

The Body in Worship

Mohan Chacko

Introduction

Several years ago I had the opportunity to talk to a group of young people in one of our churches on the subject of worship. During the class I asked them, “how do you prepare to go to worship on Sunday morning?” I was very pleased to hear them say things like “I read the Bible,” or “I pray for the pastor,” etc. Not one of them, however, thought it worth mentioning that they took bath or put nice clothes on. When I pressed them on the issue they admitted that on a Sunday morning they probably spend more time before the mirror than reading the Bible. Was the response of these young people simply an oversight or is it indicative of something deeper?

Getting “dressed up” for church was something that I found unpleasant when I went to the US as a student (something I still find unpleasant!). It used to put me in a bad mood until someone reminded me that when we go to church, we are going to meet God.

I read (quite a long time ago) the story of a man who never wore a tie to Church. When asked for his reason, he narrated an incident where he took an un-churched man to church. After the service, the guest turned to this man and said, “I was the only person in that whole group who didn’t have a tie on.” From that day on, this man decided never to wear a tie to church so that others without may not feel out of place. Should we dress formally for church or should we go “just as we are”? Or, does it matter?

After a particularly meaningful service, one of my colleagues remarked to me that the service went very well except that there was too much getting up and sitting down. Why do we have to stand up for the creed or the reading of the gospel? We are Presbyterians after all!

When I returned to a service in my highly liturgical former church, I was sad to notice how preaching had deteriorated, no doubt as pastors are trained in institutions that do not honour God’s Word. The most respectful act towards the Word was when the priest took the Bible and kissed it reverentially while the people stood watching.

Then, there is the embarrassing question of what Presbyterians should do with their hands when they sing, “lift up your hands in the holy place.”

Should we allow Sunday School children to do action songs in church? Then, how about allowing the youth group to dance or to do choreography?

It is customary in our churches for women to refrain from participating in the Lord's Supper during menstruation. In some traditions, women who have given birth to children are re-admitted to worship through a churching ceremony.

After a meaningful sermon on the forgiveness of sins, the pastor asks the congregation to write the sins that bother them most on a piece of paper. The slips of paper are collected and set on fire, to remind God's people that he blots out our transgressions.

Purpose, Presupposition and Method

All the above anecdotes, questions and practices have to do with the body in worship. What, if any, is the appropriate role of the body in worship? This is the topic of our enquiry. This question could be explored at various levels. At one level, we can ask about the disposition of our bodies in worship – their presentation (clothing, for example), movements, gestures, posture, body functions, etc. At a second level, our understanding of the role of the body in worship is relevant to broader areas such as church architecture and arrangement – Should we sit on pews or on the floor? Should we have kneeling benches? Should the building have an east-west orientation? At a third level, we can also extend our enquiry to rituals (breaking of bread, pouring of water) and the use of symbols. These also have to do with the physicality of worship or actions done by the body (in contrast to the actions of the mind, such as understanding, reflecting, believing). At a fourth level, we can consider those aspects of worship related to our physical existence other than the activities of the mind – such as expressions of emotions that are considered non-rational.

It will not be possible within the limits of this paper to deal with all the issues involved at these various levels. Our attempt here will be to bring out some of the significant issues and principles that are relevant to our worship. It may also be pointed out here that these questions need to be examined not only in the light of our theology of worship, but also in the light of our theology of the body. Another consideration is the whole question of cultural appropriateness, meaning and relevance.

We will proceed with the assumption that in the churches of the Reformation tradition, the attitude to the body in worship is mostly negative – varying from indifference to hostility.¹ This, of course, is a generalisation. The involvement of the body is more pronounced in Anglican liturgy than in Presbyterian. Some churches are more at home with rituals than others. But apart from all these, it may be accurate to say that in the mainstream Reformation tradition the role of the body in worship is limited.

In this paper, first of all, we will enquire what may have been the reasons for the development of such a negative attitude. Then we will look at certain movements that have prompted a re-examination of this attitude. Finally, we will try to define an

¹According to Don E. Saliers, "... for the most part, worship in the Reformed tradition has exhibited caution and even a stronger aversion to the language of physical gesture." "Body Language: Eight Basic Gestures Every Worship Leader Should Know," *Reformed Worship* 32 (June 1994): 18.

appropriate role of the body in worship in our Asian contexts by stating certain cautions as well as by formulating certain principles.

Factors That Contributed to a Negative View of the Body in Worship

A number of significant reasons can be identified for the generally negative attitude of Reformed Christians towards the body in worship.

● **Reaction against Roman Catholic Ritualism.** Historically, we may say that this negative attitude evolved as a reaction against certain excesses in the Roman Catholic Church. The Reformation was, among other things, a reaction against ritualistic worship, with its emphasis on correct performance rather than on faith (understanding or trust).² Reactionary developments often go to the opposite extreme, and may even result in abandoning aspects of tradition that are good and legitimate.³

● **Lingering suspicion of the body as inferior and/or the seat of sinful tendencies.** The church, under the influence of various philosophies, has often elevated reason or faculties of the soul over the body. From its very beginning, the church had to fight various Gnostic tendencies, which saw matter as inherently evil. Under the influence of such teachings, the church often considered the body and things associated with it (such as emotions and physical pleasures) as inferior to the soul or sinful and lower than the rational intellect.⁴ Greco-Roman ideas also influenced the theology of the church.⁵ The

²“Certainly, part of Calvin’s protest against ceremonies arose out of the meaninglessness of many medieval rituals. Perhaps the priest still knew the significance of the rite (or perhaps not) but certainly most of the people did not.” Harry Boonstra, “Right Rites: How Much Ritual Is Appropriate in Reformed Worship?” *Reformed Worship* 32 (June 1994): 3. Says Saliers: “There are historical, cultural, and theological reasons behind this caution [against the emphasis on the physical]. The Reformed tradition was born through a radical critique of excessive ceremony and with the need to ‘purify’ worship from distortions resulting from accumulated ecclesiastical and cultural traditions.” The author identifies three “impulses” behind the formation of such an attitude – the contrast between the spiritual reality of worship and the outward signs; the tendency to draw attention to weakness of the human faith and to mistake the physical for the spiritual; and to conceive religious identity negatively (non-Roman Catholic). Saliers, “Body Language,” 18.

³Abraham E. Millgram, *Jewish Worship* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1971), shows how this principle worked out in a reverse way in the history of Jewish worship: “Christians and Moslems borrowed many of their symbolic gestures of worship from the Jews and with some modifications still practice them. As the Christians became increasingly hostile to the Jews, the forms taken over by them came to be regarded as characteristic of Christianity and were avoided in the synagogue services.” 356-57.

⁴Jyoti Sahi remarks that in abstract spirituality, in contrast to folk spirituality, the body is marginalized and feelings and sensations are discouraged. The intellect and the will are considered more important. “The body, if not actually rejected, is certainly not addressed. The body has to be accommodated, because the human being is of necessity embodied – but it is not celebrated, enjoyed.” Jyoti Sahi, “The Body in Search of Interiority,” in Louis Chauvet and Francois Kabasele Lumbala, eds., *Liturgy and the Body* (London: SCM/Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 89.

⁵An African scholar concludes in his study of the liturgy that Greco-Roman thought has negatively influenced the estimation of the body and its expressions in liturgy. “In this universe of belief and reflection, the body was held suspect. It was fallen and an instrument of sin. Any display considered immodest or excessive was removed from the liturgy. This explains the exclusion of dance from the Roman liturgy. God-like immobility or the absence of emotion was preferred to the ‘undisciplined’ flexing of the

rise of asceticism in the medieval church points to such an interpretation. It was often thought that sanctification can be attained only through spiritual disciplines that punish the body. In the minds of many, the body is identical with “flesh,” Paul’s term for sinful human nature.⁶ The influence of the Enlightenment with its elevation of human reason cannot be discounted. It was understood that the ability to think and reason is what set human beings apart from all other animals.⁷ If the body is associated with sin, it makes sense to minimise its role in worship.

● **The understanding of “spiritual” as non-material.** The understanding of worship as a “spiritual” act may also have contributed to the devaluation of the body in worship. True worship that the Father seeks is “worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). The terms “spirit,” and “spiritual” could mean a) non-material, b) related to the human spirit or soul, or c) related to the Holy Spirit. If “worship in spirit” is understood as “non-material” or “related to the human spirit or soul,” one can be indifferent with regard to the use of the body in worship. Or, at any rate, the role of the body will be insignificant.⁸

● **What really matters is the heart.** Related to the above is the argumentation of some that God is interested in the heart of human beings, and not in anything external.⁹

● **Culturally-conditioned and no more valid.** It is pointed out that some consider the biblical examples and exhortations to be culturally conditioned, and therefore limited to the time of the Bible.¹⁰

Contemporary Movements against This Attitude

body. Immobility symbolized perfection. God is the unmoved mover. The motions of the hand and face, very prominent in rhetorics, were the commonly approved gestures.” Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, “Body and Memory in African Liturgy.” In Louis Chauvet and Francois Kabasele Lumbala, eds., *Liturgy and the Body* (London: SCM/Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 73. See also, by the same author, *Worship as Body Language: Introduction to Christian Worship, An African Orientation* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 322.

⁶“Interwoven with this emphasis on rationality is suspicion of the body, of physicality, of the senses. The New Testament warnings against ‘the flesh’ are interpreted as disapproval of the body, and a wave of pseudo-spirituality engulfs the church.” Harry Boonstra, “Light One Candle ...?” *Reformed Worship* 25 (September 1992): 5.

⁷“... the legacy of the Enlightenment remains entrenched in many quarters. Western culture tends to value empirical analysis. ... Rationality is a gift of God, and the church has gained immeasurably by the advances of the Enlightenment. But in some respects we’ve become subverted by it.” Jack Hayford, John Killinger, and Howard Stevenson, *Mastering Worship* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah, 1990), 90.

⁸Boonstra quotes Arthur Pink to illustrate this attitude: “We cannot worship with our eyes or ears, noses or hands, for they are all ‘flesh’, and not spirit. ... true worship, spiritual worship, is decorous, quiet, reverential.” The author remarks that this interpretation is “a reflection of Victorian middle class taste than of biblical insight.” Harry Boonstra, “Light One Candle ...?” 3. A consistent application of this understanding of “spiritual” would be untenable. According to Boonstra, Zwingli came closest to such a view of worship. “Zwingli may have been wrong, but he was consistent. The sixteenth-century Swiss Reformer felt that any use of the body in worship, including singing, is dangerous.” Boonstra points out that “Reformed people have generally not followed Zwingli in this extreme anti-body notion about worship,” although some have been against the use of musical instruments. *Ibid.*, 4-5).

⁹Ronald Allen and Gordon Borrer, *Worship: Rediscovering the Missing Jewel*. (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1982), 131.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

In recent decades, there has been a growing awareness of the significance of the body and things associated with it in worship. This awareness has come, in my understanding, through three movements that are very different in many ways. Though as evangelical, Reformed Christians we may not be able to agree fully with their presuppositions and positions, I believe it is beneficial to listen to the concerns they have raised.

The first of the three movements is the charismatic renewal movement. This movement is not to be associated with classical Pentecostal denominations or theology. When we speak of the charismatic movement in the context of worship, the emphasis is not on the revival of classical Pentecostal doctrines of the Holy Spirit such as baptism in the Holy Spirit or speaking in tongues. Charismatic renewal has been trans-denominational, impacting churches of diverse theological positions. The most notable characteristic of charismatic worship is its expressiveness. The worshippers are encouraged to participate fully with their bodies and emotions through spontaneous expressions, actions and gestures. The need to provide a setting and the right atmosphere for such worship is stressed by the worship leaders. Hands should be free to be lifted up or to clap during singing. Seating should be arranged in such a way as to provide space for movement. Contemporary worship styles have incorporated much of these emphases, irrespective of the particular theology of the church.

The second movement that has emphasised the significance of the body in worship is the liturgical renewal movement.¹¹ It has incorporated many of the emphases of the charismatic renewal, but with more solemnity and style. Liturgical renewal also stresses the involvement and participation of the whole congregation in contrast to traditional, pastor-oriented, sermon-centred services. The congregation sings, responds and prays together through set liturgies. Worship is seen as action of the congregation rather than something done to them or for them. Traditional rituals are re-introduced in worship more meaningfully, and new rituals are added. The pastor wears a gown or other appropriate clothing, the Lord's Supper is a celebration, not just a memorial, people come forward to put their offerings, etc. Emphasis is given to meaningful use of gestures and postures – kneeling, lifting of hands, etc. While there are many things in common between charismatic renewal and liturgical renewal, in the latter, there is greater emphasis on tradition, order, beauty and dignity, art, as well as theological meaning. Charismatic worship, in comparison, tends to be shallower and more emotional in expression.

¹¹The Journal *Reformed Worship*, a publication of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, is a good example of this type of renewal. The following excerpt from the September 1992 editorial of this Journal explains its purpose well: "In the sixteenth century our tradition reacted against the abuses of ceremony, and rightly so. The church must always guard against such abuse. But later the church moved too far in the other direction: from beautifully simple to barren, from unadorned to ugly. One purpose of *Reformed Worship* is to reclaim the biblical heritage of full-bodied worship, of the use of creation, of our offerings of craft and art in the worship of the Lord." Harry Boonstra, "Light One Candle..." 4.

The third movement that has contributed to the recognition of the significance of the body in worship is Christian feminism. This movement is more recent than the other two, and further, its impact is more at a theological level. However, the significance of its contributions cannot be overlooked. Feminism is forcing the church to re-examine many of its doctrines. Its contributions to a theology of worship, it seems to me, has come through women's concern with understanding themselves – who they are in relation to all aspects of their existence. Reflection on their body and its functions, which distinguish them as women, is important to feminists, and they are demanding that these too be incorporated in theology and worship.¹² Feminism has brought our attention to the fact that we worship as earthly and even sensual human beings, and even these aspects need to be incorporated in our faith-response to God.¹³ Feminist theologians have made much of the themes of Christ as the one who bleeds and as the one who nurtures us relating these themes to their own bodily functions. Rather than seeing these as impurities that are reasons for shame and alienation from God, they have interpreted their bleeding and their breastfeeding as life-giving, and therefore affirmative for their sexuality. Drawing upon biblical accounts and sources from medieval piety, they have identified themselves with the physicality of Christ.¹⁴

Biblical Warnings

We have noted the influence of unbiblical philosophies that contributed to a negative view of the role of the human body in worship. We must also note that there are some biblical warnings that we must be aware of.

● **Worship as performance.** There is, first of all, the danger that too much of an emphasis on the body and its use can tend to make worship performance-oriented. Part of the reason for this danger is that many of the things we do with our body in worship are usually associated with performance in society outside the church – singing, dancing, etc. We are accustomed to seeing these as means of entertainment. We go to a dance or a musical programme (if we do) in order to enjoy ourselves. The one who presents such a programme refines his ability through practice so that the audience may be entertained.

¹²Susan A. Ross in an article entitled, “Embodiment and Incarnation,” points out that in more recent days “feminist theologians have taken the Christian tradition to task for its denigration of the body – more particularly, of women’s bodies” (264). The title and publication details of the book in which this article appears were misplaced, and regrettably, I have not been able to trace them out (MC). Also note the following observation by another author: “Liturgies for women are almost always intensely symbolic and related to the body.” Teresa Berger, “Woman as Alien Bodies in the Body of Christ?” in *Liturgy and the Body*, 116. This article provides a very helpful list of “distinctive features of liturgies shaped by women for women.”

¹³Linda Walter in a brief but searching personal reflection reveals the significance of this aspect for women. She says of her Anglican faith and upbringing, which ordinarily sustained her: “*But it was as if the body simply didn’t exist* – or worse: it was an unclean impediment. And when my body took over – as it does in menstruation and passion and pregnancy and childbirth and breastfeeding – my faith had nothing positive to say. In the intensive years of motherhood the God who was reached by dutiful prayer and regular attendance at the Eucharist was far away. And in this I felt myself both guilty and abandoned.” (Author’s italics.) Linda Walter, “A Canterbury Tale,” in Janet Martin Soskice and Diana Lipton, eds., *Feminism and Theology* (New York: OUP, 2003), 14.

¹⁴Janet Martin Soskice, “Blood and Defilement,” in *Feminism and Theology*, 333-43.

The artist performs for the people, and receives their applause. It is hard for us to get away from this model when it comes especially the use of art in worship.

●**The risk of sensuality.** Our senses are gateways to our hearts, and what we perceive through them impact our thoughts and actions. The sights, sounds and tastes we take in can have very negative consequences. Getting dressed up for church to meet the Lord (perhaps a good thing) can very easily become an opportunity to show off our fashion or wealth. How they impact us will depend on a number of factors such as the accepted practices and customs in the culture and the maturity level of the persons involved. A liturgical dance or a dance of celebration can lift up a person's spirit to God. On the other hand, skimpy or revealing clothing or immodest movements can also take our attention in the wrong direction. It can lead to sensuality. Decrying women's fashions (colour of sari, length of blouses, make up and jewellery) was a favourite preaching topic for pastors of fundamentalist churches in the south. While we cannot condone such preoccupation and fixation, we affirm that the principle of modesty is a biblical concern (I Tim 2:9-10).

●**Danger of losing the sense of transcendence.** Emphasis on the body, the material and created elements may take our attention away from the fact that we worship a God who is high and lifted up. If unchecked, worship in the body can become a worship of the body (or the earth, etc.) or take on such extreme tendencies.

●**Empty Ritualism.** Repetition of actions (as well as words) has a tendency to become an empty ritual.¹⁵ Gestures repeated in the same way week after week can have either (or both) of two consequences: One, the participants may become blind to the meaning and significance of the gesture through frequent repetition. Two, certain actions can be understood and employed superstitiously in worship (such as the sign of the cross) as if the gestures have magical powers in themselves. Both are detrimental to true worship.

●**New standards of hypocrisy.** Undue emphasis on physical actions can lead us to new standards for judging the spirituality of others. Those who lift their hands in singing or kneel for prayer may consider themselves or be considered by others as more spiritual than those who keep their hands in their pocket or sit down while praying. There is a strong tendency in us to measure spirituality by external and visible actions, while God searches the hearts. Drawing attention to ourselves in worship is always a danger.

Some Principles for the Proper Use of the Body

How then shall we be guided in the use of our body in worship? What principles can we employ to discern what is pleasing to the Lord in "offering our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God," which is our "spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1)? Some principles or guidelines may be stated below to help us in this.

¹⁵Observes D.S. Russell: Body language matters, but they can quite easily become "a mechanical expression, an empty symbol, ..." D.S. Russell, "Body Language in Worship and Prayer." *Expository Times* 112/4 (January 2001): 124.

- True worship that is pleasing to the Lord is always directed to him. Worship is not meant to entertain people. Even edification of the saints is only a secondary goal in worship.

- Our bodies are an integral part of who we are. Human beings are a body-soul unity. It is unbiblical to separate them or to see the material part of us as inferior to the non-material part.¹⁶ Our bodies are part of God's good creation. The Lord Jesus Christ took our flesh,¹⁷ and rose again from the dead in his body. The doctrines of creation, incarnation and resurrection affirm the significance of the body. Paul does not hesitate to describe the body as "a temple of the Holy Spirit." The natural conclusion is: "so glorify God in your body" (I Cor 6:19-20). Therefore, any view of the body as evil or inferior ought to be rejected by Christians.

- Worship "in Spirit" refers to the fact that true worship is offered by the power of the Holy Spirit, and not by human merit. A "spiritual" activity is not opposed to physical (or emotional or intellectual) activity.¹⁸

- Potential for abuse is not sufficient justification to eliminate activities associated with the body from worship. It is not only those activities in which the body is prominent that are open to abuse. Even those activities in which the intellect is prominent – such as in preaching – are open to abuse and may become sources of sinful pride. A sermon can be preached for the praise of the audience as well as the song sung by a choir. A prayer can be a performance as much as a dance. The opposite of doing something for the praise of men is not to do something badly. The Lord is also not pleased with an unprepared or badly-prepared sermon or choral offering or congregational prayer. That we should offer the Lord our very best is a principle that must guide us when we prepare for worship. If the choir sings for the applause of the congregation, it is better that it doesn't sing at all. But is it not possible that the choir can sing for the glory of God? The solution is to learn to do all things for the glory of God, not forgetting that in this life even our best motives are mixed with sin and imperfection. A good, Reformed approach would be not to give up singing and dancing to Satan, but to reclaim these as part of God's good gifts to us, and learn to employ them in every way possible, including worship, to the glory of God. In other words, our goal should not be to eliminate the arts from the church, but to celebrate the arts, both within and outside the church, to the glory of God.¹⁹

¹⁶"Our bodies, the physical expression of our lives on earth, are integral to our very nature. We cannot be separated into compartments of 'body,' 'mind,' 'emotions,' etc. Rather we are whole people, and as such must worship with *all* our being, including our bodies." Liz Rowland and Joy Potter, "Worshipping with Our Bodies," in Dale Dieleman, ed., *The Praise Book: A Worship Guide for Youth Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 74.

¹⁷Feminist theologians have argued that "taking incarnation seriously will result in a more balanced approach to the body and to women's participation in religious life. As long as the body is seen as the 'lower' part of the person and women are seen to be 'more bodily' than men, the incarnation has not been taken seriously enough." Susan A. Ross, "Embodiment and Incarnation," 264-65. According to Jyoti Sahi, "Spirituality can easily degenerate into a kind of elitist gnosticism that denies the importance of the physical – which means ultimately a denial of the incarnation." Jyoti Sahi, "The Body in Search of Interiority," in *Liturgy and the Body*, 88.

¹⁸See the fine explanation of this phrase in Robert G. Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship: Corporate Worship in the Evangelical Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), 105-11.

¹⁹The use of dance in worship is a case in point. The following statement by Rowland and Potter, in my opinion, is a good example of the Reformed approach. "Partly because of neglect by the church,

- Both by command and by example, the Bible teaches us to employ our whole bodies in worship. We are to love our God with our entire being (Dt 6:5; Mt 22:37). Feet, tongue, hands, head, knees, face, eyes, heart, etc. are employed in various aspects of worship. There is no reason to believe that these were limited in their application either to the Old Testament or to the Bible.

- Things associated with the body in themselves are not impure, but were so designated for a time (in the Old Testament) to teach us the principle of holiness (separation) so essential to true worship of a holy God. Bodily illnesses (leprosy) and impurities (bleeding, emission of semen) are either consequences of the fall or are cases where separation was desired for hygienic or cultural reasons. Therefore, they were appropriate object lessons for God to teach us the meaning of holiness. The finished work of redemption in Christ helps us to see these in a new light, even as our Lord taught us that what makes a man unclean is not what goes into a man but what comes out of the heart. What God has made clean in Christ must not be called common (Acts 10:15).²⁰

- To say that what is important to God is a person's heart is to make a false dichotomy. The attitude of the heart can and must be expressed in and through the body.²¹

- The Lord himself designed worship in such a way as to appeal to our senses. The instructions associated with worship in the Old Testament (sacrificial system, tabernacle) are so elaborate and minute, and full of symbols. These convey the beauty and glory of God in human terms. Similarly, the sacraments directly appeal to our senses even as the Word appeals to our mind (through the senses). The drama of redemption is re-enacted every time the sacraments are celebrated. The Lord himself told the Jews: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (Jn 6:53). The incarnation and ministry of Christ is "sensual" to the point of crudity.

- Non-ritualism in itself can become a ritual, and rob worship of meaning and significance. Many pastors who abhor written prayers because of ritualism, end up praying for the same things in the same way week after week. They follow the same order of worship every week as much as those who follow a prescribed liturgy. Often protest against rituals only end up replacing one ritual with another.²²

dance and movement have been taken over and often tragically misused by the world to promote egocentricity, aggressiveness and eroticism. But our continued neglect will only make the situation worse. We need to reclaim and redeem dance and use it as it was intended – as a beautiful means of glorifying God." The authors see dance as useful to express celebration and rejoicing, fellowship, demonstrate spiritual battle, witness, teach, be a source of healing, and as a way of prayer and intercession. "Worshipping with Our Bodies," in *The Praise Book*, 74.

²⁰Ritual holiness is very prominent in all religions in India, including Christianity. It was interesting for me to note that in discussions on the ordination of women several decades ago, the strongest objection from the Orthodox church was not based on Pauline teachings on the subject, but on the Old Testament laws of purity.

²¹As Allen and Borrer have pointed out, "a right heart attitude does not exclude physical action." They illustrate this with their explanation of kneeling: "The purpose of kneeling before the Lord is not to increase our pain or discomfort. ... Kneeling is supposed to give an outward expression of an inward reality of humility and gratitude toward our majestic God. It is an act of the heart physically expressed." Allen and Borrer, *Worship: Rediscovering the Missing Jewel*, 131-33.

²²I remember an amusing incident from my childhood when (in our new denomination) there was a debate on the practice of putting a Cross on top of churches. The new denomination had opposed the superstitious use of the Cross in worship. Finally, it was decided to put the image of a Bible in the place of the Cross!

●In Christian history also certain gestures developed very early. Some of these gestures were taken from the Scriptures while others from Judaism or even contemporary culture. The point to note is that the church felt free to borrow and adapt meaningful gestures both from the Scriptures as well as from culture by giving them certain meanings.²³ At the same time, it did not feel obliged to imitate every gesture mentioned in the Scripture or to limit itself to them.

●Gestures have meaning within certain contexts.²⁴ In other words, their significance and appeal are not universal. What is appropriate and meaningful may not be so in another. Instead of slavishly following gestures used in the Bible or in Christian history elsewhere, we must attempt to follow equivalent gestures in our own culture. For example, lifting up of hands, spreading of hands, turning towards Jerusalem, looking to heaven, bowing down, etc. are all gestures associated with prayer. The question we must ask is what do they mean?²⁵ They refer to calling out for God's help, acknowledging that God is transcendent (lifted up), humility before God, etc. We must remember that when it comes to God, all our language and gesture are metaphorical. We associate God with heaven, not because God lives in the sky, but to show that he is "above" all creation. We can borrow or create gestures that give expression to the same in our culture.²⁶ In the Indian context, for example, kneeling, prostrating, closing one's eyes,²⁷ folding hands, sitting on the ground in a dignified position, handling the Bible in a respectful way, etc. are meaningful gestures that express biblical truth. It is not necessary or even desirable that we raise our hands in prayer or praise. Gestures, even those found in the Bible, are not unalterable magic formulas.

Conclusion

²³An archaeological study by a team of theologians and anthropologists done at the Byzantine monastery of St. Stephen at Jerusalem, an important monastic centre from fifth to seventh centuries, brought out evidence from the skeletons showing that "repetitive kneeling" was practised by the monks. The authors explain that "kneeling as a deferential gesture was taken over from courtly Greco-Roman culture and placed in a new religious context." How gestures were theologically accommodated can be seen from the following observation given by Peter of Alexandria (c. 311), as noted in this article: "We therefore kneel on six days for prayer, as a sign of our fallen state. But on the Lord's Day, we do not kneel, as a sign of the resurrection through which by the grace of Christ we have been freed from sin and death." Michael S. Driscoll and Susan Guise Sheridan, "Every Knee Shall Bend: A Biocultural Reconstruction of Liturgical and Ascetical Prayer in V-VII Century Palestine," *Worship* 74/3 (September 2000): 453-67.

²⁴Says Uzukwu: "It will be unusual to talk about a universal type of gesture." Gestures absorbed in worship "find their meaning within a particular social group." Uzukwu, "Body and Memory in African Liturgy," in *Liturgy and the Body*, 71-72. "Body language, though universal in its usage, shows many variations, and reflects many different cultures and traditions." D.S. Russell, "Body Language in Worship and Prayer," 125.

²⁵To interpret a gesture literally instead of appropriating its meaning, as if it is direction for action, is to misinterpret the Scriptures. Lifting our hands or eyes can be done literally, as if they are directions for action songs (as many worship leaders tend to understand them), is possible, but how shall one literally express "lift up your hearts"?

²⁶As Russell points out, if the body language is "corrupted" by elements contrary to the Scripture (fertility cults, for example), it may be inappropriate for use. Russell, "Body Language in Worship and Prayer," 125.

²⁷Though now employed by Christians everywhere, as far as I know, this gesture is not a biblical one. But it is full of meaning: it communicates that our attention to God is undivided, that we pray to a God who is invisible rather than to idols, that we are in the presence of a God whose glory we cannot bear.

The body ought not be an inconvenience, impediment or embarrassment in worship. Neither is it something to be simply tolerated because we cannot exist without it. Though affected by sin, we affirm that it is created by God and redeemed by the Lord Jesus Christ and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. The Bible as well as Christian history affirms its use in worship. But like in all other aspects of worship, it should be used for the glory of God, being conscious of our sinful tendencies. Rather than seeing gestures, postures and other actions of the body in a rigid way, we need to express the meaning of these in culturally appropriate equivalent actions. To do this, we need to constantly re-examine the meaning of worship, the theology of the body, as well as the principles of accommodation.