

Should We Raise Our Hands During Worship?

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Should Christians raise their hands while worshipping together in their local churches? Some will say “yes” and others “no” depending upon their religious background and upbringing. Does the Bible have anything to say about this matter or is it simply left to the whims of personal choice? This is what we want to investigate in this simple study.

Psalm 134:1-3 declares:

“Behold, bless ye the Lord, all ye servants of the Lord, which by night stand in the house of the Lord. Lift up your hands in the sanctuary, and bless the Lord. The Lord that made heaven and earth bless thee out of Zion.”

This is a Psalm of worship that was directed to the priests who worshipped in the temple. It is very clear that the verses are addressed to these specific servants of the Lord (the priests) in the temple who were on night duty (“which by night”). The ministry of these men was to bless the Lord and lift up their hands toward the sanctuary in a posture of prayer and praise while they performed their sacred duties as Levites and descendants of Aaron (Ps. 135:19-20). This expression of worship was not directed the entire congregation of Israel. However, the lifting up of the hands was seen to be a posture of prayer and praise during individual and *private* worship (Ps. 28:2; 63:4; 141:2; 143:6) and was indicative of expectancy from God and surrender to God. Prayers were sometimes offered with lifted hands.

This was a common cultural and Old Testament practice (1 Kings 8:22; 2 Chron. 6:13; Ezra 9:5; Lam. 2:19) but it never was seen as a command. However, it’s interesting to note that the lifting of hands was never practiced by the entire congregation of Israel. Again, the *priests* individually practiced this (Ps. 134:1-2) as they served in the temple but the raising of hands was not a universal part of Israel’s worship. The Scriptures do not teach this was a practice in the Jewish stated gatherings and feast days.

The references stated above have to do with specific leaders lifting their hands while leading in prayer and other individuals lifting their hands in their personal or

private worship before God. We never read in the Old Testament where “all the people raised their hands” when meeting together as a congregation and while worshipping God. You might conclude that they did but you cannot base this conclusion on the references in the Old Testament. It’s simply an assumption.

People often ask if this expression of worship (the lifting of hands) is applicable and appropriate for worship today in our 21st century church services. Of course, God’s moral laws never change from Old Testament to New Testament (Rom. 8:4; Rom. 13:8-9) but not everything we read about in the Old Testament is necessarily applicable to New Testament Christianity and is repeated in the Church epistles. For instance, New Testament corporate worship under grace should not be interpreted in the same way Israel’s system of worship was conducted under the Mosaic Law with its many rituals and ceremonial practices (Rom. 6:14).

Robert McQuilkin has correctly observed:

“That an event was reported to have truly happened does not necessarily make it a revelation of God’s universal will.”

We must remember this and look to the Scriptures themselves to determine what is NORMAL for today and what God would have us to follow and practice within our Christian lives and local church services. The raising of hands was a *cultural* practice in Israel’s community. In the writings of the epistles, which are directed to the church, we find that there is no direct reference to Christians raising their hands during the church services or stated gatherings of the saints, nor is the term “clap” (Ps. 47:1) used as an expression of universal New Testament worship. Sadly, today clapping has primarily turned into applauding performers and has lost any historic significance it once had.

Here is the point. These gestures were apparently not part of New Testament worship practices. In fact, during the infant days of Christianity and their Christians services, we read about the believer’s singing, praying, breaking of bread, teaching doctrinal truth, and fellowshiping (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:10; Col. 3:16) but there is no mention of the lifting of hands or clapping as specific expressions of *corporate* worship. The raising of hands is not an actual requirement for worship. The fact that there is no direct reference to this specific practice in the days of early Christianity and the fact that this “hand raising” posture was not developed throughout the passing church centuries, until

more recently in the 20th century, suggests that it was not practiced nor promoted by the early church.

Some have misunderstood the meaning of 1 Timothy 2:8: “I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting.” The subject here is public prayer (not praise) and one must note that it was the “men” praying during the public gatherings or church services. The women did not pray. The Greek word used for “men” (aner) is not a reference to general mankind but is the word used for a man. So, if one wants to use this as a reference for the physical raising of hands for New Testament worship then you must limit it to the time of prayer and to only men doing the praying! However, this is NOT a reference to the literal raising of hands for several reasons.

First, how do hands suddenly and magically become “holy” (consecrated to God) when they are raised? If this were the case, then we should try and lift up our legs as well. Have fun trying this! Our physical hands do not become holier just because we raise them during a church service. Second, this expression (“holy hands”) is actually a figure of speech that Paul is using for living a holy life. The emphasis here is not on the physical posture of the one praying but on his spiritual life.

Hands are sometimes used as an idiomatic expression throughout Scripture to represent the activities of a person’s life. For example, Psalm 24:4 refers to *clean hands and a pure heart*. God sometimes will use the use of hands to make a spiritual application concerning one’s actions and life (Ps. 7:3; 9:16; 18:20; Job 16:17; 17:9; Isa. 59:3).

Psalm 18:20

“The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands hath he recompensed me.”

The “holy hands” (1 Tim. 2:8) is a figurative expression of what a person does with his entire life. This figurative understanding of “holy hands” aligns with the next two expressions. Paul now gives two examples of living a holy life. The man was to pray “without wrath” which means he was not to be a man noted for displays of temper toward others if he was praying in church. This would disqualify him from praying. Finally, he should pray “without doubting.” This means he should be a man of faith and pray believing that God would answer his prayers (James 1:6-7).

All of these expressions (holy hands, without temper and doubting) reference God's work of sanctification taking place in the man's heart and life. Therefore, the reference to "holy hands" cannot possibly reference the physical raising of hands since this does not apply to God's sanctifying work upon the Christian life. Instead, the reference "holy hands" must apply to the entire manner of lifestyle of the one praying. We can summarize these qualifications for prayer by saying that a man should exhibit holiness and purity *selfward*, love and peace *manward* and unquestioning faith *Godward*. It's about the heart – not the hands!

If God meant for us to raise our hands in the air while praying or worshipping, why do so many of us not do so? Are we too lazy? Do we lack the feeling that some charismatic worshipers possess? Are we missing out on something God wants us to experience? Or could it be that this practice was never part of early New Testament Christianity, and that worship was never relegated by some outward physical manifestation? Did Paul mandate that the local churches should raise their hands and lift them high so the people could be more real and less stuffy in their worship? We find nothing of this sort and the absence of the raising of hands speaks volumes against the early church practicing this gesture. 1 Timothy 2:8 is talking about holiness – not posture.

Hebrews 12:12 is also misunderstood and misapplied:

"Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees."

Once again, this reference is a figure of speech that relates to a person's entire spiritual life. If one is spiritually weak, they should renew their strength, which is expressed in the figurative language of a physical recovery ("lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees"). The writer of Hebrews is not referencing lifting up one's hands in order to become more spiritual. He is calling the saints to renew themselves spiritually and likens this transformation as someone renewing themselves from a physically weakened state.

In short, there are no proof texts that can be used which condone the universal raising of hands for worship in New Testament local churches. This raises another question. Is the practice of lifting hands necessarily wrong? Is it wrong to raise hands during a church service? The answer to this question is that it's neither right nor wrong to raise hands during worship. The practice of raising hands is not a pagan form or expression of worship. Therefore, it cannot be viewed as

something that is evil in God's sight or something that would bring His displeasure against His people. On the other hand, there are many reasons why we might refuse to raise our hands during a church worship service.

Here are some practical reasons why we should refuse to raise our hands in a corporate church gathering or service.

- There is no record of early New Testament Christianity practicing this form or expression of worship when they would meet together. Of course, this does not necessarily make the practice wrong, but we should err on the side of caution. There may have been some specific reasons for not developing this practice and order and decorum may be one of them (1 Cor. 14:40).
- True worship happens on the inside of a person's heart. Psalm 4:4: "Stand in awe, and sin not: commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still. Selah." The "inner man" (Eph. 3:16) and "the hidden man of the heart" (1 Pet. 3:4) is the place of all true worship. It's not necessary to worship God with physical gestures. Some will tell you that they don't "feel" like they really are worshipping unless they have raised their hands and have swayed back and forth to some specific rhythmic sound. If this is your case, then you are likely worshipping your form of worship and not God (Ps. 29:2).
- We should love one another and limit our liberties even in worship. Galatians 5:13 gives this principle: "For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only *use* not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another."

Yes, by love we serve one another! What a wonderful principle this is to apply to all of our living and worship. Following this guiding principle, we can choose to limit our outward expression of worship at times, so we do not offend others, but build them up and encourage them in their Christian living as we come together for ministry (Heb. 10:25). Did you ever stop and think that if you are waving your hands in front of someone that you are distracting them from their time of worship? You see, church is not all about you and your personal form of worship. It's about serving others and loving them more than your own personal and sometime petty preferences in worship.

Here is something else to reflect upon. When you come into a congregation, you come to build up the congregation. You don't come to cause grief through miniscule differences in styles or outward expressions of worship. 1 Corinthians 14:12 reminds us of the edification principle when it says: "Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church." The *edification* of the saints, not the *frustration* of the saints, should be our goal in ministry. We should want to build up the saints and not tear down the convictions of others in certain non-essential areas (Rom.14:1-5).

We must remember that there may be those serving within the assembly who are discouraged or even offended by a more expressive style of worship. Since God's children are to be understanding and not offensive to God's saints in trivial matters (I Cor. 8:10-13), we should seek at times to *cater to the convictions* of others in worship, so we can minister to people without offence.

1 Corinthians 10:23 declares:

"All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient (beneficial or advantageous): all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not."

We need to remember this principle with some of our outward expressions of worship in certain congregations. Although there is no direct command forbidding the lifting hands during worship, we sometimes must limit our preferences and practices, so we might minister to God's saints without offence. We want to leave a meeting knowing that we have built up God's people in the truth instead of discouraging them with some trivial act or expression of worship which might offend them.

Romans 14:20 declares:

"For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence."

We might put it in this perspective. Don't destroy your usefulness and effectiveness in ministry by causing a simple hand gesture or more energetic style of music to get in the way of ministry. Learn the lesson of limiting yourself, if necessary, so the saints who think differently will not be offended. This is love and this is ministry.

1 Corinthians 10:32

“Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God.”

If we truly love the brethren and want to serve them, we should remember to be a servant to the brethren even in our time of corporate worship.

1 Corinthians 14:32 declares: “And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.” The prophets were able to bring their “spirits” under control. In other words, the place where emotion, decision, and worship originate was to be brought under control in the stated meetings of the local church. This means we can limit our expressions of worship because of our love and consideration toward other saints.

The idea that you can’t worship God without a certain gesture or sound is ludicrous. Again, if this is your conclusion, then you are addicted to a form of worship (1 Cor. 6:12) and have lost your focus on worshipping God (Ps. 96:9).

One man shared this:

“Offer your whole self to God—including your body—and experience worshipping God in a whole new way by lifting up your hands. Try taking your next step and follow God where He’s leading you because He wants to take you to brand new places.”

This kind of mentality places the focus of worship on the outward and concludes that a gesture will somehow take you to a higher plateau of spiritual living and connection with God. Of course, this is absolutely not the case. Our focus in worship is to be inward and not outward (Ps. 77:6).

Today, some claim that hand raising is an evidence of the moving of the Holy Spirit in the worshiper. But there is no passage of Scripture to support this conclusion. There is no question that the Holy Spirit works in our hearts to stir our hearts Godward during our time of worship (Rom. 5:5). But nowhere in the Bible is the raising of hands presented as an evidence of the special work of the Holy Spirit in an individual. While hand raising in personal prayer and worship is not presented in a negative way in the Bible, it is nowhere commanded or recommended as the ultimate sign of the Spirit’s movement in one’s life and heart.

Another man described his first experience of raising his hands in this way:

"To this day, I cannot explain what happened, except that it bore fruit in what felt and feels to me now like a release from a very significant bondage."

Sadly, his idea of bondage is not being able to raise one's hands during worship. If that's true, then a mass number of Christians are under bondage every time they attend church for failing to raise their hands! In the same line, he comments that the Bible speaks of "bold praise (1 Chronicles 16:23-31 and Psalm 95:1-2), which made him wonder why everyone did not raise their hands." Again, this is passing judgment upon those who do not feel comfortable raising their hands and concluding that they are stuffy Christians who need to be liberated from bondage. Of course, this is pejorative nonsense.

The outward displays of this sort, even when motivated by a sincere love for the Lord, should never stir us to see someone as spiritually more mature, liberated, or blessed than others. On the other hand, we should not look upon those who raise their hands as necessarily spiritually immature or seekers of personal attention. Arrogance is a sin which can work on both sides of this issue.

A Christian asked:

"Why don't I raise my hands in your church? I just don't want to!"

Good enough! And yet, in many churches people feel compelled to conform to raising their hands while not feeling comfortable in doing it. It makes for a painfully awkward time for them as they are placed under what we might term as "worship bullies" who essentially force people to conform to their impeccable standard of worship.

Another Christian gave this passing comment:

"Sometimes I think we'd all be better off without anyone standing in the front modeling proper singing behaviors. Especially in those churches where the entire congregation could stop singing and you'd never know it."

Those who think a person is out of touch in their worship for not raising hands during church forget that fifty to seventy-five years ago most of the evangelical churches would have through the same thing about a person that raises their hands in church! Think about it. You don't find people raising their hands in the past 20 centuries of church history. John Calvin, Martin Luther, nor any of the

reformers practiced hand raising. The Puritans or Anabaptist, Baptists or any of the mainline denominational and independent churches didn't practice this ancient tradition. So here is a key question. If Jesus and the apostles do not specifically mention it and we cannot find anything in recent history about it, then why should we mandate and practice it in our local churches today?

Let me just add one more thing at this point. Whatever happened to the quiet church? Most churches today are part of what someone labeled as "the wild west of Christendom" where people are to be held spellbound for one hour with entertaining music and worship. Many Christians are raising hands in church today because they think "that's what you do" when worshipping God – but their hearts are far away from true worship (Matt. 15:8).

The whole idea that you don't really love Jesus if you don't enjoy loud music playing in a church or if you refuse to aimlessly wave your hands around in your times of worship is certainly a foolish and unbiblical conclusion. Many Christians just don't want to do it! For many the raising of hands in a church becomes a distraction to them as they seek to worship God. In fact, where lifting the hands is not a common practice, it tends to be more of a distraction, a drawing attention to the worshipper more than to God.

A person may certainly be sincere and well meaning, but if it is not a normal practice in a church worship setting, it is better not to practice it. The distraction it causes from the perspective of other worshippers should be reason enough to not raise one's hands. Once again, the Biblical principle applies: "For meat (hand raising) destroy not the work of God" (Rom. 14:20).

Here is an interesting observation. You could take a poll to find out how many saints do not raise their hands in their private worship but who raise them in church (public worship). You could also ask them if they would like to avoid raising their hands in church. I am confident the conclusion of many would be that they would choose to not raise their hands in church and this practice would significantly decrease. Why is this? It's because many of them are doing it to just fit in and please the worship leader. They are doing it out of ritual but not for any real purpose or reason.

On the other hand, we must remember that if we choose to raise our hands during our time of personal worship, or kneel in our private worship before God, this does not mean we should practice it publicly. This is because certain gestures and postures of worship can become more of a distraction or hindrance in our times of public worship when done before all the saints instead of a positive contribution to corporate worship. None of us should want a specific posture or gesture to distract others in their time of worship.

Here are some concluding reasons why you might think twice before raising your hands during a church service.

- As a congregation, we should refuse to associate with charismatic worship and entertainment.

Of course, this is not to say that when someone raises their hands, they are embracing the errant teachings of the charismatic church. However, most fundamental congregations that practice Bible separation have steered away from raising hands in their church services. It's not because they are stale and stagnate in their time of worship. It's because within the charismatic revamped culture there is the raising of hands which is also accompanied with contemporary music and wrong teachings centered on the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. Separated churches do not want to promote the appearance (1 Thess. 5:22) that they are embracing charismatic music and false doctrine, which is often accompanied with the practice of raising hands. Also, considering the epidemic of entertaining music, most fundamental groups have chosen to be more selective and careful in various mannerisms and expressions of worship, which might reflect entertainment.

If you attend a Pentecostal/Charismatic church, you should study doctrine which corrects the false teachings regarding the Holy Spirit and eternal security (1 Cor. 12:13; 1 Jn. 5:13). Doctrine would also include the teaching of Bible separation which condemns worldly music, women preachers (1 Tim. 2:12), and other carnal practices of entertainment (2 Cor. 6:14-17; Rom. 12:2).

Pastor David Moss summarizes all of this:

“A reverent posture in worship is certainly advisable. But even if we were to concede that raising the hands in worship was appropriate, there is another way

that it can be done besides the charismatic model. By bending the arms at the elbows, a person can raise his hands to his chest and fold them together. With hands raised in this manner and with his head bowed, a person can assume a very reverent, respectful, and biblical worship posture. For all through the Bible, you find true worshipers bowed, fallen prostrate, and humbly subdued when in the presence of the Almighty...”

- Keeping a church from embracing an entertainment philosophy in their ministry (1 Cor. 14:40; Eph. 6:6; Matt. 23:5; Acts 2:42).

Many churches today try to create an atmosphere in which people feel free to raise their hands in worship. However, many times the raising of hands becomes a coerced demonstration, a performance that has no worship value at all. A so-called worship leader might say, “Come on, people, get your hands up. We just sang a song that said, ‘Our hands are lifted up.’”

Think about this. In saying this the worship leader is actually scolding the people that don’t raise their hands and causes them to think they are not really worshipping God without the raising of hands. In fact, this type of conclusion creates an unbelievably hypocritical crisis for worshippers because they’re going practice something they don’t feel comfortable doing in their time of worship. This kind of universal approach to the raising of hands actually ruins authentic worship and caters to an entertaining form of worship.

Shawn Brasseaux, among other things, speaks to the issue of entertainment in this way: “Modern-day lifting up of hands in church does not seem to be conducive to the local assembly’s testimony. I have personally found it very distracting when someone in a local church has stood by me and reached for nothing in the air. Eventually, we lose sight of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we start worshipping form and posture. We are not thinking about God’s Word and the truths therein anymore. We are just concerned about kneeling, swaying, dancing, speaking in tongues, raising up hands, tapping our feet, clapping our hands, et cetera. These activities, while assumed to be ‘spiritual,’ are not necessarily so. Often, ‘praise and worship’ becomes a flesh carnival, an emotional experience, something that pushes the Bible aside and exalts self and flesh. The ritual or ceremony becomes the issue instead of the Bible text and the Person it honors.”

Like other things, the raising of hands can develop into a ritual form of personal worship without meaning.

Isaiah 1:15

“And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood.”

Brasseaux concludes his remarks:

“Personally, I do not focus on physical posture when it comes to prayer. When I fellowship with other believers, it is not about me and it is not about how loud I can sing, how fast I can sway, how well I can dance, how high I can lift my hands, and so on. I do not fellowship with believers to be entertained and to exercise. I meet with God’s people to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ using His rightly divided Word, the Holy King James Bible.”

- Maintaining a certain order or decorum which can prevent patterns of leniency and disrespect from surfacing in God’s House (1 Cor. 14:40).
- Establishing a standard pattern of reverence in the Lord’s house (Ps. 89:7).
- In the best possible light (Phil. 1:10), we should declare a separated stand in our time of corporate worship from the many cultural and carnal forms of worship which are being promoted within Christendom.
- Causing saints to function together as a loving and considerate body when meeting together (Gal. 5:13). Where hand raising creates offense and confusion it should be avoided.

There are several postures of prayer seen in the Bible: *lowering* of the head (Gen. 24:26-27; 48); *lifting* of hands (Gen. 24:26-27; 48; 43:28; 134:2), *looking* up (Ps. 5:3; Matt. 4:19; John 11:41; 17:1) and *leaving* our eyes open (Neh. 4:9 with Matt. 26:41). While there is no record of early New Testament Christianity practicing the corporate raising of hands, this is not to say it should never be practiced in private while one worships God as we witness Old Testament saints doing (Ps. 28:2; 63:4; 141:2, 6; Lam. 2:19; 3:41).

Yes, there are many postures that the Bible acknowledges as appropriate for prayer and worship such as sitting, kneeling, standing, lying prostrate, as well as lifting of the hands. None of them automatically make for greater prayer or worship since these expressions of prayer are merely external and not internal in nature (John 4:24).

Of course, the lifting of hands is just a way of reaching up to God to exalt Him, seek Him, surrender to Him, and can denote a posture of supplication and humility. In a private and personal setting of worship there is no reason why the lifting of hands cannot be an appropriate expression of worship. When it is practiced and understood as a humble expression toward God, it is an acceptable option in our time of private worship.

It's true that the Charismatic Movement introduced this practice into the modern church era but there is nothing theologically wrong about raising hands in worship. One is not embracing Charismatic Theology by doing this any more than one is embracing Catholic Theology by kneeling (Catholics kneel a lot!). It is important for us to always evaluate things biblically and not by our own cultural or personal background. We must remember that there is no perceived evil lurking behind all hand raising.

I recently visited a dear, godly, elderly lady who said, "Pastor, I'm not charismatic but I do raise my hands sometimes in my private prayers and worship to God." Well, so be it. God certainly does not condemn her for this expression of worship. We must remember that some outward expressions of worship and joy are better suited for our own personal and private worship (2 Samuel 6:14).

William Bright wrote this about worship:

"And now the wants are told, that brought
Thy children to thy knee;
Here, lingering still, we ask for naught
But simply worship thee."