

Posture in Public Prayer.¹

Free Presbyterian Magazine – August 1938

TWO things may here be taken for granted, as either self-evident, or so plainly inculcated in the Bible, as not to admit of doubt. One is, that in offering up our prayers to God, we should be filled with a deep reverence for His glorious Majesty, and the other, that the inward reverence should be expressed by suitable external acts. Both these things are so clear in themselves, and so frequently enjoined, that there can be no uncertainty in regard to them. God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about Him. It enters into the very idea of religious worship, that the feelings of the worshippers should be solemn, and their deportment devout. Everything teaches us this, - the creation and providence of God, reason and revelation, our own sense of propriety, and the example of the saints in all past ages of the world. Deep and holy reverence is enforced upon us by every page of divine truth, and every dictate of the human conscience. On all things, within us and around us, the fearful and gracious name Jehovah, our God, is written as in sunbeams; and in prayer we distinctly recognise all this.

But if the feeling of reverence be present in the mind, it will be sure, your Committee believe, to express itself in the outward conduct. Everything in the looks and attitudes of the worshippers will wear a serious aspect, whenever they who are but dust and ashes take it upon them to speak unto God. As they approach the mercy-seat, a voice will seem to say, 'Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.'

These are preliminary observations, in relation to which there can be little or no difference of opinion. But the question to be considered now is, *What particular posture ought to be assumed by our congregations while engaged in public prayer?* This is the single point submitted to us by the Synod, and it is this which we wish to present in a clear and distinct light. You will bear in mind, that it is only prayer in the house of God which our inquiries need embrace; for there is probably no great diversity of practice in reference to prayer in the family, or

¹ The above is the Report of a Committee appointed by the Synod of New Jersey, U.S.A., on the subject of Posture in Public Prayer. It was printed in the *Free Church Magazine*, iii. 185-6 and reprinted in *The Watchword* (October, 1870), a monthly edited by Dr. Regg -- Editor.

prayer in the closet. We should think it strange to find a domestic circle performing their morning or evening devotions on their seats. In secret, too, it is to be presumed every one chooses some reverential attitude when he presents himself before God. It is solely in reference to prayer in the sanctuary that any unpleasant diversity is found; and here almost every variety of posture which can be named is to be met with. In one congregation, when the preacher rises and invites the people to join with him and with each other in calling upon God, we see the whole assembly keeping their seats. In another, some stand while others sit, or they sit and stand alternately as they deem most easy or convenient. While in a few instances, and these few, we are sorry to say, all the time becoming fewer, we witness the pleasant spectacle of an entire assembly standing up together to present their supplications to God. This diversity is of itself unseemly; and if one mode is decent and in order, it follows that the others are not so. *Which, then, is the scriptural and proper posture for public prayers?* Let the Bible be our guide: "To the law and to the testimony; for if any speak not according to this Word, it is because there is no light in them."

There are three principal postures of prayer mentioned in the Bible -- *prostration, kneeling, and standing*. Your Committee deem it fit and useful to spend a few minutes illustrating each of these, and showing to what circumstances they relate.

The first, *prostration*, or falling down upon one's face, is a posture of prayer never spoken of as suited, ordinarily, to congregations. It belongs rather to an individual in his private chamber, labouring under an unusual sense of guilt, or having some special request to urge before God, or favoured with a remarkable discovery of divine glory. An examination of the cases in which prostration was practised, the Committee are assured, will evince the truth of this remark. We may, therefore, consider the question as narrowed down to the two postures, *kneeling and standing*, one or other of which ought to be universally taken by our congregations.

Kneeling, we readily admit, is a posture of prayer of which we have many examples in the Word of God. Such an attitude is not only all, expression of humility, and a declaration of a sense of want, but it also denotes adoration of the Most High, and a feeling of dependence on Him for blessings. Solomon knelt in

prayer. Paul loved to bow his knee before the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And even the Saviour Himself assumed this position. Kneeling has, to authorise it, the precepts of the Scriptures, the example of inspired men, and the customs of all lands, heathen as well as Christian. This is the usual posture in social meetings, and in family and secret prayer, and no particular objection can be made to it as the posture for a whole congregation. Were our churches constructed with this view, it would be very proper to make this the common attitude of prayer.

The other position of the body recognised in the Bible, is standing, and this your Committee judge to be most suitable on all ordinary occasions. We have no hesitation here. It cannot be doubted that to stand up in the presence of a superior is a token of respect and reverence. and therefore a becoming attitude for churches to assume in offering prayer to God. Some of your people may not be aware how strong and decided the testimony of the Scriptures is on this point. Not only did public assemblies often assume this position, but it is said expressly, "When we stand before this house, and in Thy presence, and cry to Thee in our affliction, then Thou wilt hear and, help." This is very decisive. It hardly leaves it uncertain what the posture was in which the Jewish Church prayed. The Saviour, too, uses the phrase, "When ye *stand* praying," while giving the conditions of acceptable approaches unto God. All is clear, so far as Bible illustration and example are concerned.

If precedent is to have weight, your Committee is convinced that it is in favour of *standing*, in preference to any other mode. That this was the custom of the temple service in Christ's day we learn from the parable of the Pharisee and Publican, intended expressly to illustrate the nature of real prayer. During the whole season of Pentecost kneeling was positively forbidden. The early Christians, too, if we may judge from hints, as well as distinct notices in their writings, were unanimous in adopting the posture of standing. One reason they had for this was that the upright position reminded them of Christ's resurrection from the grave. Sitting in prayer was never allowed.

Your Committee, therefore, can come but to one conclusion in regard to this matter. As prostration is a private individual thing, and as kneeling cannot be practised in our churches as at present constructed, we recommend standing as

the posture to be universally adopted. These are the only modes which seem to have the sanction of the Word of God, and there are strong reasons for preferring the last. This, it may be added, was the uniform posture of our pious ancestors. After this manner, worshipped they the God of their fathers. We, therefore, wish all our people to rise, and stand with their faces towards the pulpit, and their eyes closed, during public prayers.

It is not relevant to say, as is often done, that bodily forms or postures profit little. This we admit and feel the force of; but why should we lose the spirit of devotion in seeking to ascertain what mode of worship is fittest in itself, and most in accordance with the teachings of the Bible? Prayer may be offered, too, at any time, and under any circumstances. We may sit in our houses and commune with God, as did the pious Psalmist, or we may lie on our beds, and lift up our hearts and voices to heaven, as did the devout Hezekiah; still neither sitting nor lying is the proper position for us when we join in the supplications of the sanctuary. The thing is unseemly, and cannot but strike the mind with repugnance the moment it is mentioned.

This is not all. There is a difference between praying in a *particular posture and taking the posture for the purpose of prayer*. For example, we may present our requests unto God anywhere -- in the shop, in the field, or in the market-house -- but we do not go to those places for the sake of praying. This, your Committee suppose, may explain the case of David when he came in and sat before the Lord. He did not do this with the previous intention of engaging in prayer on his seat, but being in that position he found it in his heart to pray, and did pray. Every Christian knows what this means. Here, too, we have reason for the custom of sitting; while asking a blessing on our meals. We take our places at the table for the purpose of eating, and may very properly remain in our seats while we pause to express our dependence on God, and thank Him for His mercies. But prayer is not our special business there. Our Saviour commanded the multitude to be seated when about miraculously to feed them.

Sometimes it is objected to standing in prayer that the service is so protracted as to exhaust the strength of the congregation. If this be so, it is not thus that the corrective should be applied. We can hardly argue from the length of the prayers against a posture which is both suitable and scriptural, without running into the

absurdity of making one evil practice a pretext for indulging in another. Public prayer ought never to be so long as to weary those who are in the enjoyment of tolerable health. As for the feeble and aged, they have a right to regard themselves as exceptions to the rule, and to assume without hesitation such a position as best enables them to unite in this solemn and delightful exercise. People in general can never plead inability to stand before God in prayer twelve or fifteen minutes. Let ministers also remember that the flesh is sometimes weak when the spirit is willing, and that the beginning of weariness is commonly the end of devotion.

Your Committee, however, believe that our aged church members are the last persons who would wish to be excused from standing in prayer. We see, in looking over our religious assemblies, that it is the sons and daughters, rather than the fathers and mothers, who need a dispensation to pray sitting in their seats. Old people are never first to relinquish the good customs of former days.

There is another thing which it seems important to notice in this connection. In many of our congregations we witness a restlessness and confusion while the benediction is pronounced, which cannot but be regarded as utterly inconsistent with the design of this deeply interesting service. Such conduct savours as little of reverence as it does of good breeding. We must all agree that no part of the public worship of God demands greater seriousness of mind than this. Whether we regard it simply as a brief concluding prayer, or as an official act of the minister authoritatively blessing the people in the name of the Lord, it evidently should be attended upon with seriousness. This is not the time for adjusting articles of dress or getting ready, as if ill haste to leave the house of God. We separate, perhaps not to meet again on earth; and we should all retire praying that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God our heavenly Father, and the communion of the Holy Ghost may abide with us for ever.

In view of the foregoing statements and reasons, your Committee judge that *standing* is the fittest position for prayer in the sanctuary. This is an attitude taught us by the light of nature, as well as by the examples and precepts of the Bible, and it is one in which our congregations can more readily harmonise than any other. We should be glad to see more uniformity in the Psalmody we use, and in everything pertaining to God's house. But we must say it is peculiarly

unpleasant in itself, and entirely at variance with Scripture and the practice of the primitive Church, to witness so strange a diversity of posture in public prayer. It is not comely or of good report for one to stand and another to sit, while the mass of the congregation is sometimes in one position and sometimes in another. This has an appearance of carelessness and irreverence which needs only to be considered in order to its being condemned.

We therefore recommend to the Synod² the adoption of the following resolutions: --1. That of the three postures of prayer spoken of in the Bible, *prostration, kneeling, and standing*, the last, viz., *standing*, is the best suited for public worship, and the only one to which the construction of our churches is adapted. 2. That as a posture, not only scriptural and proper, but enforced by the practice of the early Christians, and our own forefathers, as well as conducive to good order and uniformity, we recommend to all persons in health to *rise and stand* during the offering of public pray. 3. That we gravely enjoin it upon the ministers of this Synod not to give any reasonable occasion to the people to assume any other position than that of *standing*, by prolonging their prayers to an *undue and wearisome* length.

² That. is, the Synod of New Jersey, U.S.A.