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LET THE PEOPLE BE GLAD: CORPORATE WORSHIP AND EXPRESSIVENESS

I. Intro

Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy! For the LORD, the Most High, is to be feared, a great king over all the earth. (Psa. 47:1-2)

A. Many questions about this topic.

1. What is the place of expressiveness in our public worship?
2. How do we pursue genuine affection for God without moving into emotionalism?
3. Does God care what we do with our bodies in worship?
4. If he does, how should we respond?

B. This is not a primary issue when it comes to fellowshiping with other Christians.

1. What's going on with our bodies is less important than what's going on in our hearts.
2. Whether or not we're obeying God in our daily lives is matters much more than any particular physical expression when we gather.

II. The Biblical Evidence for Physical Expression

A. Scriptural Language

1. God created our bodies to glorify him (1 Cor. 6:20). In the broadest sense, worship is always connected to physical acts that communicate things like homage, respect, celebration, and servanthood.
2. The Greek and Hebrew words we most often translate worship (*hishtahavah* and *proskyneo*) both refer to a physical action, bowing down or bending over. (Ex. 12:27; Job 1:20; Ps. 47:1; Ps. 95:6).
3. Other "worship" words, *abad* in Hebrew and *doulos* in Greek, refer to acts of service.
4. Some Hebrew words for praise infer movement, like *towdah* (throwing forth the hands) and *barak* (kneeling).

5. Romans 12 :1 says we're to present our *bodies* as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, and that this is our spiritual, or "reasonable," worship.
6. The Scriptural words for worship tell us that if we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Dt. 6:5), that will be reflected in our bodies.

B. Scriptural Examples

1. Spontaneous responses of the Israelites – Ex. 4:31, Ex. 15, Neh. 8:6-9 (bowing down, dancing, lifting hands, bowing, weeping)
2. The Psalms are filled with references to physical expression. (Ps. 30:11-12; 63:4; 57:7-8)
3. NT references include 1 Cor. 14:25 (falling down), Eph. 3:14 (kneeling), and Rev. 1:17 (falling down)

C. Scriptural Commands

1. Singing (Ps. 47:6; Col. 3:16)
2. Kneeling (Ps. 95:6)
3. Lifting hands to bless (Ps. 134:2)
4. Lifting hands in prayer (1 Tim. 2:8)
5. Bowing (Ps. 95:6)
6. Clapping (Ps. 47:1)
7. Shouting (Ps. 33:1)
8. Playing instruments (Ps. 150:3-5)
9. Dancing (Ps. 149:3)
10. Standing in awe (Ps. 33:8)

D. Are these commands to be obeyed at all times by all of God's people?

Iain Duguid suggests that three possibilities exist when we are dealing with commands for corporate worship from the Old Testament.

1. They point forward to fulfillment in Jesus, so they no longer apply. (animal sacrifices)
2. They apply enduringly and universally to all of God's people and should be obeyed. (don't worship idols or worship God in a merely external manner.)
3. They reflect cultural and local practices given to ethnic Israel, which do not govern us directly but merely in "their general equity."

Perhaps a better question is, "Do our minds, hearts, and bodies reflect the overall biblical model for how we are to respond to the greatness and goodness of God?"

III. The Benefits of Physical Expression

- A. We magnify the glory of God.
- B. We follow the Scriptural example.
- C. We encourage others.
- D. We encourage our own hearts.
 - 1. Even when my heart isn't affected by what I'm singing, expressing my devotion to God physically can stir up affection in my heart..
 - 2. Some think it's hypocrisy to express honor towards God physically when they don't feel anything in their hearts. Hypocrisy is when we act a certain way to give others a false impression of our spirituality.
 - 3. Others are concerned it's evidence of emotionalism, kind of a short cut to stir affections without engaging the mind. Emotionalism takes place when we aren't seeking to engage our minds with God's truth.
 - 4. When we lack affection for God, we should acknowledge our lack of desire for God as evidence of our innate sinfulness, and begin to fill our minds with truths about His character and works. We then act in faith, trusting that God will give us a greater passion for Him.

“The inward attitude certainly holds first place in prayer, but outward signs, kneeling, uncovering the head, lifting up the hands, have a twofold use. The first is that we may employ all our members for the glory and worship of God; secondly, that we are, so to speak, jolted out of our laziness by this help. There is also a third use in solemn and public prayer, because in this way the sons of God profess their piety, and they inflame each other with reverence of God. But just as the lifting up of the hands is a symbol of confidence and longing, so in order to show our humility, we fall down on our knees.” (John Calvin, commentary on Acts 20:36)

IV. The Limitations of Physical Expression

- A. Physical expression doesn't insure that worship is taking place in the heart.

“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”(Mt. 15:8-9)

 - 1. A person we call a real “worshiper” is really just an expressive singer. Only God knows if we're truly worshipping him.
 - 2. Christians can exhibit little physical expression on Sundays but have a profound love for the Savior, a godly life, and a deep knowledge of Scripture.

B. Physical expressions can be self-deceiving.

1. A genuine response to God can't be measured by raised hands, dancing feet, and loud shouts.
2. Although raised hands can express dependence, gratefulness, or celebration, God once told Israel, "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" (Isaiah 1:15).
3. Singing isn't always pleasing to God: "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).

C. Physical expressiveness can be self-glorifying and self-gratifying.

1. Look how spiritual I am! Look how godly! Look how passionate! Look how self-centered!
2. Physical expressiveness is about what truly glorifies God, not simply what I feel like doing at the moment. (1 Cor. 12:7, 14:12)

V. The Hindrances to Physical Expression

A. Lack of biblical instruction.

B. Fear of man.

1. Signs that fear of man is present:
 - a. You're convicted in this area but don't follow through on it.
 - b. You're more mindful of the eyes of others than the eyes of God.
 - c. You think about how little you can get by with rather than how worthy God is.

God is not the safe-keeper of our reputations. God is not some priggish domestic deity, a heavenly Miss Manners intent on prescribing the etiquette that maintains polite society, aghast by any outbursts of fervor. And our role on this Earth, be it prophet, king, priest, or homemaker, is not to keep ourselves from embarrassment. We must come before the King, dignified or undignified, robed or disrobed, in the presence of the elite or in the company of slave girls, and worship with all our might. (Mark Buchanan, "Dance of the God-Struck," *Christianity Today*, Oct. 7, 2002, p. 53-54)

C. Tradition.

1. Traditions shouldn't be quickly dismissed, but they should be tested against Scripture. A tradition without faith is a dead work.
2. It's possible to use our tradition to justify our own laziness, lack of understanding, or a craving for people's respect.

D. Theological concerns.

1. Worship with reverence and awe (Heb. 12:28)
 - a. Not necessarily speaking of the gathered church.
 - b. But even in a meeting can't bowing down or lifting hands be a sign of reverence and awe as well?
 - c. We can't ignore the multitude of examples and commands in Scripture that emphasize celebration, passion, delight, and exuberance, all reflected through our bodies.
2. Worship decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40)
 - a. Paul is referring to everything taking place in the meeting in an orderly way.
 - b. Helpful to realize that in the preceding verse he is encouraging both prophecy and speaking in tongues.
3. Questions for the theologically wary.
 - a. Assuming that God want 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?
 - b. Must expressiveness always be natural, or can it be learned?
 - c. Is singing appropriate for worshipping God? If so, why not shouting? (Ps. 71:23; 81:1)
 - d. If physical expressiveness is primarily cultural, when are Christians called to be counter-cultural because of the greatness of the God we worship?
 - e. Are there any physical expressions of worship modeled or commanded in the Bible that you've never engaged in? If so, why not?

E. Concern for others

1. Our expressions of praise and worship in a meeting should be appropriate to our context.
2. But no one should question whether or not we are moved by the God whose glory we're seeking to exalt.

VI. Leading Others into God-glorifying Physical Expression

- A. Model what you believe.
 - 1. The church will learn best from your example.
 - 2. Be engaged, be natural, be consistent.
- B. Teach your people what the Bible has to say about physical expression.
 - 1. Maybe a sermon
 - 2. More likely comments on Sunday morning
- C. Aim at the heart, not the body: sing, pray, and preach the glories of God in Christ.
 - 1. We don't help people grow in God-glorifying expressiveness simply by explaining it or telling them to lift their hands. Directing people's gaze toward God's glory in Christ is our ultimate motivation and goal.
 - 2. Is the church the only place where our bodies can't express what our minds are comprehending and our hearts are feeling?
 - 3. Our goal must be to help people hear, see, and understand the right things.

VII. Conclusion

- A. Our bodily expressions should draw people's attention to the reality, greatness, and goodness of the God we worship.
- B. 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.
- C. 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.