

## How Do We Grow in Physical Expressiveness in Worship?

By Bob Kauflin

After the Together for the Gospel conference, I received a lengthy e-mail from a worship pastor in attendance who shared a current dilemma his pastoral team is facing. They have been “wrestling with how to best be obedient to Scripture in our corporate worship through song.” His church contains people who are “naturally NOT very expressive AT ALL” during that time. So he asks:

“Exactly how, and how much should we encourage our people to follow the numerous commands throughout Scripture of bodily expression (as a natural outpouring of the heart)?

First, I want to thank this pastor and his team for their humility in seeking to wrestle through this issue from a biblical perspective. His background and training have minimized physical expression, but he is realizing that although bodily expression in worship is not the MAIN issue, it can reflect an inward reality.

Responses to this question range from sober reverence – “do what you’d do in the presence of royalty” – to complete freedom – “do whatever God commands in Scripture.” I think the answer is a little more nuanced than either of these extremes suggest. For that reason, I want to take a few posts to answer this question.

Here are my recommendations for how to lead your church into biblical physical expression. (I adapted these four points from Mark Alderton, a pastor in one of the Sovereign Grace Churches in Minnesota.)

1. Teach on the appropriateness of physical expression in worshipping God. Worship of God was never meant to be mere intellectual engagement with biblical truths. Nor is it limited to an inner emotional response. God created our bodies to glorify him (1 Cor. 6:20). We aren’t pursuing a Gnostic spirituality that downplays or negates the importance of the body in true spirituality (Rom. 12:1; Phil. 1:20). God commands us to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. That certainly includes the bodies he’s given us.

Many of the words that we translate as “worship” in both Greek and Hebrew contain the idea of bodily movement. The two most prominent words – *histahawah* in the Old Testament, and *proskynein* in the Greek – connote the idea of bending over at the waist or bowing down as an expression of homage. In addition, physical expression is both commanded and spontaneously modeled in Scripture as a way of giving God glory (Ex. 12:27; Job 1:20; Ps. 47:1; Ps. 95:6). Those expressions include clapping, singing, bowing, kneeling, lifting hands, shouting, playing instruments, dancing, and standing in awe (Ps. 47:1; Eph. 5:19; Ps. 95:6; Ps. 134:2; Ps. 33:1; Rev. 15:2; Ps. 149:3; Ps. 22:23).

Some have pointed out that the New Testament contains few references to physical expression other than kneeling, singing, and lifting hands (although this last one isn't emphasized too often). However, it's not readily apparent that the bodily responses commanded in the Old Testament have been superseded or fulfilled in Christ's high priestly work, or that we now obey them only in a "spiritualized" manner. ("I'm shouting in my heart.") Rather, we need to seek to apply these Scriptures in a way that truly honors God and edifies the church.

I began by saying we must teach our people that physical expression is appropriate in biblical worship. We aren't disembodied spirits. God intends that we use our whole beings to bring him praise.

Psalm 16:9, "Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure."

But how and how much? We don't simply tell people to "sing like they mean it," or "jump higher for Jesus," although in my early zeal to see God honored I crossed that line a few times. Commanding a physical response can produce artificial affection and actually end up being dishonoring to God. Nevertheless, it's clear from Scripture God expects us to use our bodies to glorify Him both in corporate worship and in all of life. He is infinitely glorious, desirable, good, and worthy of our strongest and purest affections.

Here's the second thing I'd do:

2. Teach that physical expression should flow from a heart that desires to bring God glory, and that outward expressions are no sign one way or the other that someone is offering God acceptable worship.

God strongly rebukes those who think physical expression makes up for an idolatrous heart or disobedient life. Moving our church into greater physical expressiveness that's not rooted in a clear view of God's glory will hinder, not help, true worship.

One of the actions that supposedly signifies spirituality is lifting hands. Lifting hands can express a wide range of emotions and attitudes – dependence, gratefulness, expectation, reverence, or celebration. However, God condemned both the actions and motives of the Israelites through His prophet Isaiah.

"When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood." (Is. 1:15)

The hands we lift to worship God should be holy hands (1 Timothy 2:8, "I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling..."), made so through our humble trust in the atoning work of the Savior.

In our culture singing has become almost synonymous with worship. But God turns a deaf ear to singing that isn't accompanied by righteous living.

“Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Amos 5:23-24, “Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

I’ve known more than one person who was exuberant in corporate worship who lived in unrepentant sin. I’ve also known people who exhibit little physical expression on Sundays but have a thorough knowledge of Scripture, an exemplary life, and a profound love for the Savior. We never prove our devotion to God by external acts alone. God looks upon the heart (1 Samuel 16:7, “But the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.’”).

3. Address the different reasons people might be reserved in their expression and teach on preferring others.

Some Christians are simply unaware of what the Bible teaches about physical responses to God. They don’t know that Scripture is filled with examples of exuberant, passionate worship (Psalm 150; Neh. 8:6; Rev. 5:11-14). Perhaps they’ve grown up in a church environment that elevated certain types of expressions and ignored others. Often simply understanding what the Bible says will bring about a greater freedom in expression.

Others restrict their responses to God because they’re afraid of what others might think. They wonder if their image as a “respectable” Christian will be tarnished. They’re concerned that people might think they’re pursuing emotionalism. The Bible calls this the fear of man (Prov. 29:25). Our responses to God are based on His worthiness, not some image or reputation we may be trying to protect.

Some think it’s hypocrisy to express honor towards God physically when they don’t feel anything in their hearts. On the contrary, it’s only hypocritical when we act a certain way to give others a false impression of our spirituality. A better response is to acknowledge our lack of desire for God as evidence of our innate sinfulness, and to begin to fill our minds with truths about His kindness, mercy, holiness, grace, and goodness, especially expressed to us in the Gospel. We then act in faith, trusting that God will give us a greater passion for Him.

Another reason our physical actions to God are tempered is theological presuppositions. I have good friends I respect deeply who love God passionately, know the Bible much better than I do, and are more reserved in their physical expressiveness. They believe our worship is to be characterized by an attitude of reverence and awe (Heb. 12:28), soberness and solemnity. It’s true that reverence and awe are essential to biblical worship, but can’t bowing down or lifting hands be a sign of that as well? Also, it’s impossible to ignore the multitude of examples and commands in Scripture that emphasize celebration, passion, delight, and exuberance, all reflected through our bodies. The question to ask ourselves is this: Is there

any physical expression of worship that God has given us in Scripture that I've never displayed? If so, why?

Finally, some think that worship is a matter of the heart, not the body. Actually, both are crucial. If I told my wife that I loved her in my heart, but never demonstrated it through physical actions, I doubt that she would believe me. We wouldn't have much of a marriage either.

In every church there will be varying degrees of physical expressiveness. While the focus of our bodily expression is God Himself, we are called in love to do what is edifying to others (1 Cor. 14:12; 13:1-8). That means I don't break into loud shouting and enthusiastic dancing just because I feel like it. I want people to see the glory and greatness of God, not my physical displays. I also don't assume that those who are physically expressive are seeking attention, hypocritical, or insensitive to others. Perhaps God wants me to learn from their unhindered and sincere expressiveness.

Our focus should be exalting God in a way that magnifies both His infinite holiness and His unfathomable grace which has brought us near to Him through Jesus Christ. Our culture, personality, or background doesn't ultimately determine what that looks like – God does. May our churches be filled with the kind of truth and expression that most clearly communicates to others the value of the One we worship.

Let me say again that in issues regarding our faith, physical expressiveness in corporate worship is an important but secondary issue. I have no problem worshipping God with a church that may be more enthusiastic or reserved than I'm used to, as long as they are proclaiming the same Gospel and glorying in the same Savior.

However, our culture tends to separate head and heart, doctrine and devotion. Some congregations sing profoundly biblical lyrics with no visible effect (which doesn't always mean they aren't affected). Other churches are enthusiastically expressive, but seem to be pursuing experiences more than God (which again isn't always true). So that leads to a fourth suggestion to help a church grow in natural expressiveness:

4. Preach and sing the Word, works, and worth of God, centered on the Gospel, to raise the affections of people for God.

This might have made a better first point. We don't help people grow in God-glorifying expressiveness simply by explaining it or telling them to lift their hands. Teaching and encouragement may be necessary at times, but directing people's gaze toward God's glory in Christ is our ultimate motivation and goal.

Our bodies naturally reflect what affects us. I cringe when a glass of milk is about to be knocked over; I open my arms wide as my daughter runs to greet me; I jump up from the couch with my hands upraised when my team scores the winning goal; I gratefully applaud

unselfish acts of service; I cry when a friend's child dies. Is the church the only place where our bodies can't express what our minds are comprehending and our hearts are feeling?

So our goal must be to help people hear, see, and understand the right things. What does this look like? As we sing "No power of hell, no scheme of man can ever pluck me from his hand," some might raise their hands to thank God that His plans to save us can not be thwarted. As we sing, "My sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin, not in part but the whole, has been nailed to the cross and I bear it no more," some might kneel in grateful adoration that ALL their sins have been paid for. After singing, "Crown Him ye kings with many crowns for He is King of all!" we might hear joyful acclamations of praise to the omnipotent, sovereign, reigning Savior.

Even when my heart isn't affected by what I'm singing, expressing my devotion to God bodily can stir up affection in my heart. I raise my hands because God IS worthy to be exalted. I kneel because I AM completely dependent on God for mercy, sustenance, and wisdom. My feet move for joy because my greatest problem – my sin against the holy God – has been solved through the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Of course, at the end of the day, I'd rather be sitting in the midst of a quiet congregation that is singing rich, doctrinal truths than be jumping around with a lively congregation that is belting out shallow, man-centered songs. But why not pursue both? God doesn't intend for us to have to choose. We can experience theological depth AND passionate expression.

Our physical expression should help people see the greatness of God's glory in Christ. It may feel uncomfortable at times. We may find ourselves on our knees, broken over our sin, while others sing on, seemingly unaffected. It will mean we have to make every effort to engage with GOD, and not simply our emotions. It will certainly mean that we'll never think any physical expression is adequate to fully express our amazement at God's mercy in drawing us to Himself through the Savior. It will look different at different times, in different churches, and in different cultures. But there's no question that we have to help those in our congregations understand that God is worthy of our deepest, strongest, and purest affections. And that our bodies should show it.

My heart is steadfast, O God! I will sing and make melody with all my being!  
Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn!  
I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples;  
I will sing praises to you among the nations.  
For your steadfast love is great above the heavens;  
your faithfulness reaches to the clouds. (Ps. 108:1-4)

#### Addendum

In response to the series I did on physical expressiveness in corporate worship, I received a follow-up question from the gentleman who originally asked the question. It was pretty extensive, but this was his closing query:

“Bottom, Bottom, Lowest of Bottom Lines: Am I exegetically, theologically, homiletically accurate when I say, ‘God COMMANDS us to CLAP our hands!’? Or should it be softened to ‘God ENCOURAGES us to express our love and worship to Him using our bodies?’ And then let people do what they’re comfortable with.”

Great question. And I want to commend him for seeking to pinpoint as clearly as possible what God tells us in His Word and what He doesn’t tell us.

In a set of unpublished notes from a course he has taught, Iain Duguid suggests that three possibilities exist when we are dealing with commands for corporate worship from the Old Testament.

- It’s a command that points forward to fulfillment in Jesus, so it no longer applies. Animal sacrifices would be the most obvious example.
- It’s a command that applies enduringly and universally to all of God’s people and should be obeyed. For instance we are never to worship idols nor worship God in a merely external manner.
- It’s a command that reflects cultural and local practices given to ethnic Israel, which do not govern us directly but merely in “their general equity.”

It would be a stretch to say that lifting hands, shouting, or dancing, for instance, has been fulfilled in Jesus. But does that mean they are commands that are always to be obeyed when we gather to exalt God? That would be a hard case to make as well. I know I used to think that if I wasn’t jumping up and down at some point my worship of God was insincere or somehow inadequate. But, if that’s true, does that mean senior saints, those who are paralyzed, and uncoordinated people are in sin? No.

So that leaves us with the third category – culturally related commands that need to be applied in our specific context. However, I think we can do better than simply tell people, “Interpret these Scriptural commands for physical expressiveness in way you feel comfortable with.” That doesn’t address those who don’t show physical expression in worship due to laziness, selfishness, fear of man, or other idolatries. It also doesn’t acknowledge that many different “cultures” may exist in our culture, and that the church in many ways is called to be counter-cultural.

This is an example of the danger of looking for specific rules and commands to follow in gathered worship to make sure we’re doing everything “right.” We too easily justify ourselves before God by what we do or don’t do, and end up missing the weightier issue of loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Rather than arguing whether a specific command applies to us at this specific moment, it’s better to ask, “Do our minds, hearts, and bodies reflect the overall biblical case for how we are to respond to God?”

Clearly, in both Old and New Testaments, God expects our bodies to reflect our heart's desire to exalt his name and glory when we meet together. He gives us various ways that please him, one of the most prominent being singing. However shouting, dancing, lifting hands, bowing, kneeling are also physical expressions that can honor God when done from the heart in faith.

So, to someone who insisted that God doesn't "command" us to clap our hands so therefore we don't have to do it, I would ask the following questions:

- Assuming that God wants us to exalt Him with our bodies, what physical expressions of praise in Scripture do you think ARE appropriate in corporate worship? How do you distinguish between what's appropriate and what's not?
- Do you think that all forms of physical expressiveness are natural, or that they can be learned?
- Is there a possibility that your resistance to physical expression is more rooted in laziness, lack of understanding, or a craving for people's respect? How do you know?
- Is singing appropriate for worshipping God? If so, why not shouting? (Psalm 71:23, "My lips will shout for joy, when I sing praises to you; my soul also, which you have redeemed.")
- Are there any physical expressions of worship modeled or commanded in the Bible that you've never engaged in? If so, why not?

I'm sure there are other questions that could be asked. Maybe you can suggest some. But I think these questions would be enough to get a meaningful conversation going, resulting in the individual examining his or her heart more thoroughly to see where they might seek to exalt our Savior more sincerely, wholeheartedly, and passionately - which should be the main focus from start to finish.