive Holy Communion from the presiding presbyter. In the Middle Ages this eventually changed to kneeling to receive the elements.

It was Huldreich Zwingli who originated the practice of receiving the Communion elements just sitting in the pew, in Zurich, in contrast to the practice in Geneva and elsewhere.¹¹² This related

¹¹² W.D. Maxwell: *Outline of Worship*, p.84.

to his very “low” understanding of the sacrament, which reduced it to a mere act of remembrance. (Later he changed his view.) Some Nonconformists in England then followed his example.

What we have forgotten is that *the original Calvinists went to the front to receive Communion*. In Calvin’s church in Geneva, as in the early Church, they received it standing.¹¹³ Calvin also stressed the corporate dimension of Communion.¹¹⁴

In Scotland for Communion the people came forward in batches to be seated around a table at the front; in part this was to encourage the sense of corporateness at the Table. Repeating part of the liturgy for every batch was very time-consuming, however, and eventually a long trestle table was placed in the aisle to which more people moved for the liturgy of Communion. Then, in 1828, Dr Thomas Chalmers introduced the English Nonconformist practice of sitting in one’s ordinary pew, in St John’s Church in Glasgow. When this began, the Scottish Presbyterians condemned it as an innovation and a “mangling of the sacrament”. The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland repeatedly opposed the practice, but despite this it eventually became the norm in Church of Scotland and so other Presbyterian congregations. At first special pews were marked off with white cloths for those partaking to move to when the Communion liturgy started. In the 20th century that too was abandoned, and people just remained sitting while the elements were brought to wherever they were, as with Zwingli.

Many Prayers of Thanksgiving at Communion include an epiclesis in which the congregation prays that the Spirit will make it one in the unity of the Body of Christ. Yet the modern celebration of the sacrament often lacks the twofold sense of both *the real presence of Christ* and the solidarity of the communicants in celebrating together *with one another as one*

¹¹³ Calvin (in contrast to John Knox) did not oppose kneeling to receive the bread and wine. See A.M. Hunter: *The Teaching of Calvin* (London: James Clarke, 1950²), p.190n.131.

¹¹⁴ For this reason Calvin insisted that even with the sick the bread should be broken in a company of believers: the Minister was to take a few fellow believers with him. (A.M. Hunter: *The Teaching of Calvin*, London: Js Clarke & Co., 2nd ed. 1950, p.190). Usually this meant a couple of Elders.

Body. Just sitting in the pew and receiving the elements plays down the dimension of a corporate reception and reduces the act to one of individual piety. This can to some extent be overcome if the Minister stresses that all are gathered at the Table of the Lord and if they pass the elements to one another with suitable words ("The body of Christ (*name*)/The blood of Christ" or "The bread of life (*name*)/the cup of salvation"). But physical movement can also contribute. Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans and Methodists say that they find our Communion services less meaningful than their own. Why? Because the physical movement of getting up and going to the front and standing or kneeling to receive the sacrament involves the whole person, which just sitting in the pew does not. Going forward and kneeling or standing together also encourages more of a corporate sense with one another, as the one body of Christ¹¹⁵ But lining up to kneel in front may still leave people without any strong sense of the communal, or corporate, nature of the Supper, however.¹¹⁶ Communicants who stand in a semicircle in front or a circle around the Table and pass the paten, or plate, and the chalice, or the tray of glasses, to one another with the appropriate words, looking at one another, have more of such a sense of solidarity than those kneeling side by side in silence.

7. Pentecostalism and African-style Worship

It has taken the Pentecostal and charismatic movements in the 20th century to help people to break free from the constraints of

¹¹⁵ See W.D. Maxwell: *An Outline of Christian Worship*, p.126, and the Church of Scotland Committee on Ecumenical Affairs (ed.): *Holy Communion. Why Can't We Share?*, p.9. Even communicants who go up to kneel at the front may feel isolated from one another.

¹¹⁶ Elias Caanetti describes this isolation even in traditional Catholic(?) Communion services: "Whoever has looked at the rows of those who line up to receive Communion cannot avoid noticing how much each individual is occupied only with himself. Whoever comes before or after him concerns him even less than the fellow human being with whom he has to do in ordinary life, and the connection that he has with the latter is certainly loose enough... The communicants feel themselves to be one body as little as a group of people who have discovered a treasure and have just divided it up between themselves." (Quoted in H. Zahrnt: *Warum ich Glaube. Meine Sache mit Gott*, Munich: R. Piper & Co. 1977, p.290.)

the mindset of Platonism and traditional western formal worship of most of our Churches. It is these movements that have reintroduced bodily worship into Protestantism. Pentecostalism has spread in our western culture as it has gradually drifted away from the inhibitions of the uptight, formal, body-denying "Christian" culture of the medieval and Victorian eras and enriched worship with its emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit and the praise and enjoyment of God. Its real secret is that it understands that the Holy Spirit wishes to set our whole beings free, so that we worship and serve God in body as well as with our minds and spirits. It seeks, in other words, to recover a more Hebraic approach to the *corporal* nature of worship. It does so by introducing more rhythmic music with musical groups, movement to the music in singing, clapping, standing and lifting up one's hands in praying, dancing and speaking in tongues. It has replaced formalism and stiffness with enthusiasm. It has sought in other words to recover *total worship* in place of mere cerebral worship. And that is why its adherents have found such *liberation* in its worship.

Ask a member of one of the new Pentecostal Churches why she worships there rather than in a traditional main-line Church, and she is likely to answer: "Because in other churches I am so constrained, whereas in my church I am free to worship as I feel." She will mean free to worship in body as well as in spirit. Watch any film of a Pentecostal service, and it is immediately evident that the worshippers more emotionally and indeed totally involved in the worship *because they are physically* involved as well. Attend a Pentecostal service and join in this way of worship, and one becomes more involved oneself (unless one holds oneself aloof as a mere spectator).

Of course in reaction to the passiveness of traditional worship Pentecostal "enthusiasm" can be, and sometimes is, taken to extremes, but in general the Pentecostal and the charismatic movements have gone some way towards restoring the bodily and festive character of Christian worship in contrast to the generally inhibited and formal character of traditional western worship.

On the other hand the Pentecostal movement has at the same time exacerbated the one-sided emphasis on the subjective and

the loss of the objective and sacramental dimension. For Pentecostalism is paradoxically and unfortunately for the most part itself still stuck in a Platonic mode in two ways. Firstly in that most Pentecostal Churches have a very low doctrine of the sacraments. They do not take seriously that it is not we but God who is the primary actor in baptism and the Lord's Supper, that baptism is not just a confession of faith but a sacrament in and through which God acts for us and upon us and that the Lord's Supper is not merely an act of "remembrance" but a sacrament in which the crucified and risen Christ gives us his body. Secondly some Pentecostal churches, despite their more corporal and festive worship, remain stuck in the Platonic-*Puritan* tradition of asking the congregation to sit for the prayers.

The worship in many African churches has remained free from the constraints of the mindset and formal worship of western culture. This is because Africans do not come from a tradition influenced by the Platonic aspect of western culture. That is why their worship, despite missionary influence, has retained much greater physical freedom in that they sing to a strong beat with movement and dancing. Despite this many have taken over from the missionaries the idea that they should sit for the prayers!

Today: In Practice

In discussing and implementing the appropriate postures in worship, worship leaders need to bear in mind that

- elderly or physically weak people may find standing, for instance, difficult;
- the intention of body language is more important than the posture itself;
- postures may have different meanings in different cultural communities;
- nevertheless most people will accept that Scripture provides normative principles for congregations as a whole in public worship.

To meet the first point the Sunday bulletin or a brief announcement can make clear that people who find it difficult to stand are not expected to. Or the worship leader can call the people to stand by saying, "Let us now stand, in body or in spirit" or just

“Let all those of us who can, stand” Or, if the rationale for bodily worship has been explained, “Stand or sit, as you feel led.”

To sum up, then, in what specific practical ways can we take the physical dimension of our existence more seriously in worship? Some ways are the following:

1. stand for the entry of the Bible, until it is placed on the lectern or pulpit where it is to be read and opened¹¹⁷;
2. continue standing for the Call to Worship (whether before or after the entry);
3. greet one another with appropriate words and physical gestures of welcome;
4. stand for at least most of the hymns, and most especially for hymns of praise;
5. clap (and for that matter sway!) during rhythmic hymns and songs;
6. stand for the prayers or *at least* for the Prayer of Praise and the Prayer of Thanksgiving in Holy Communion;
7. lift up their hands in praise and in prayer;
8. kneel¹¹⁸ for the confession of sins and assurance of grace, if there is enough room between the pews, or otherwise stand;
9. stand, as in some denominations, for the reading of the Gospel on the grounds that it is the lection which portrays the Lord for us and in which we hear him speak to us most directly—or alternatively stand for the lection that provides the main text for the sermon or else for all the lections, on the ground that God addresses us in them all;
10. stand for the recitation of the creed;
11. stand when the offering is brought up to the holy Table as a sign that we offer ourselves as well as our gifts to God;

¹¹⁷ If the congregation begins to think that it is standing for the Minister and Elders who follow the Bible into the church, it may be a good idea for them to enter before the Bible is carried in.

¹¹⁸ The secret to kneeling is not to bend at the waist but thrust one's hips forward, so that they and the thighs form a straight vertical line. In this way one can kneel for long periods without having to sit on one's heels.

12. stand for the singing of any doxology, e.g. while the offering is brought up;
13. stand for the act of baptism;
14. stand for other special liturgical acts like the actual ordination and induction;
15. practise the Scottish tradition of the Entry of the Elements, at least on special occasions, the congregation standing;
16. pass the peace to one another with an appropriate gesture of reconciliation before approaching the Table, as the apostolic and early Church passed the "kiss of peace" in conformity with Matt. 5:23f. (Rom. 16:16, I Cor. 16:20, II Cor. 13:12, I Th. 5:26, I Pet. 5:14 cf. Luke 24:36; John 20:21, 20:26).¹¹⁹
17. come forward to stand at the Table to receive the elements of Holy Communion (as Calvin's congregation in Geneva did);
18. stand for the prayers of intercession and petition;
19. arrange liturgical dances on special occasions, if these can be well choreographed;
20. stand for the commission and benediction at the end of the service;
21. stand, or remain standing, for the exit of the Bible as it is carried out through the main door of the church at the end of the service (to symbolize that the God's Word leads us out into the world);
22. occasionally process in the streets around the church, especially on Palm Sunday, carrying palms; and
23. show solidarity by lining up outside the main door of the church after every service, so that after greeting those already in the line each exiting person joins it to greet those exiting after him/her.

Changing to such practices will not, however, take place, happily at any rate, unless the Minister explains their rationale and encourages them.

¹¹⁹ See, e.g., Justin Martyr: I Apology.65, and Athenagoras: *A Plea regarding Christians*.32 (LCC, vol. I, p.285f., 337 and n.).

The Minister also needs to be aware of the importance of the way he/she moves or stands him/herself. For instance,

1. he/she should never stand irreverently with hands in pockets;
2. for the prayer of confession the Minister or worship leader can use the traditional symbolic liturgical gesture of contrition, which is to hold the right fist against the breast,
3. when preaching he/she should preferably not insecurely grip the top of the pulpit with both hands as though afraid of falling down, but stand with both arms free to gesture; and
4. at Communion the Minister should hold and extend the paten and the chalice properly. (See the Directions for Holy Communion.)