

Chapter 18

Posture

February 2, 1997

This is our eighteenth study and nineteenth Lord's Day evening on prayer. We have considered the simplicity and the difficulty of prayer; the nature of prayer; the question of prayer's effect (whether or not we can believe that it actually changes things in the world, God being sovereign, his plan for world history and the history of every individual life having been laid out from eternity, and so many of our prayers not being obviously answered in the affirmative); then, in a series of several separate studies we considered what we called "the parts of prayer", viz. adoration/thanksgiving, confession, and petition; we studied the Bible's model prayer, "The Lord's Prayer"; then we noticed the various "types" of prayers in the Bible: deliberate prayers prayed on a daily schedule as well as those prayed on occasions in our lives and, then, arrow prayers; then, in another series, we considered the "prerequisites of prayer" that are emphasized separately in the Bible: sincerity, prayer "in the Spirit;" "in the name of Jesus;" "according to God's will;" "in or with faith;" "with right motives;" then, most recently, we have considered the two primary circumstances of prayer to which the Bible draws special attention and for which it lays down certain principles and rules, viz. corporate prayer and private prayer.

Tonight I want to begin the consideration of the next subject bearing on the life of prayer, viz. *"helps to prayer."* Tonight I want to consider posture, or the attitude of the body in prayer. Next Lord's Day evening I want to study

the connection the Scripture makes between fasting and prayer.

I. The Bible itself often draws attention to the postures in which prayer ought to be offered.

Most of the time when prayer is mentioned in Scripture, it is not stated what, if any particular posture, is assumed by the individual or congregation in question. And we are certainly not saying that posture is the essence of prayer, as if someone cannot pray lying in bed—as David says he often did. Nevertheless, we cannot be faithful to the Bible and say that posture is a matter of indifference either.

1. I have commonplacéd my Bible on that subject at Psalm 95:6: ‘Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our maker.’ (Regulative Principle!)

- (a) Kneeling is the most commonly mentioned posture for prayer in the Bible, and there are three ways by which the Bible refers to it, three different Hebrew phrases or terms.

- 2 Chron 6:13 Solomon kneeling for dedicatory prayer at Temple dedication
- 1 Kings 19:18 all the knees that have not bowed to Baal
- Isa 45:23 ‘every knee shall bow before me’ as at Phil 2:10; Rom 14:11
- Ezra 9:5 Ezra kneeling for a public prayer of penitence and confession
- 2 Chron 7:3 all Israel knelt before God
- 2 Chron 29:29 King Hezekiah and all with him knelt in worship before the Lord

Another word means ‘prostrate oneself’ though this may be simply another form of kneeling

- 1 Chron 29:20 ‘all Israel prostrated itself before the Lord’ (JB has ‘went on their knees’)
- Neh 8:6 ‘Ezra and all the people bowed down and worshipped the Lord with faces to the ground’
- and so of prayer in the Psalter: 5:7; 132:7; 138:2

In the NT similarly, kneeling is found frequently noted as a posture

- Luke 22:41 Jesus in Gethsemane
- Acts 7:60 Stephen
- Acts 20:36 Paul and the Ephesian elders
- Acts 21:5 Paul with the Church at Joppa

NB: this posture was used for both private and corporate prayer.

- (b) The next posture to which the Scriptures draws attention is standing.

- Neh 9:2,4 standing to confess and praise
- 2 Chron 20:5,13, then note 18-19 kneeling followed by standing
- 1 Kings 8:22 but cf. v. 54 (does ‘standing’ here refer only to place or did he begin standing and end on his knees? Ps 24:3 ‘who may stand in your holy place; but in Neh 8:5-6 clearly they start standing and then kneel)

So the NT:

- Matt 6:5 the hypocrites love to stand in the synagogue
- Mk 11:25 “. . . when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone. . .”
- Luke 18:11,13 both publican and Pharisee stood

Both postures, standing and kneeling, are used for both public and private prayer. (vs. Samuel Miller’s claim in Thoughts on Public Prayer, but he was trying to defend a dying practice of standing prayer). And in public prayer these postures are used for both the whole congregation and small groups (Moses, Aaron and Hur stand; Paul and Ephesian elders kneel). Both used for confession and penitential prayer (vs. the early church’s scattered prohibition against kneeling in the Sabbath prayer of the church). Both used for intercession.

- (c) The next posture to which special attention is raised in the Bible is the raising of hands. Now, in almost every case this posture would be associated with one of the other primary postures. You would either raise your hands on your knees or you would raise your hands while standing.

- sometimes with reference to other postures

- i. standing: Exod 17:1-12 Moses with Aaron and Hur, similarly Neh 8:5-6
- ii. kneeling 1 Kings 8:54 Solomon is on his knees, but his hands are toward the Lord
- or without reference to other postures
 - i. Ps 28:2; 141:2 petitionary prayer; so 1 Tim 2:8
 - ii. Ps 63:4 praise

Clearly this posture is a variation on the other two and would be virtually always combined with one or the other.

- (d) Sitting is only very questionably a biblically recommended or illustrated posture.
 - Moses when tired
 - David once if what we mean by sitting is intended — other interpretation has it as a form of kneeling
 - Elijah, sat under a broom tree and prayed that he might die! 1 Kings 19:14

If you research the earlier reformed works on posture in prayer you will find that they recommend standing and kneeling and generally forbid sitting — even though that has become a standard posture in our churches!

The biblical data draws our attention to the fact of posture for prayer and the various postures.

II. Now, in the second place, it is clear enough and highly important that these postures be appreciated for the simple and straightforward significance they have in the Bible.

That significance is two-fold.

1. First, the position of the body is itself an act of worship. When you kneel or stand because you are in the presence of the Almighty and are to speak to him, you are honoring him with your entire self, with your soul and body together expressing reverence. In Holy Scripture, whenever men or women came face to face with God, they always immediately and instinctively assumed postures which were appropriate

for a creature and a sinner before the living God. Well when we are before him by faith, we are as really before him as we would be by sight! And we ought to behave the same way.

— Calvin on Ps 95:6: “We observe that mention is made not only of inward gratitude, but the necessity of an outward profession. The three words which are used imply that, to discharge their duty properly, the Lord’s people must present themselves a sacrifice to him publicly, with kneeling, and other marks of devotion—an entire devotement of themselves to God.”

This is not at all difficult for us to understand. We recognize the timeless significance of all of the postures.

- (a) Kneeling expresses homage, submission to, humility before—before kings; —Peter’s ‘depart from me’. One of our great problems in our world today is that there is no one before whom we will any longer kneel. [Entreaty: the position of a suppliant.]
- (b) Standing is a sign of honor, a sign of homage or respect. [Lev. says the young should rise for the old!] There are still today some men who stand up when a woman enters the room: You are still, believe it or not, required to stand when a judge enters the courtroom. Even the American press stands when the President enters the press conference. We stand for the national anthem, etc.

(The early church associated the standing posture with freedom and privilege of status before God as opposed to the kneeling posture which they saw as symbolic of penitence. But the Bible does not uphold that distinction, as we saw.)
- (c) Raising the hands is a universally significant posture. What does any little child do that wants something from his or her parent? The lifting of the hands signals the direction of the plea
- (d) Here lies the problem with sitting: sitting says and signifies nothing. Believe me, you would not just sit there if you were visibly present in the sanctuary of the Most High.

If we are really worshipping God as his children, then we are to worship him not with half ourselves but with our whole selves and our bodies

ought to be as involved as our souls. If we say we are in the presence of the Lord, we should behave as if we are. A child who sullenly or indifferently says “I’m sorry,” to a brother or sister, or who slouches and looks pained and wronged while listening to an adult correct him, has not done right. We say to him: ‘actions speak louder than words.’ And so in worship! If we don’t look like we are worshipping God, we probably aren’t!

This was the feeling of the church in the days of the Reformation. A failure to take proper positions of body in the church was regarded as an act of irreverence. Let me read you a canon from the Book of Discipline of the French Reformed Church from 1559:

“That great irreverence which is found in divers 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, without exception. . . do evidence by these exterior signs the inward humility of their hearts and homage which they yield to God; unless anyone be hindered from doing so by sickness or otherwise.”

(That is true, by the way, even with the hearing of a sermon, which should be done sitting, as that is the appropriate posture for instruction. A congregation ought to sit in such an interested and attentive way as to do honor to the Word which is being preached, to declare in the way they hear their reverence for the Word of God and to bear witness to others!) James Denny, the Scottish theologian of a few generations back, used to say that “one had to brace and key oneself up when one opened one’s Bible; and one laid it down and took up Punch, e.g., with a distinct and visible relaxation that was not merely mental but bodily.” [Letters of J.D. to W.R. Nicoll, p. xxxvi]. Well, so with hearing the Word!

2. But postures are more than an act of worship in themselves, they are also an aid to the soul. We have no difficulty understanding this. We know architecture, music, poetry can stir us, move us within to a deeper

feeling in and a more genuine expression of worship. Well, so the posture of our body.

My experience of sitting prayer taught me this. Had you looked out over the churches in which I grew up, you would not have caught the sense that the congregation saw itself *coram Deo*, in large part, I think, because of the posture assumed. No one who really thought himself or herself before the Lord would sit that way! The soul perhaps was worshipping, but the body was not only not helping, it was a positive hindrance.

No, says Calvin. The soul needs the help of the body. “As for bodily gestures customarily observed in praying, such as kneeling. . . they are exercises whereby we try to rise to a greater reverence for God.”

And, better yet, this brilliant passage from Thomas Howard.

“The first thing that struck me about this church was that the people knelt. They knelt to pray when they first came into their pews, and they knelt for all of the prayers during the service.

“I myself had always desperately wanted to kneel in church. Most American evangelicals did not do that, however; so I had attempted a compromise at one point in my life, striking a somewhat stiff semi-kneel by sitting forward in the pew with my forehead on my hand, grasping the back of the pew in front, my knees angled down toward the floor but not quite touching it. I had seen dowagers do this in the Congregational Church (very modernist) that we attended in the summers in New Hampshire, and I thought it looked more reverent, or at least more elegant, than the stolid sitting posture that most evangelicals maintain for prayer.

“But here were my own evangelicals, kneeling. What joy. I could kneel with impunity.

“An open-minded evangelical from one of the free-churches in America that do not kneel may read the account of a trivial matter like this and say, ‘Fine, If the lad wants to kneel, by all means let him. It’s a very fine posture. And no doubt there is something to be said for such a practice in the Church. Certainly we free-churchmen have much to learn about reverence

in worship from the ancient churches.’

“A response like this is a charitable one, but under the ensign of broad-mindedness it may be missing a point. It is not quite a trivial matter of mere taste or whim. To treat it so is to fall into the error of supposing that physical attitudes do not matter. It is once again to locate faith and piety in a disembodied realm. We know that this is false. Our innermost attitudes cry out for a shape. They long to be clothed with flesh. We can see this wherever we turn: we are happy and our face muscles stretch into smiles; we are sad, and our tear ducts go to work; we are ashamed, and our neck muscles incline our heads forward; we are awed, and our mouths gape open; we are exasperated, and we throw up our hands; we were angry, and we clench our fists.

“We might discipline ourselves to quell all of these motions so that, like a superannuated Tibetan lama, we could sit, petrified and inscrutable, registering nothing. The lama, however, would tell us that posture matters infinitely and that it had taken him years of discipline to reach this impassivity, one of the most rigorous exercises being learning to stay motionless. The motionlessness of his body had percolated inwards and assisted his soul to be motionless.

“This last point is perhaps the one that might escape us. The question is not merely one of outward gestures and postures that express something interior. It works the other way around as well. The outward posture actually helps to create the inner attitude. We all know this from our Sunday school teachers who told us that if we could not quite feel love for somebody, at least we should act as though we love him. The external attempt would eventually have its effect on how we feel. Baron von Hugel remarked that he kissed his son in order that he might love him. The act dragooned his somewhat untrustworthy and wayward feelings and helped to bundle them along toward their true object.

“All of this raises the question, however, as to whether kneeling is an absolute for prayer.

“No. For one thing, we mortals know that some of our best praying occurs at excessively awkward moments. We

find ourselves squeezed in a subway, or marooned in a traffic jam, or jogging, and we realize we might as well say our prayers as waste the time. For another, if we want to adopt the most ancient posture for prayer, we will stand, probably with our hands raised. As far as we know, this was the posture in the early Church for corporate prayer.

“It cannot be argued, then, that we must kneel. But it can indeed be argued that posture is immensely significant and that if we find shallowness to be a problem in worship services then it may be worth considering the matter. We sit for a thousand things—to eat, to chat, to work, to write notes, to rest. It may be that our bodies cry out for an attitude that will pluck us by the sleeve, as it were, and assist our inner-beings in the extremely difficult task of prayer. If in any church the sitting posture exists only as a protest against kneeling because enemy Christians kneel, then what we have is protest carried to its most dismal and barren end.”

If you wonder why Reformed Christians do not customarily kneel, you will be disappointed to discover that, while they originally did kneel in worship, the practice was lost to them as a result of controversies in the English and Scottish churches in the mid-17th century over the practice of kneeling to receive the sacrament. There was a great fear that in kneeling to receive the bread and the wine, the church would confirm the superstitions that people had about the elements being transformed into the very body and blood of Christ. And so, originally, while the kneeling practice continued, even in the days of John Knox, a rubric was added to the Book of Common Prayer, later to be called the ‘black rubric,’ explicitly saying that by kneeling we do no reverence to the elements themselves. We are not worshipping the elements. That rubric was eventually removed under the influence of Anglican feelings and as the controversy progressed, Reformed Christians finally stopped kneeling for the sacrament, and out with the bath water went the baby of kneeling for prayer altogether.

III. Third, let me just mention practical problems for Reformed Christians regarding posture.

There is first the problem of false identification. Kneeling strikes some Christians as Romanist, even some Presbyterians. Hand raising strikes them as charismatic. I hope we are too resolutely biblical to succumb to those considerations. The Catholics also pray the Lord's Prayer. I honor the charismatics for restoring the lifting of hands; and wish they would now learn to kneel; it would be very good for them! I had foolish prejudices against kneeling in church; I got them from by spiritual culture. I thank God he got rid of them for me.

The principle for Reformed Christians has always been *ecclesia reformata et semper reformanda* — 'The Church is reformed, but it is always to be reformed.' Be sure that a worship so deeply influenced by past over-reactions and by American prejudices and fundamentalism's implicit gnosticism is going to need some reforming. It should be our happy task always to be searching the Scriptures to learn how to make our worship of God more perfect.

What is more, Reformed Christians should attend to posture because of their principle of worship: the regulative principle — that everything is to be done that is taught in the Bible and nothing is to be done which is not taught. By both precept and example we are commanded to kneel and stand. We are the Christians who, above all other Christians are constrained by our principles to pay attention to that fact.

We installed kneeling rails in our pews in September of 1987, having made the decision to do so the previous Spring. The unfortunate fact is that if you have pews you can't kneel without rails; even cushions, as you find in some Episcopal churches make the practice overly difficult. Without rails or cushions you most can get down, but only some can get back up again. The result would be that kneeling would be restricted to a very few, very agile members of the congregation and kept from the whole. There was some concern in some quarters at first. But I think I can say today with great confidence that our kneelers have been a great success. They are deeply loved and appreciated. And there is something very, very impressive about an entire congregation going to its knees in order to offer a prayer to God. The purposes for which we installed them have been, or, at least, have begun to be fulfilled and for that we are thankful. [My father installed them in his church in Gainseville, Texas; the next minister had them removed!]

Hand raising has not been so successful. I think it is the spiritual culture, not just the association with charismatic theology. We are a more reserved

people. We have told you that we wanted you to feel free to raise your hands whenever you felt it appropriate in the singing of hymns or in the offering of prayers. But only some of you have had the inclination or, perhaps, the courage to do it. That is why we decided finally that we had to prime the pump. Now, in our offering response, we raise our hands together as a congregation, whether it's the doxology or whatever it is, the sung response is something short and doesn't require a hymnal in the hand.

Ask yourself this: When a visitor walks into our church, is it clear to him or to her that this is a body of people who know themselves to be before the Lord God and who fear him? If the fact that we fear the Lord and that we truly believe we are in His presence ought to be plain at any time, it ought to be plain in the public worship of the church. We need more vitality in our worship in Reformed Churches, more sense of where we are, what we are about, and whom it is we are before. Posture, the engagement of the body, is, I believe, a most important means to that holy end.