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Teaching Letter

Free to Worship - Part 1



Part 1/2
Free to Worship
By Derek Prince

> But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. (John 4:23)

Isn't that amazing? Almighty God, who has the resources of the entire universe at His disposal, is seeking people to worship Him—people like you and me, drawn from a fallen race of sinners! What can be God's motive? Does He have some deep need for affirmation and approval? Hardly!

No—His Father's heart yearns to reveal Himself in all His glory to those whom He has created. This is the highest blessing He has to bestow.

In this new series of two teaching letters, *Free to Worship*, we are going to explore firstly, the uninhibited nature of worship that God longs for from His people. In the second letter, we will confront the reality of the sacrificial nature of true worship.

The revelation of God comes first and foremost through His precious word—the Bible. "If anyone loves Me," Jesus said, "he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him" (John 14:23). Through God's Word, received and obeyed, both God the Father and God the Son come to indwell us.

This in turn draws us to worship the God whom we have received. The better we know God through His Word, the more we desire to worship Him. We may measure the place that God's Word has in our lives by the degree in which we desire to worship Him.

First of all, we need to recognize that worship does not consist in singing hymns or choruses, or listening to a choir, or even in praying—though all these are legitimate activities. These can—or should—lead us into worship.

More important still, worship is not a form of spiritual entertainment. In worship, we do not focus on ourselves, or our experiences, but on God. Worship is direct, intimate, personal communion with our Creator. It is the highest activity of which the human spirit is capable. But it goes beyond the spirit and involves the totality of human personality.

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It is a mistake, too, to think of worship as something we only do in a congregation or in public. Worship should form the highest point of our private devotions. In fact, the original meaning of the word *devotion* is an act of worship. If we only worship God in public in a congregation, there will always be something artificial about it. It will be merely a religious *act* that we put on in the presence of others.

On the other hand, united congregational worship can bring each individual into a higher and deeper awareness of God and His majesty than could ever be attained in solitary devotions.

Unfortunately, through the centuries, the Christian concept of worship has fallen far below the pattern presented in Scripture. I have researched all the main words the Bible uses for worship, and I have arrived at an exciting and revolutionary conclusion: every word used for worship—both in the Old Testament and in the New–describes a posture of the body. By way of illustration we will begin at the head and work downwards.

One main act is to *bow the head*. When Abraham's servant, seeking a bride for his master's son, realized that God had directed him to the family of Abraham's brother, "Then the man bowed down his head and worshiped the Lord" (Genesis 24:26).

Again, when Moses and Aaron reported to the elders of Israel in Egypt that the Lord had promised to deliver them from their slavery, their response was the same: "they bowed down their heads and worshiped" (Exodus 4:31).

Our hands also play an important part in our worship. David's response to God's lovingkindness is described in Psalm 63:4:

> Thus will I bless you while I live;
> I will *lift up my hands* in your name.

In Psalm 141:2 David describes a similar act of worship:

> Let my prayer be set forth before you as incense,
> The *lifting up of my hands* as the evening sacrifice.

In Psalm 143:6 David describes a different position of his hands which expresses his longing for God:

> I *spread out my hands* to You;
> My soul longs for you like a thirsty land.

Lifting up our hands is an act by which we *acknowledge* God's majesty. *Spreading out our hands* indicates our desire to *receive* from God.

Probably the most familiar work of art that depicts prayer is Albrecht Durer's *Praying Hands*. Perhaps this is more a picture of supplication than of worship. Nevertheless, it is significant that Durer does not focus on the lips, or even the face of the one praying, but on the *hands*.

Another way in which we may use our hands in worship is described in Psalm 47:1–2:

> Oh, *clap your hands*, all you peoples! Shout to God with the voice of triumph! For the Lord Most High is awesome; He is a great King over all the earth.

By *clapping our hands* in this way we acknowledge the awesome majesty of our great King. By joining this with a *shout of triumph*, we proclaim His total victory. From time to time I have been present in a meeting when something that was said or done provoked a burst of clapping and sometimes also of shouting. Probably some who responded in this way did not realize that it was a scriptural act of worship.

Shouting—let me add—does not mean loud singing. It means shouting—exercising the full capacity of our lungs.

When Solomon was dedicating the temple that he had built to the Lord, he spread out his hands. But he also went further: he *knelt down on his knees* (2 Chronicles 6:12–13). This form of worship typifies total submission to the Lord.

In Ephesians 3:14 Paul reveals that he too approached God in this position: "I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Ultimately the whole universe will make this act of submission to the Creator. In Isaiah 45:23 the Lord declares: "I have sworn by myself ... that to Me every knee shall bow. ..." In Philippians 2:10 Paul reveals that this act of submission will be made specifically to Jesus, as God's appointed ruler: "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow. ..."

There is a further act of worship which includes the whole body and which is depicted in the Bible more often than any other: to prostrate one's self before God. When we prostrate ourselves in this way, we acknowledge our total dependence on God. We thus revoke the desire to be independent of God which prompted the original

disobedience of Adam and Eve and which characterizes the fallen nature of every one of their descendants.

At some time or other most of the great men in the Bible had found themselves flat on their faces before God. Twice in Genesis 17 it records that Abraham fell on his face before the Lord (vv. 3, 17).

When the Lord appeared to Joshua outside Jericho as the commander of God's army, [Joshua] fell on his face to the earth. He was further commanded to take off his sandals from his feet (Joshua 5:13–15). Both actions—falling on his face and taking off his sandals—expressed worship. It was in this posture of worship that Joshua received the Lord's direction for taking Jericho.

By contemporary standards, however, the most unconventional act of worship is described in 2 Samuel 6:12–14. When David had successfully brought the ark up to Jerusalem, he *danced before the Lord with all his might*. Since David was a mighty man of valor, the phrase *all his might* must indicate extremely energetic actions that included every part of his body. This was the most appropriate expression of his exuberant joy and gratitude to God.

The chapter closes with a word of warning to any who might react in a negative way to such a vigorous expression of worship. David's wife Michal criticized him for such a display, and as a result was deprived of the privilege of bearing children. A carnal attitude of criticism can result in spiritual barrenness.

I said earlier that singing is not in itself an act of worship, but this statement needs to be qualified. In some cases singing can flow imperceptibly into worship. On the other side, clapping hands or dancing may often be expressive of praise as much as of worship. Human language is not sensitive enough to mark the exact borderline between various forms of worship and praise.

Why the Body?

We may ask: Why does the body play such an important part in our worship? After all, Jesus said that we should worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24). The answer lies in understanding the relationship between the three elements that make up human personality: spirit, soul and body (see 1 Thessalonians 5:23).

The spirit is the part of our personality that can make direct contact with God (see 1 Corinthians 6:17). But to express itself the spirit needs the cooperation of the soul—the part through which the will operates and which therefore makes decisions for the whole person. The soul, in turn, sets the body in motion.

This is illustrated by the words of David in Psalm 103:1: "Bless the Lord, O my soul ..." David's spirit was stirred to bless the Lord and urged his soul to make the appropriate decision. His soul, in turn, had to set his body in motion—primarily his vocal organ—to express the blessing which his spirit was longing to offer.

Seen in this light, worship is an activity in which the spirit works through the soul to produce the appropriate actions of the body. If the soul and the body do not respond to the spirit's urging, then the body is in effect a prison in which the spirit remains inhibited and unable to express itself. There are multitudes in the contemporary church who are in this condition—spirits imprisoned in bodies through which they cannot freely express themselves. Their physical activity in church is limited to a few routine movements. They walk in, sit down, stand up, sit down, stand up and walk out again. As a result, they scarcely participate at all in the highest activity of which their spirits are capable—the uninhibited worship of the Creator.

There is, however, an opposite error: the soul and the body may "go through the motions" of worship without the spirit initiating it or being involved. The result is mere religious activity and not true worship. The scriptural pattern of worship requires the harmonious interaction of all three parts—spirit, soul and body—with the spirit to bring the initiative. It is this harmony of all our faculties that constitutes true liberty.

A Spirit of Stiffness

I once had an experience which I believe serves as a kind of *parable* to illustrate this situation. I was with a group of Christians waiting upon God in prayer. Suddenly, without any act of my will, my hands went up in the air and my body went through a series of convulsive jerks for a moment. I felt embarrassed, wondering what the other people would think. Then I asked myself: Which is more important, what people think, or what God wants to do for me? I decided to yield without reservation to what God was doing. Actually, most of the other people were too preoccupied with God to notice what was happening to me.

The convulsive jerks lasted for a few minutes, then I relaxed and my body went limp. God showed me that I had been delivered from a spirit of *stiffness* (something I had never heard of before). He showed me, too, when and how that spirit had gained access to me. I was born in India—in 1915—at a time when the medical facilities were relatively

primitive. The local doctor soon detected that my legs were unequal. He recommended that I lie on my back with one leg in a splint—which continued for several months. From that time onward there were certain normal physical movements that I was never able to make. Since my deliverance, however, I have begun to experience a new freedom of movement.

I find it a sobering thought that a spirit of stiffness had kept me from full freedom in my body for 79 years—in spite of many physical and spiritual blessings that I have enjoyed in subsequent years.

Over the centuries, I believe, something analogous has happened to the Christian church. A large section of it has been infiltrated by a spirit of *stiffness* which has kept Christians from experiencing the liberty and exhilaration which God desires His people to enjoy in their worship of Him. As a result, our forms of worship are often far removed from the patterns so abundantly presented in Scriptures.

What is the remedy? First, we must return to the pattern of Scripture and apprehend the full scope of activities with which it is appropriate to worship God. Then we must discipline our souls to respond to the prompting of our spirits and to release our bodies into all the appropriate actions. In many cases this may require some kind of spiritual deliverance.

If these words apply to you, don't make the mistake I nearly made. Don't let embarrassment or self-consciousness keep you from pressing through into all that God has for you!

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