

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Space: Our Bodies in Worship

EXERCISE

Have you ever been asked to do something with your body in worship (e.g., kneel, raise your hands, clap your hands, bow down)? What sort of emotions did it evoke? Did it feel comfortable? Take time to go around the room and allow people to describe their experiences.

Introduction

Scripture tells us that we are material creatures with bodies that are important and given to us by God. The Bible also has much to say about how we use our bodies in worship. There are as many verses about lifting hands, bowing, kneeling, clapping, and other bodily expressions of worship as there are passages about music and liturgy. So the material world in the form of our bodies is not an obstacle to our life with God; rather it is one of the gifts God has given to us for use in worshipping him.

Discussion

The Power of Bodily Expression

There are expressive and formative aspects to using our bodies in worship as there are in all other areas of worship. Our bodies are created to be able to physically and accurately express our inward emotions and states. This is true in worship as in all other aspects of life. For some people this comes easily and naturally, but for all of us it is an important part of worship.

ILLUSTRATION

We know the power of expressing how we feel with our bodies. We should express our love with physical affection in our marriages, with our friends, and with our children. If we don't, our loved ones will find it harder to believe in our love for them. Some of us grow up in

an environment where physical expression is modeled well and so we are able to worship with our bodies well.

Scripture gives us many examples of God's people expressing their love for God in worship with their bodies. In Nehemiah, Ezra praised the Lord and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen, amen," and they bowed down. In Psalm 28, David says, "*Hear my cry for mercy as I cry to you for help, as I lift up my hands toward the most holy place.*" In Exodus the Lord says *it is the Passover sacrifice of the Lord, who passed over the houses of Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes*, and then the people bowed down and worshiped him. "*But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house, I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you,*" David says to God in Psalm 5.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Is it easy for you to express yourself physically in worship or does it feel uncomfortable and awkward?

The Power of Bodily Formation

While bodily expression in worship is important, no one is able to physically express his or her love for God fully or without brokenness. It is important to have instruction in ways of healthy expression. So we should structure our worship in such a way that we are teaching God's people how to use their bodies in worship.

ILLUSTRATION

Just as we realize how important it is to express our love with physical affection, we realize there is something wrong if someone has no physical expressiveness. If a father is not physically expressive with his child, we don't say, "Oh, well, he doesn't really feel like

being expressive, so that child will never be hugged growing up.” Instead, we realize there is a deficiency there—perhaps because the father didn’t receive physical affection himself—and we say that he needs to learn how to be physically expressive with his children. Other things can make it hard for us to use our bodies properly. Some of us dislike our bodies due to what our culture or people in our lives have told us about how we look. Still others have physical disabilities.

So when we bring our bodies into a worship service, this brokenness comes with us. And in these cases we can’t rely on the authenticity of our expression; we have to learn how to express ourselves properly. Scripture shows us this because it not only gives us examples of people expressing themselves with their bodies, it also commands us to do so, implying that we don’t always do it naturally. Psalm 63 tells us to, *Praise the Lord as long as you live; in his name, lift up holy hands.* Psalm 134 says, *Lift up your hands in the sanctuary, and praise the Lord.* In 1 Timothy 2:8, Paul says, *“I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling.”* Psalm 95 says, *Come, let us bow down in worship. Let us kneel before the Lord our maker.*

Some of us show up to worship so well nurtured in what it means to be joyful that it comes naturally to us to raise our hands in celebration. Others of us are very comfortable with our need and we recognize the value of stretching out our hands for God to fill us, but we’re not comfortable with celebration and raising our hands. If we come to worship having been nurtured in such a way that we think of worship as the awesomeness and the terror of God, we might understand the kneeling posture, but not the joyful posture. We have to be formed and learn to worship with our bodies in all these ways.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Does it feel insincere to raise your hands if you don’t feel like it? How might you need to be formed into the sort of person who values bodily expression in worship and does it well?

Lesson

In Christian worship, the way we use our bodies both expresses and forms our love.
(Psalm 95:1-8)

Exercise

Have you ever been asked to do something with your body in worship (e.g., kneel, raise your hands, clap your hands, bow down)? What sort of emotions did it evoke? Did it feel comfortable? Take time to go around the room and allow people to describe their experiences.

Discussion Question

1. Is it easy for you to express yourself physically in worship or does it feel uncomfortable and awkward?
2. Does it feel insincere to raise your hands if you don't feel like it? How might you need to be formed into the sort of person who values bodily expression in worship and does it well?

Lesson

In Christian worship, the way we use our bodies both expresses and forms our love. (Psalm 95:1-8)

What are obstacles in our path to applying this lesson?

O Lord Jesus,
You wept and suffered that we might rejoice. For our joy, You have sent the Comforter as a fountain of every blessing. You are preparing joy for us and us for joy. We pray for Your joy, wait for Your joy, and long for Your joy. If we weep at night, give us joy in the morning. Let our hearts leap toward the eternal Sabbath of joy where the work of redemption and sanctification give way to the work of joyful glorification. Bring us speedily to Your house of joy, we pray. Amen.