

# **LIFTING HOLY HANDS? COMPARING CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE WITH BIBLICAL INJUNCTIONS AND DESCRIPTIONS**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Coming back to a Baptist seminary after being gone for 20 years enabled me to identify many changes, like an uncle who sees his niece at birth and not again until her High School graduation. One of these “my how you’ve grown” moments occurred when I attended my first worship service in the Seminary Chapel.

Remembering my student days, I was expecting traditional sacred organ music with a new chorus or two thrown in to appear contemporary; the drum set, electric guitar and tambourine were unexpected changes. People were clapping to the music and lifting hands up toward heaven. Even a professor who teaches Baptist worship was lifting his hands, though not an unrestrained outstretched raising of his arms, rather a discreet waist level opening of the palms in an upward direction. Sitting in this transformed worship service I rejoiced at the expression of joy and thought, “My how you’ve changed!”

This injection of emotion and freedom to express praise to God in various forms is not unique to seminaries. Many evangelical churches enjoy this new freedom in worship even as other churches, unsure of change, stick to more reserved forms of worship. While all these changes will be tested over time, I’d like to focus on one specific action. Just as a lifted hand asks to be recognized in a classroom, the practice of lifting hands in worship needs to be addressed.

Some people are uncomfortable with hands being lifted during worship services because it is new. Others are irritated, not just uncomforta-

ble. They see it as a move towards a worship tradition that they believe might be theologically incorrect. Or worse, they see lifting hands in a worship service as a move towards rowdy behavior. “What’s next,” they might think, “One of those NFL stadium *waves*?” However, those lifted hands are not trying to offend, they are just expressing themselves. Some even justify “lifting hands” by quoting scripture and saying that Christians are commanded to worship in this way.

Should we *all* be lifting our hands in praise like we bow our heads in prayer? Should we ask people to *not* lift their hands because it is disturbing to others, or ask them *to* lift their hands because it is a command? Is this action of lifting hands during a worship service a personal preference, or a command? Is it a nuance of worship to be encouraged or a nuisance to be confronted, or should it be simply tolerated?

In this article, I will briefly examine what Scripture teaches regarding the use of lifting hands in worship. The observations are broad in their scope and need further and deeper exegetical work. Culture and tradition speak about this as well, but for the present let us confine ourselves to an introductory Biblical theology. This article can serve as a foundation for further study.

## II. FIRST TIMOTHY 2:8

*Therefore, I want the men in every place to pray,  
lifting holy hands, with out wrath and dissension.<sup>1</sup>*

Paul expresses his desire that men in every place should pray, lifting up holy hands. How strongly does Paul desire that men pray? He does not use the same force of a command seen in the earlier exhortation to prayer in 2:1. There, he uses a different and stronger word, which is “exhort” (*parakaleō*). Here, he chooses “I want” (*boulomai*) as he does later in the book when he desires the younger women to get married (5:14). It, *boulomai*, has the same suggestive feel rather than a clear command. Thus, Paul’s preference is that when people pray they lift their hands, just as he is only suggesting that younger women get married. The NIV translation is unfortunate for it gives the impression that the wish is for men to lift holy hands. However, the structure is a subjunctive, *I wish*,

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotes from New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

followed by an infinitive, *to pray*; and the *lifting of hands* is a participle modifying the call to pray. The NASB translation best fits the grammar.

So then, what exactly is Paul suggesting? The lifting of hands (*epaironatas*) is used in conjunction with praying. It can be translated as an action that is associated with, but independent of, praying; much like the participles in the Great Commission.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it could be that Paul has two independent actions in mind, praying and lifting their hands. However, the act of lifting hands is logically and grammatically connected to praying. Logically, the lifting of hands makes no sense without the connection to praying. Why would a person just lift their hands—certainly not for the exercise? So, logically, the lifting of hands must be linked to that of prayer. Grammatically, lifting hands could be translated as expressing attendant circumstances, which sees the action as capable of being independent of the main verb, but it is best translated as an adverbial participle which sees the participle as dependent upon the main verb.<sup>3</sup> The secondary act of lifting hands is linked to the primary action of prayer in a dependent relationship. Thus, the lifting of hands should be done in conjunction with prayer. The desire is for men to pray. The lifting of their hands is describing what one does while praying. It is grammatically untenable to say that Paul desires men to lift their hands apart from prayer. His primary desire is that men pray. The lifting of hands is at most an assumed or suggested posture in prayer.

Three representative commentators give even less directive authority to this verse. Lea sees this not as prescribing a posture for prayer, but rather as describing the common practice of that day.<sup>4</sup> Kent views the hands as symbolic of a holy lifestyle.<sup>5</sup> Fee says the point is not that men should pray or lift hands, but rather when they do pray and lift their

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<sup>2</sup> The Great Commission has a main verb followed by three participles. These particles are seen by many as sharing the force of the main command. Thus the translation appears to be four commands instead of one. Christians are to go, make disciples, baptize them and teach them. While they are related they can be seen as independent actions.

<sup>3</sup> If a participle makes good sense when treated as adverbial participle, it is best not to treat it as attendant circumstance. Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar, Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 640.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Lea, *First and Second Timothy, Titus* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 94.

<sup>5</sup> Homer Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 104-105.

hands, as was common in the first century, they are to do it without wrath or dissension.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, it is clear that this verse is not ordering or prescribing a physical position of the body that must be a part of Christian worship. The text describes the lifting of hands but falls short of prescribing the action. What then is the Biblical pattern for the use of hands in worship? My observation of lifting hands in today's worship services is in a time of exaltation and even joy. Here it is only linked to the very broad term "prayer." What kind of prayer? We must turn to the rest of Scripture to see if there is a Biblical pattern.

The only other passage in the NT that refers to the use of hands in worship or with a prayer is Luke 24:50. Here, Christ lifts His hands as He blesses the apostles. Christ is not requesting that the Father bless them, but rather He is performing the blessing Himself. This is not prescriptive for us in that it is not a prayer; rather it is a unique role of the Son just before He ascends into heaven. In contrast, the OT has numerous references.

### III. GENESIS 14:22

*And Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have sworn [literally, lifted my hand] to the Lord God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth."*

Abram tells the king of Sodom that he has lifted up his hand to the Lord. The lifted hand is a sign of an oath. Both the NASB and the NIV take the liberty of translating the phrase as a figure of speech. Thus the literal "I have lifted my hand" becomes "I have sworn" in the NASB and the NIV adds the explanatory phrase, "and I have taken an oath." Here it is not an act of prayer. It is a legal sign of the intent of the one giving the oath. Abram was making the promise before his highest authority.

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<sup>6</sup> Gordon Fee, *First and Second Timothy* (San Francisco: Harper Row, 1984), 36.

## IV. DEUTERONOMY 32:40

*Indeed, I lift up my hand to heaven, and say, as I live forever.*

Within the context of a poem, Moses is affirming that God will bring justice. He does this by using the image of God taking an oath with an uplifted hand. Here again an uplifted hand is seen not as an act of prayer but a legal affirmation of one's intent.

## V. FIRST KINGS 8:22FF.

*(22) Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord  
in the presence of all the assembly of Israel  
and spread out his hands toward heaven.*

*(38) "Whatever prayer or supplication is made by any man or by  
all Thy people Israel, each knowing the affliction of his own heart,  
and spreading his hands toward this house.*

*(54) And it came about that when Solomon had finished praying  
this entire prayer and supplication to the Lord, he arose from be-  
fore the altar of the Lord, from kneeling on his knees with his  
hands spread toward heaven.*

Solomon is dedicating the temple to the Lord. As he prays in front of the assembled congregation he stands before the altar and spreads his hands out toward heaven. The word for hands here is more specifically the palms of the hands. This clear act of prayer is a long request for God's action on behalf of Israel in hypothetical future situations. All the situations mentioned are times of great need. This lifting of hands then is not an offering of praise it is a request for help. This is reinforced in v 38 when an individual is seen as lifting up his hands with an afflicted heart.

## VI. EZRA 9:5

*Then, at evening sacrifice, I rose from my self abasement, with my  
tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread  
out to the Lord my God and prayed.*

The children of Israel are returning to the land after the exile which is not just geographical, but also spiritual. Just as they left Babylon they should leave sin behind them. Here Ezra is confessing, on behalf of the nation, the sin of intermarriage. Though he himself is not guilty, he leads the people to be contrite and sorrowful for their sin through example, and through recognizing the cooperate ramifications for individual sin. Ezra lifts his hands in confession and lament.

## VII. NEHEMIAH 8:6

*Ezra Praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen!, Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.*

Chronologically this general reading occurred before the specific confession of intermarriage in Ezra. Reconciling the time line for the two books we see that the general reading of the Pentateuch exposes the specific sin of intermarriage. As the word was read, the people lifted hands and shouted "Amen." This response to the general reading of God's law seems at first to be one of exuberance and praise. We must not take the modern practice, most common in smaller churches, of saying "amen" which expresses a joyful affirmation, to color our view of the Israelites' response. Here the nation is agreeing with the reading of the God's words to them, but their attitude is revealed as they fall prostrate before God. This mournful attitude is confirmed when the leaders instruct them not to mourn. This agreement of the people results not so much in hands lifted in exuberance, but rather the hands were lifted as they fell on their faces. It is a time of lament and grieving (v10).

The OT narratives present these examples, some in a worship setting, and others in a judicial or legal setting. Hands lifted in a judicial setting expressed affirmation or brought weight to the oath that was being uttered. In contrast, hands lifted in worship expressed lament. Thus, we can say these OT narrative examples lead us to assume that lifting hands in worship was an expression of lament. Perhaps, more apt for our discussion of worship practices is the Hebrew hymnbook.

## VIII. PSALM 28:2

*Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help,  
as I lift up my hands towards your Most Holy Place.*

David, in this lament Psalm, is lifting his hands in the direction of Jerusalem or the Holy of Holies. The rest of the psalm contains a highly emotional request. It is clear that David is in deep despair. The despair that he feels is expressed with his body in the lifting of his hands. His anxiety is that he would not become “like those who go down to the pit.” He is stating his fear of death. This psalm presents the very core of a man struggling with his life.

The direction of his reaching is significant. The “most holy place” is a reference to the Holy of Holies.<sup>7</sup> In David’s thinking this was the special dwelling place of God. The Jewish mind knew that God could not be contained in one place, but this place gave a point of reference. David, in a time of despair, prayed and used his hands to reach toward God’s reference point in his culture.

## IX. PSALM 44:20

*If we had forgotten the name of our God,  
Or spread out our hands to a foreign god,*

This psalm is also a lament but on a much larger scale. It is a national lament that follows a military defeat.<sup>8</sup> The reference is not directed toward YHWH, but rather in a denial that the nation “spread out their hands” to foreign gods. This would have been an act of pleading for help during a time of war. The psalm is lamenting the fact that the nation did not appeal to other gods and yet they were defeated. It is evident that the act of lifting or spreading hands in association with prayer came at a time of despair.

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1983), 238.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

## X. PSALM 63:4

*I will praise you as long as I live,  
And in your name I will lift up my hands.*

This psalm is described as a trust psalm or as an individual lament.<sup>9</sup> It has a theme of hope but this hope or trust comes out of a time of despair. David states: “In your name I will lift up my hands.” At first, it seems this a time of exuberant praise, but the psalm begins, “O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” This is in contrast with the immediate context of verses 3-4a, but it is still within the context of a lament. The hands lifted to God again occur in association with a time of despair.

## XI. PSALM 88:9

*My eyes dim with grief, I call to you,  
O Lord, every day: I spread out my hands to you.*

The psalmist is Heman the Ezrahite, who was the leader of the Korahite guild. Apparently from I Chronicles, this was a type of choir of which Heman was the director. This trained musician in this lament is spreading out his hands to God in an act of despair, much as David did in Psalm 63. Here, hands are used to help express deep despair. “I spread out my hands to you.” “Do you show your wonders to the dead?” Vv 9-10. This is despair to the point of death. Again it is seen that the hands are used in a prayer during a time of extreme distress.

## XII. PSALM 134:2

*Lift up your hands in the sanctuary  
and praise the Lord*

This exhortation to lift up hands and praise God is directed to a specific group, described as those “who minister by night in the house of the Lord.” These are those priests who guarded the Temple at night.<sup>10</sup> Ap-

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<sup>9</sup> Bernhard Anderson, *Out of the Depths* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 175.

<sup>10</sup> Allen P. Ross, “Psalms” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, OT Edition, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Dallas, TX: Victor, 1985), 888.



parently the worshiper is visiting the Temple at night, or had in the past and wanted to address those who were there.

By examining the words used for night and evening it can be seen that the worshiper was worshipping at an unusual time. The Hebrew word used here to express night is not the word for evening time, when sacrifices were offered. Night, as used here, is deep night. It was after the Temple had finished its official worshipping. At times this word is translated midnight.<sup>11</sup> This indicates that the psalmist had visited or was associated with the Temple at midnight type of hours. It is possible that this worshiper had come at night due to a time of despair or perhaps it is a time of joy. Either case is an argument from silence for the Psalm does not clearly indicate why the worship is taking place at an unusual hour.

In this Psalm the use of hands in worship can be associated with despair or joy. While it is not conclusive, my experience has been that special times of prayer are called when there is a crisis rather than a time of joy. The night time prayer meetings are normally called in times of great need such as those that were called on September 11, 2001. The times of celebration and joy are normally during the day or at regular times of worship. It is possible, and perhaps more probable, that this Psalm is written with a crisis in mind. Thus the lifting of hands could refer to a time of need.

### XIII. PSALM 141:2

*May my prayer be set before you like incense:  
May the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.*

Once again the lifting of hands takes place in a lament Psalm.<sup>12</sup> Here the lament causes a prayer for God's assistance in maintaining a Godly character in the face of opposition. The extent of the struggle is seen in vv 8b-9, "...do not give me over to death. Keep me from the snares they have laid for me, from the traps set by evil doers." Again, it is an extreme type of despair for life as seen in most of the other references.

Without exception, all the references to the lifting of hands to God in prayer are associated with times of varying degrees of despair. The up-

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<sup>11</sup> Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 538.

<sup>12</sup> Anderson, 177. Willem A. VanGemeren, *Psalms: The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank Gaebelain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 847.

lifting of the hands in the book of Psalms is not in praise or thanksgiving but rather in petition. It is a petition of great despair rather than an everyday request that one might make to the Father. In the book of Psalms, lifting hands is limited to an exceptional request of help from God during a time of despair.

There are no references to lifting hands in prayer in the wisdom literature so we now turn to the last portion of the OT, the Prophets. Outside of the Book of Lamentations, the only reference to lifting hands in prayer is Isaiah's condemnation of false worship in which hands were lifted (1:15). Thus, the focus will be upon Lamentations.

#### XIV. LAMENTATIONS 1:17; 2:19; 3:41-42

*(1:17) Zion stretches out her hands:  
There is no one to comfort her...*

*(2:19) Arise, Cry aloud in the night at the beginning of the night watches; Pour out your heart like water; before the presence of the Lord; Lift up your hands to Him for the life of your little ones Who are faint because of hunger at the head of every street.*

*(3:41-42) We lift up our heart and our hands toward God in heaven: We have transgressed and rebelled, Thou hast not pardoned.*

In all of these the prophet Jeremiah is expressing a desperate calling on God. The first is a general cry for comfort. The second is crying out for the survival of children in a time of famine and the last is lamenting that God has not pardoned sin. As the title of the book suggests these are all offered at a time of deep lamentation.

#### XV. CONCLUSION

After examining all the references to lifting hands, some conclusions are in order. In the NT we heard Paul's desire for men to pray with the possibility of lifting hands. Since there was no further description of the type of prayer that was associated with lifting hands, we turned to the OT. The practice of "lifting hands in prayer" in the OT is always asso-

ciated with lament.<sup>13</sup> The only exception might be Psalm 134, but it is at least possible that this was a time of lament. At times, the lifting of hands is a very clear expression of lament. While other times, it is only in the context of lament, but, the context is always lament. So, it seems that we have a degree of confidence that the lifting of hands in prayer was a sign of dependence upon God most often in a time of lament.

As we hear Paul's word to Timothy to "pray, lifting hands", we must remember that Paul was well versed and well practiced in OT worship. Surely this has a bearing upon Paul's intent. Is he not saying that our attitude in prayer should be that of one who lifts his hands in a humble lament? The physical act of lifted hands may accompany the prayer, but is not necessary.

When I was a student at Dallas Seminary a senior student mentioned to me that the President, Dr. John Walvoord, didn't close his eyes during prayer. Somehow I could not image this patriarch disobeying a clear command of every Sunday school teacher. One day I decided to peek. I looked up during an opening prayer in a Theology class and sure enough Dr. Walvoord had his eyes open while he was praying and he was looking straight at me. If Dr. Walvoord could pray with his eyes open, then I suppose we can pray with our hands lifted. As joyful as many feel when they lift their hands they must remember that it may make others uncomfortable. Dr. Walvoord's opened eyes didn't offend anyone because those who felt that they must keep "every head bowed and every eye closed" had no opportunity to know that he didn't follow their belief, unless like I, they peeked. Scripture tells us to be careful not to offend a brother (Rom 15:14) and to maintain the unity (Eph 4:3). If lifting hands during singing, praying, or even preaching causes disunity or offense, then it should be avoided. In some local church settings it would be offensive to *not* lift hands, even during preaching. This issue is offense and disunity, not lifting hands. We can choose to put our hands down, but we must never put down unity. Though we raise our hands we must strive to never raise an offense.

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<sup>13</sup> Psalm 119:48 mentions the lifting of hands to God's commandments. The verses preceding and following are expressing joy and delight in God's Word. Thus, in parallel thought the lifting of hands in this situation expresses confidence and joy. This is in contrast to other references, but differs in that the lifting of hands is not to God or in prayer, but to His written word. Though this act of lifting hands is in the context of joy, it can still be seen as an expression of dependence upon the commandants of God.

At a previous church that I pastored, a humorous gift was given to a deacon who seemed to be charismatic-phobic. It was an *anti-charismatic kit* which contained a pair of gloves with each glove having a string attached to a brick. Obviously this playful kit was never used, but should we keep the principle behind it close at hand? Should we be ready to correct those who are lifting hands? Christ was very clear in the Sermon on the Mount that we are not to draw attention to ourselves when we pray. In some settings, lifting hands would draw undue attention to the person and thus should be avoided or at least tempered with restraint. In other settings, lifting of hands is part of the tradition and in yet another setting lifting hands is a new practice, but not offensive. While we must obey commands to maintain unity and not offend a brother, we must remember the examples of exuberant praise in the Psalms. Some of our churches have no sense of excitement in worship. Singing praises in the worship service is done with great restraint, but to shout for joy in the worship service is unthinkable. While the lifting of hands is not the point, a few lifted hands could help some of our churches breathe a little more deeply of the joy that is expressed in the Psalms.

So, is the professor who lifts his palms in a discreet expression of worship going against the Biblical teaching? Are the students who openly lift their hands while singing a song of praise in opposition to the Scripture? The answer is clearly, no. They are not going against Scripture. But let us change the question slightly. Are those who lift hands in praise obeying Scripture? Again the answer is, no. To lift hands in worship is neither prohibited nor commanded in Scripture. The Scriptures give a clear example of lifting hands being associated with lament and an appeal for help, but they do not give a clear command. The widespread practice of lifting hands in joyful praise rather than lament is not forbidden by Scripture, but neither is it exemplified. Thus, to lift our hands in praise is Biblically acceptable, but it is not Biblically mandated.