

Reverence in Worship

by David Stevens

Over recent weeks, several have asked me about the meaning of *reverence* in corporate worship. It's an important question, dealing with *how* we approach God together. It's also a difficult question, because there are varying opinions as to the meaning of reverence and its implications for our times of corporate worship as a church family.

The American College Dictionary defines "reverence" as: "the feeling or attitude of deep respect tinged with awe."¹ Given this current definition and understanding, one might conclude that certain expressions (*i.e.* clapping, raising of the hands, celebratory and spontaneous expressions of joy) are *irreverent* and therefore not acceptable forms of worship.

In this short study, let's explore what the Bible has to say about the subject of reverence in worship. We do want to be sure that we are guided by the Bible (which is our final authority) and not by our personal opinions or traditions.

The English word "reverence" is used seven times in the New Testament in the New International Version (ACTS 10:25; 2 CORINTHIANS 7:1; EPHESIANS 5:21; COLOSSIANS 3:22; HEBREWS 12:28; 1 PETER 3:2; REVELATION 11:18). More often than not it translates a Greek work (*phobos*) referring to "fear" (*i.e.* the fear of God). Here are three examples:

Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God. 2 CORINTHIANS 7:1

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. EPHESIANS 5:21

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. COLOSSIANS 3:22-23

It's interesting that in each instance the idea of reverence toward God/Christ manifests itself in *life change*:

- purity/holiness (2 CORINTHIANS 7:1)
- submission to one another (EPHESIANS 5:21)
- obedience (COLOSSIANS 3:22-23)

The emphasis is on inward motivations shaped by our view of God which consequently results in life change (purity, obedience, submission, etc.). The emphasis does not seem to be on a particular style or form of expressing oneself to God in congregational worship (*i.e.* somber vs. celebratory, quiet

vs. expressive). In other words, the New Testament meaning of “reverence” always speaks of heart attitude and obedience, *not a particular form or expression of worship*.

This is understandable, for the meaning of worship in the New Testament is so much more than our times of corporate worship on Sundays. As Paul reminds us, our worship that is spiritual is the presenting of our entire lives to God (ROMANS 12:1-2). This same thought is echoed in HEBREWS 12:28-29 which also uses the word “reverence.”

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our “God is a consuming fire.”

But again, in context the writer is speaking primarily of our entire lifestyle; his focus is not on a particular expression of praise in the gathering of the church. And this makes sense, for while the Bible speaks often of “reverence”² it also allows and even encourages a wide variety of worshipful expressions. There is never a hint that one expression is more reverent than another. For example, the following forms of worship are all mentioned and encouraged in the Old Testament (which, by the way, the Hebrew Christians were very familiar with):

- Kneeling (PSALM 95:6)
- Prostrate (DEUTERONOMY 9:25)
- Singing (PSALM 95 8)
- Clapping (PSALM 47:1)
- Dancing (PSALM 149:3)
- Shouting (PSALM 81:1)

Interestingly, what is noticeably absent is *silence* as an expression of worship! In fact, silent prayer and praise was *not* a regular Hebrew practice.³ This can be seen in the primary words that express the worship of God’s people in the Old Testament:

1. **halal** = “to make a noise.” That’s why Eli thought Hannah was drunk because she prayed without forming words to be heard. In ACTS 8:30, Philip *hears* the Ethiopian as he reads the prophetic writing.
2. **yada** = connected with the word “hand” *yad* means “to give thanks” with hands and voices upraised. Worship was very locomotive among God’s people in the Bible: hands, voices, dancing.
3. **zamar** = to make melody. Often with musical instruments, ranging from the trumpet blast to the clashing symbol to the sweet melody of flute and harp.

We see then that worship in the Old Testament was quite expressive and physical. It often involved not only the heart and voice, but the entire body. But this did not make it *irreverent*. It was all to be expressed in the fear of the Lord.

When we come to the New Testament, we find that the early church was a singing church. Passages like COLOSSIANS 3:16 give us some insight into the variety of musical expressions that were employed by these early believers.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. COLOSSIANS 3:16-17

It's hard to grasp the meaning of this passage without being reminded that the early believers gathered in private homes for their corporate worship. I sincerely doubt that a particular type of dress was required – they simply wore their normal clothes. In fact, there is good evidence to believe that many of these believers were still working on the first day of the week. That helps explain why Paul preached late into the night when Eutychus fell from the window of a private home (ACTS 20:9).

The service probably began in the evening after these believers returned from a long day's work.⁴ The gathering in the home was characterized by spontaneity, casual conversations, a shared meal, followed by singing, the exercise of various spiritual gifts (1 CORINTHIANS 12, 14), the ministry of the Word (as here in ACTS 20), and the Lord's supper (1 CORINTHIANS 11). But such spontaneity, life exchange in the context of a private home, impromptu songs, as well as the crying of young children made the gathering no less "reverent" than the quiet liturgy of a 21st Century cathedral.

What are these "psalms," "hymns," and "spiritual songs?" The "psalms" (Gk: *psalmos*) probably refers to songs composed by the members of the congregation, which they would then present during the worship gathering.⁵ This was done spontaneously and, from our point of view, informally.

The terms "hymns" (Gk: *humnos*) is only found in COLOSSIANS 3:16 and EPHESIANS 5:19 while the verb "to sing a hymn" is found in MATTHEW 26:30, MARK 14:26, ACTS 16:25 and HEBREWS 2:12. At least its first occurrence in MATTHEW 26 certainly refers to the singing of an Old Testament psalm, very possibly the Hallel psalms (113-118).

By the way, we must avoid the temptation to associate this term "hymns" with what we call hymns today. As already stated, the "hymns" Paul is referring to were taken from the Psalms. We must also avoid the idea that a hymn is defined by its date of composition or by certain memories attached to it. We have many contemporary hymns that have God-centered lyrics and are sung regularly at CBC, such as:

- Jesus, You Are My Life
- I Will Offer Up My Life
- Grace Alone
- Jesus What a Beautiful Name
- Knowing You
- Shout to the North
- In Christ Alone
- Shine Jesus Shine
- Before the Throne of God Above
- The Power of Your Love
- How Deep the Father's Love for Us
- You are My All in All

The term "songs" (Gk: *ode*) is modified by "spiritual." That's because the word "songs" in itself can refer to either religious or non-religious songs. It most likely refers to various types of Spirit-inspired spontaneous songs offered up during congregational worship.

The instruction Paul gives us in COLOSSIANS 3:16 is beautifully illustrated in the heavenly worship depicted in the book of Revelation. The singing in heaven includes both old and new songs (REVELATION 5:9; 14:3). In REVELATION 15:3-4, John mentions a heavenly multitude singing an old song, which is revised with new meaning and a new tune in light of the New Covenant. This is the "song of Moses...and

the song of the Lamb.” This may well be accompanied by dancing, for on this occasion in the Old Testament song of Moses, Miriam and many of the women danced with tambourines (EXODUS 17:19-21). Some of the new songs of heaven seem to even be accompanied by a shout (REVELATION 7:10). All of this recalls the joyful shout of the multitudes at our Lord’s Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (MATTHEW 21:8-11).

From this brief overview we see that there is a certain spontaneity and diversity that characterized the worship of the early believers. The principle seems to be that various types of songs and musical expressions are encouraged in the gathering of the church. Apparently, the early believers could *each* — irrespective of age and cultural background — contribute to the corporate worship and by doing so worship in their own “heart language” as directed by the Holy Spirit (1 CORINTHIANS 14:26). And yet such spontaneity and diversity did not make their gathering any less “reverent.”

In summary, here is what the Bible says about reverence in worship.

1. Reverent worship is more a heart attitude and resulting lifestyle than a particular *form* of congregational worship.
2. The Old and New Testaments encourage a wide variety of expressions (both vocal and physical) as means of authentic worship.
3. Expressions of worship in both the Old and New Testaments are often celebratory in nature. At least in the Old Testament, we find many examples where worship involved bodily expression (clapping, dancing, lying prostrate, etc.).

4. Under the New Covenant, COLOSSIANS 3:16 gives us the guiding principle and the book of Revelation illustrates that principle. It includes both old and new expressions of musical praise to God.

What honors God is the *state of the heart*, not the *form of the art*. May we all grow as those who worship our holy God “in spirit and in truth” (JOHN 4).

Notes:

1. *The American College Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 1963).
2. The English term is found eight more times in the Old Testament (NIV): LEVITICUS 19:30; 26:2; JOSHUA 5:14; NEHEMIAH 5:15; PSALM 5:7; JEREMIAH 44:10; DANIEL 6:26; MALACHI 2:5. The majority of the passages use a Hebrew term referring to the “fear of the Lord.”
3. Some may object and cite PSALMS 37:7 and 46:10. The latter reads, “Be still, and know that I am God.” But the meaning of the Hebrew text is “Stop striving in yourself...” not “Be physically quiet.”
4. See Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).
5. The term occurs seven times in the New Testament: LUKE 20:42; 24:44; ACTS 1:20; 13:33; 1 CORINTHIANS 14:26; EPHESIANS 5:19; COLOSSIANS 3:16. G. Delling, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 8:499.



8815 NE Glisan Street, Portland, Oregon 97220
503.252.1424 CentralBible.net