

## **Worship (26)      Corporate – the Body**

When it comes to our entire Christian lives, the body plays an important role.

When it comes to corporate worship, there is an aspect that is tied fairly closely to music – and that is the use of your body in worship. Music often causes quite a physical reaction from us – be it swaying, clapping or even dancing. How are we to use our body in corporate worship?

The Body is a great gift from God. According to the Bible the body is a house, a dwelling place for you. Paul calls the body a tabernacle or a tent (**2 Cor 5:1**) - *For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.* The Bible does not say you are a body with a soul in it. The Bible says you are a soul, who is clothed with a body.

The body is not evil, nor is it a source of evil. The body can be used for evil. The body can be used for fornication or adultery, or it can be used for purity. You can use your body to help an old lady across the street or to mug her. You can use your body to build a church building or to paint graffiti on it.

And so the Body, being neither good nor evil, can be a great source of good in corporate worship, or a great source of evil. A right use of the body can magnify God and edify the saints. A wrong use can distract the saints, attract attention away from God and cause offence. The danger of the body is that wrongly used it can provoke inordinate desires in others.

### **Present Your Body**

**Rom 12:1-2** *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. <sup>2</sup>And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.*

Now we present our bodies to God individually on a continual basis. And by that we mean we come to God and say, ‘All that I am is yours. I am as good as dead when it comes to going my own way; I am like a sacrifice on the altar, but yet I am alive – I am yours.’

But there is another way we present our bodies, and that is to simply present ourselves at corporate worship – to be present when it happens. This seems almost too obvious, but it is necessary to state. We have to present ourselves for worship. That means getting our bodies to the place of worship. That means getting out of bed. It means sometimes overcoming the fatigue of the body which wants to tempt us otherwise. It means overcoming the body’s desire to be lazy, and presenting ourselves.

God places significance on the physical presence of his people. Look at this scene in heaven itself: **Job 1:6** *Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan came also among them.*

And again: **Job 2:1** *Again there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan came also among them to present himself before the LORD.*

**Josh 24:1** *And Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and called for the elders of Israel, and for their heads, and for their judges, and for their officers; and they presented themselves before God.*

Corporate worship is more than meeting with some other Christians. It is also presenting self before God. If God has led you to a certain church, then God expects to see you. God does a roll-call, God does a head count.

Occasionally you hear someone say, ‘We weren’t there, but we were there in spirit.’ When it comes to corporate worship, as a member of a church, attitude will not do. Your spirit can only partake in corporate worship if it rides the vehicle of your body to church. Your spirit can’t say ‘Amen’ to a sermon your ears aren’t hearing; your spirit can’t cheerfully give to God if your hands aren’t there; your spirit can’t bow to God in prayer if your body isn’t there to hear the prayers offered.

We are not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is. Present your body in a literal sense, by being present for corporate worship.

But after you arrive, the next thing is that you are going to be seen. That leads us to the second thing you are to do with your body.

### **Adorn Your Body**

**I Tim 2:8-9** *I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting.<sup>9</sup> In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array;*

Whenever you talk about clothing or appearance, some immediately quote **I Samuel 16:7**: *for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.* They mean to say, ‘Don’t worry about these things, because God sees the heart.’ But unfortunately for them, it proves the opposite. Since we are indeed men, and cannot see the heart, the outward appearance is what we often have to use to understand each other. And if this wasn’t so, the Bible would give no instructions regarding the outward appearance. But we find the opposite in this Scripture.

Notice the context here is a public worship context. This Scripture is Paul telling Timothy how he wishes the women to dress to the public services of the church. And, although it is directed specifically at women, its application is for men as well. Since our bodies are physically seen, we need to give attention to our appearance. Our appearance can either edify or it can cause offence.

The first words are ‘modest apparel’. The next two words help us understand what that means – ‘shamefacedness and sobriety’. Shamefacedness really means bashfulness, almost shyness, to be reserved, the kind of spirit that would blush if exposed. It is respectful of others, not trying to make them blush either. Sobriety means self-control. This is a person who is not under the control of others, or at the mercy of his or her own lusts. It is measured, thoughtful, serious, self-controlled. Combine the heart which is bashful with one that is serious and respectful, and you understand it means – modest. It does not want to expose itself, it wants to cover and beautify itself.

And the whole attitude of the Scripture towards the dress of God’s people is ‘cover up’ when in public. You recall the incident with Noah’s sons, who instead of seeing their drunk father’s nakedness, went backwards to cover him up; and how God forbade his altars from having stones, lest the priests climbing up should expose anything of themselves to people watching.

By contrast, the standards of the pagans have always been to uncover and expose – to provoke desire in others. Twice the Bible shows how dress can be used for this purpose. When Tamar wanted to trick Judah, the Bible says she changed her widow's garments for that of a prostitute, and it worked. Judah thought she was a prostitute. **Proverbs 7:10** adds to this idea: *And there a woman met him, with the attire of a harlot, and a crafty heart.*

When the goal is to provoke desire, there is a particular kind of dress which does so - the kind which reveals the body; and the kind which is so form-fitting that it essentially does the same thing. As someone said, 'Too high, too low, too tight or too thin – reject it.'

Outside of the sacred marriage bed, believers should never wear what will provoke desire in others. The natural attraction, desire and arousal should never be exported from the marital bedroom to the public domain. To do so is to lead others into temptation; it is to make it harder for others not to lust in their hearts; it is to defile the imaginations and thoughts of people. This is what the Bible calls licentiousness and God condemns it. Modesty is an attitude in the heart of God's people – an attitude of love to your neighbour, respect for their purity, and trust in God.

Added to the issue of modesty, the Bible also frowns on being flamboyant, showy, glitzy, or ostentatious. This is the meaning of '*not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array.*' I do not believe it is forbidding plaiting of the hair or the wearing of jewellery – though both can be abused. Peter also wrote on this (**I Pet 3:3**), and his wording shows it was not a total ban, but a call not to emphasise these things to the exclusion of the inner person. When our dress and our appearance - which includes jewellery, hairstyle, makeup - for public worship, is glamorous and head-turning and sensational, it can distract other worshippers. It draws attention away from the Lord. It seems to suggest that the person wants the attention instead of the Lord. In fact, one of the modern applications of the head covering teaching in **I Cor 11** is that the Lord does not want the lady to be loud and clamorous in public worship, but rather showing respect.

There is no ban on beauty; there is no commandment against looking attractive. The command here is – do not try to draw attention to yourself. Look your best, without trying to be noticed.

Not only should we consider the *modesty* in our clothing, but also the *meaning*. We have already seen that it is a biblical absolute that we are to worship God in reverence and awe. If I am in awe, and in deep reverence, I am not, at the same time, laid back, careless, casual. I cannot simultaneously approach God casually and reverently.

Now, let me ask you a question. When you attend a new gathering, say a chess club, the local stamp collecting group, a social, a lunch – when you walk in the room, what will be the first thing that tips you off that the approach the people have toward their activity is casual?

On the other hand, when you walk into a high level business meeting, or a funeral, or a military ceremony, a performance of an orchestra – what immediately tells you that the approach these people have is one of reverence, significance and respect?

Clothing and appearance sends a message as to how you approach this event. Now, in most churches today, upon entering, what would a first time visitor conclude about how these people approach their God? When it comes to our meetings, what meaning should we attach to it?

We do not have to quibble over the details. We know, in general, what dress in our culture signifies respect, seriousness, and meaning. We know that in Western culture, long hair on a man does not usually mean gravity, seriousness, reverence, respect. Do you have to dress like that every day? No, but not every day is the Lord's Day. Just like we set the day apart for the Lord, we set ourselves apart – our bodies apart. That means that we signify that fact as well in how we dress to public worship.

If you have presented your body for worship, and dressed it in a way which does not offend or distract, we come then to what you do with your body.

## Posture

By that I don't simply mean if you stand up straight when you enter. I mean how you use your body throughout the time of corporate worship.

The Bible is not silent about the various acts of the body in worship. Let's simplify our public worship service into three categories – prayer, praise and proclamation. We pray, we sing and speak praises to God, we proclaim His Word in the preaching. And there are physical responses to each. We ought to adopt the right *physical posture during the proclamation of the Word*.

You may remember from Nehemiah, that the congregation stood up when the Word was read. The words for 'hear', used for receiving the Word are 'peering into', 'pricking up the ears'. That suggests that lounging, slouching, and most definitely sleeping, are not appropriate postures when the Word is opened.

Your body and mind work together. Adopt a slouching, stretched out position with your body and your mind adopts a sloppy, casual attitude towards the Word. Sit up in a way which requires some effort, and that will translate into how you listen to the Word of God

When it comes to prayer and praise, the Bible describes them being done in different postures.

It describes *prayer* in many postures:

- [ *Standing*, as Solomon did when he dedicated the Temple.
- [ *Kneeling*, as Daniel did in his chamber three times a day, or as the Lord Jesus Himself did in the Garden.
- [ *Bowing* as Moses did on the mount.
- [ *Lying prostrate on the ground* – as Joshua before the angel of the LORD, and as Christ Himself did in the Garden

It describes *praise* with some physical gestures:

- [ *Lift up your hands*:  
**Psalm 134:2** *Lift up your hands in the sanctuary, and bless the LORD.*  
**1Tim 2:8** *I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting.*
- [ *Clap your hands*:  
**Psalm 47:1** *O clap your hands, all ye people; shout unto God with the voice of triumph.*

Now what must we make of all this – bowing, lifting up of hands, kneeling, clapping?

We know well that Western culture is mostly a reserved, stand stock-still kind of culture. We know conservative Christianity has also reacted against other elements in Christianity, which are very expressive in worship, and so perhaps thrown the baby out with the bathwater. Too often, then, we are more concerned with who or what we look like if we lift our hands or close our eyes, or kneel spontaneously. And, if that is our primary focus, it means our eyes are off the Lord and responding to him. We are responding to man's opinions primarily. A bigger fear than 'What will people think?' ought to be, 'What will I say to God when I stand before Him and He says, "Why did you keep quenching the desires I gave you to please people around you?"'

I believe the right approach to these physical gestures and postures is to treat them as the Bible does. The Bible treats them as if they are natural, and so should we. The Bible treats them like an extension of our inward response to God, and so should we.

So to put it into principle form – if a physical gesture is a natural and yet ordinate response, then *don't suppress it*. If the magnitude of God's glory is illuminated to you as we sing, and your natural response would be to lift your hands, then don't suppress that for the fear of man. If confronted with God's holiness would cause you to close your eyes and bow your head, then do not quench the work of the Spirit within you by trying to fit in.

But the flip side principle is this – if a physical gesture is not natural then *don't force it*. Do not feel the opposite form of the fear of man where peer pressure pushes you to look like you are really engaged in the worship, so you lift hands, bow, or kneel, to pretend. That is probably worse than suppression; it is insincerity, a form of lying.

If you want to know what is appropriate or inappropriate, take the same principles of clothing and apply them here. Just as the Lord does not want us to be flamboyant or ostentatious with our clothing, the same is probably true for gestures. Again, we are not to be in the fear of man, but we are to love our neighbour. And there is a way of lifting hands, bowing, even kneeling which does not distract, it actually encourages. And there is a way of doing those motions which draws attention to you, and distracts everyone else. Simply use wisdom.

And of course, some situations make these bodily gestures difficult or impossible. It is one thing to lie prostrate on the ground when you are in a wide open space, but becomes difficult in a closed space, like when we meet in our church buildings. No doubt the synagogue did not have people moving as freely as they did when in the Temple courts.

This brings us to the last aspect of the use of the body in worship – dancing. Is dancing evil? That is like asking, 'Is music evil?'

Now, you will know that David danced before the Ark of the Lord, and many people often enlist David as an example of how dancing can be pleasing to the Lord. And they are very right. God even commands dance in **Psalms 149:3**: *Let them praise His name with the dance; Let them sing praises to Him with the timbrel and harp.*

**Psalms 150:4** *Praise Him with the timbrel and dance; Praise Him with stringed instruments and flutes!*

Most times where dance is mentioned in the Bible it has to do with a celebration –it suggests a leaping for joy. The Hebrew words for 'dance' mean 'to twirl, to skip, to jump or leap for joy'. Almost every positive use of dance in Scripture has to do with a celebration. And the dances of the Jews were probably very beautiful to watch. Like many of the old folk dances that belonged to particular cultures. I remember as a boy watching folk dances being performed at

my school, when it was a very multicultural school – Portuguese, Greek, Italian, Chinese, French, British, Jewish, all attended. And the dances were made up of very colourful and beautiful dresses, with umbrellas – it was a coordinated action, beautiful to watch.

Folk dances typically developed out of one ethnic tradition, and are most often a group dance, a segregated dance and, yes, a celebratory dance. And when you read of dance in the Bible you are reading about a folk dance - the dance of the ethnic people of Israel.

But the Bible also shows us how dance can be perverted. For example, Herodias' daughter who danced before Herod and tempted him into a foolish oath; or when Israel was worshipping the Golden Calf, the Bible says they were dancing – and yet we know it had become a drunken, sensual orgy.

Any dance form can be perverted – ethnic dances, ritual dances, even the classical dances.

So we know that dance can be used for good, and dance can be used for evil. Now here is the thing. You and I, though we come from many different backgrounds, are really all in one culture – that is Westernised pop culture. With worldwide TV and the Internet and other mass media, folk culture is almost gone, and what is left is pop culture. And in our mass-media pop culture – what kind of dancing is known and shown? That would be dancing of a sensual kind. Instead of being the dance of celebration or storytelling, it is the dance of eroticism. It is most often a pairing off – male and female. Billy Sunday preached against ballroom dancing in 1915, whereas today people hardly bat an eyelid. But the more dance goes towards pairing off and contact between male and female – it goes towards sensuality. The wrong kind of dance is provocative, it is alluring, it is designed to show off the body, in order to tempt, or to provoke the body through contact. It is the dance of seduction. It is the same principles of dress all over again. Dress is supposed to decorate the body, not accentuate the body.

If dance is public it should not do that. Good ethnic folk dances served not to accentuate the body but to celebrate with a beautiful combination of movements. Sensual dance, like sensual dress seeks to emphasise the shapes and curves and various body parts, so as to provoke lust and desire. And, as such, what is dancing in our culture most often connected with? It is connected with drunkenness, parties, revelry and ultimately debauchery.

In this culture, I have not been taught any kind of dance that is not fraught with moral problems. Thus, apart from the natural swaying of your body to natural and good rhythm in the songs we sing, I cannot see a positive application of Western forms of dance in our corporate worship services.

And then there is, again, the simple matter of practicality. Hebrew dancing took place in parades, in processions, in outdoor worship near the Temple. It certainly did not take place in the rather cramped synagogues. And like them, we do not have ample space for a God-glorifying dance, even if we had such a thing.

If a church was started on a far off corner of Ireland, and none of us had TVs and had not been exposed to sinful dance, and we had a traditional folk dance of celebration, perhaps we would have some outdoor services and dance to the Lord with our folk dance. I am almost certain we will dance during the Millennium and praise God with unrestrained, unpolluted joy.

But until then, it is best we recognise that modern enlisting of sensual dances for God is an abomination to God, and will not bring glory to God. Our focus is not to be how we can bring worldly dance into the church; it is how to magnify Him effectively in our culture.

Your body can be a mighty instrument for good, or a terrible instrument for harm. So present it, consider its appearance – one of modesty and of meaning for the occasion. And then, as you pray or praise or hear the Word, respond sincerely, not suppressing nor faking genuine responses to God. Let your body be a true Temple – available, modest and clean, and used rightly in public worship.