

Lifting Up Holy Hands

story by Tim Revis

Some believe it's a necessary component of worship. Others view it as unnecessary, or worse, as a totally gratuitous, emotionally-driven physical act. In some churches it is a perfectly normal and common practice while in others it may even be discouraged. The pendulum swings both directions and often extremely so.



Children Singing During a First Christian Church Worship Service

Is there is anything that gives us more pleasure than to see our child or grandchild come running to us with their arms stretched outward, longing for us to pick them up and embrace them? It happened to me just the other day and I freely admit my heart soared. Even my wife noticed the huge smile that suddenly appeared on my face.

Not long after that, I was taking a few candid shots at a children's program at church and captured a picture of a little girl totally absorbed with the praise song she was singing. Her little arms open and her tiny hands lifted up, I envisioned her running into the arms of Jesus for a great big hug. It made me wonder if God was smiling as big as I had recently done.

Since opinions on the lifting of hands in worship are often very strongly held, I thought it would be interesting to do a little research on the subject.

Having come from a Methodist background of over 40 years, the lifting of hands in worship just wasn't something one generally witnessed much, if at all. It's not that it was necessarily "right" or "wrong", it was just, well, uncomfortable and that seems to be where most people generally fall on the subject. In my research and conversations, however, there were those for which the subject quickly became a "we" versus "them" situation. "It's not what 'we' do, it's what 'they' do - over there."

So I thought I would turn to the Bible to see what scripture had to say on the matter. Not surprisingly, the raising of hands to the Lord in worship is supported in both Old and New Testament scriptures. For example, it is cited seven times in Psalms, with the clearest and most commonly cited passages being: "I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands." (Ps 63:4 NIV) and "Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the Lord." (Ps 134:2 NIV). In the New Testament lifting up holy hands is mentioned in 1 Timothy when the Apostle Paul provides instructions to the church at Ephesus on how to worship.

The raising of hands tends to follow certain denominational lines. For instance, most mainline, protestant denominational or catholic churches (reportedly in 7% and 18% respectively²) do raise their hands in worship. While those percentages are small, the raising of hands in worship is becoming more common in churches overall in America. In a recent study³ about the characteristics of America's congregations, the raising of hands in worship is up over 12% in the past ten years to 56.7%.

As an expressive/emotive form of worship one can see several variations of raised hands in worship. Whether done so consciously or not, these various postures are often an outward, physical expression of an inward, emotional state.

One or both hands raised above head, with the palms facing outward, helps signify an attitude of praise, testimony, or of giving glory to God. It may also be a posture of surrendering one's will to God and/or standing in awe of His majesty and glory.

Hands raised above the head, with the palms facing inward, is often a posture of receiving – praising God and receiving His grace, love, mercy, and blessing in prayer. Arms waist or chest high, with palms facing upward, is similar to hands over head with palms inward, which is both praising God and receiving or inviting Him to come and dwell in your heart.

I think we can all agree the raising of hands in worship should only be done as the result of a deeply heartfelt desire to outwardly express worship and praise, giving glory and honor to the King. Raising one's hands simply because others are doing it, or because someone told us we should do so, diminishes worship and is not pleasing to God. (Jesus cautions us not to do our acts of worship before men just so others will notice us!)

On the other hand, it's important not to let our pride interfere with our worship. Intentionally withholding or diminishing our worship to God for fear of what we might look like or what others around us might think, can not only diminish our worship but rob us of the joy and blessing we have when basking in the light of His glory. I'm reminded of Jesus' words to the woman at the well in which He tells her the true worshippers are those who worship in Spirit and in Truth. They are the kind of worshippers the Lord seeks.

Even though for many years the raising of hands wasn't a regular part of my worship experience, I now find it's an awesome addition to my worship. I realize there are those who might view me as a "fanatic" but that's okay. I'm fine with being thought of as a fanatic for God.

In the end, the decision to raise one's hands in worship, or not, is a very personal and one that, in either case, should reflect honor and glory to God.

Whether you raise your hands in worship or not isn't really what's important. What is important is worshiping (loving) God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all our strength. I encourage you to pray about your worship, do what it is in your heart, and what is pleasing to God. Don't ever let the sin of pride hold you back from raising holy hands, nor let peer pressure make you do something that is not genuine.

In either case, make God smile.

1. Ps 63:4, Ps 28:2, Ps 88:9, Ps 119:48, Ps 134:2, Ps 141:1-2, Ps 143:6, 2 Ch 6:12-13, Ez 9:5, Ne 8:6, Lm 3:40-42, 1 Tm 2:8
2. U.S. Congregational Life Survey, 2001, Deborah A. Bruce, Research Services, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), www.uscongregations.org.
3. National Congregation Study 2006-07 Wave II, National Opinion Research Center (NORC), University of Chicago, www.soc.duke.edu/natcong.