

Posture in Worship: The Significance of Standing and Kneeling

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The approach of the Lenten season provides us with a fitting occasion to consider the biblical practice of kneeling during appropriate parts of the worship service.

Kneeling is a universally recognized as a posture of submission and reverent self-humiliation. It is a position of complete powerlessness in order to beg for mercy. It's an extreme form of bowing—recognition of being in the presence of and under the authority of someone more powerful than oneself (Gen. 41:43; Mt. 18:26; Mt. 27:29). Kneeling can be used to show deference to a human authority, and it can also be used in liturgical settings as a posture of worship (1 Kgs. 19:18; Is. 45:23; Ps. 95:6; Mt. 17:14; Lk. 5:8; Phil. 2:10).

Kneeling can be an appropriate posture for prayer, especially in a situation of dire need (1 Kgs. 18:42; 2 Chr. 6:13; Ez. 9:5; Dan. 6:10; Acts 21:5; Eph. 3:14). However, kneeling is more appropriate for confession and penitential prayer than for other types of prayer. From the earliest days of the church, Christians have generally used standing with hands raised (1 Tim. 2:8) as the most fitting posture for prayer. In fact, the First Council of Nicaea (Canon 20) called for all Christians everywhere to adopt the practice of standing for prayer on the Lord's Day as a way of acknowledging the priestly access that we have before God's throne in union with Jesus (Eph. 3:11-12; Heb. 10:11-25). It's also worth noting that kneeling on one knee is traditionally a position of submission in order to receive a gift or commission from a superior (as with a king bestowing knighthood). Some traditions use kneeling on one knee during the benediction for this reason.

Be that as it may, Christians have—until recently—recognized that kneeling is the appropriate position for confession of sin. Worship is not simply about ideas, as if God only cared about our minds. As John Stott put it, we are souls-in-bodies-in-community. God calls us to worship Him with our whole being, and so our worship should engage the whole person. What we do with our bodies shapes us just as much (if not more) than the ideas we put in our minds.

I realize that kneeling would be virtually impossible for some in our congregation, and it is completely okay if people need to sit instead of kneeling. However, there are many who are able to kneel for confession, and so the Session has expressed their support of my proposal to adopt this practice in our regular liturgy. I realize that any sort of change is uncomfortable—especially kneeling! At the same time, this is an important element of biblical worship that will greatly benefit our congregation in the long run. Please let me know if you have questions about this matter or anything else related to our worship.