

# “Lifting Holy Hands”: Nuance, Nuisance, or Error? A Biblical Theology of the Practice of Lifting Hands in Worship

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Worship practices have dramatically changed in evangelical churches during the last two decades. Drums and guitars have moved from the Friday night youth services to Sunday morning. The choir has set aside its robes and hymnbooks and has shrunk to an ensemble called a worship team. Conservative evangelical members are clapping and lifting hands in praise. Even a well-seasoned pastor can be seen lifting his hands, though often in a discreet waist-level opening of the palms in an upward direction.

Some people are uncomfortable with hands being lifted during worship services because it is new. Others are irritated because they see lifting hands in worship as a move towards rowdy behavior. While still others are distressed because they see it as a move toward a charismatic worship tradition that they believe might be theologically incorrect. However, those worshipers lifting hands are not trying to offend; rather, 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 in the same way we all bow our heads in prayer? Should we ask people *not* to 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, a nuisance to be simply tolerated, or an error to be confronted?

I find the practice of lifting hands a personal encouragement. When I see someone so focused upon the Lord that they express their joy through the raising of their hands, I am moved. I might even say that I envy their freedom and their undistracted attention upon our Lord. To know whether to encourage or discourage this emerging expression of praise to the Lord, it will be helpful to examine how the Scriptures speak to this practice of lifting hands in worship. The following 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 this study is confined to an introductory biblical theology based on relevant passages, which will hopefully serve as a foundation for further study.

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## I Timothy 2:8

*Therefore, I want the men in every place to pray,  
lifting holy hands, without wrath and dissension.<sup>2</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, “exhort” (*parakaleo*). Here, he chooses “I want” (*boulomai*), as he does later in the book when he desires that the younger women get married (5:14). The word *boulomai* is more of a suggestion 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*, followed by an infinitive, *to pray*, and the *lifting of hands* is a participle modifying *pray*. The NASB translation best fits the grammar.

What, then, 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>3</sup> Thus, it could be that Paul has two independent actions in mind, praying and lifting 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. Grammatically, the participial phrase *lifting hands* could be translated as expressing action independent of the main verb, but it is best translated as an adverbial participle that sees the participle as dependent upon the main verb.<sup>4</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 describes 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>5</sup> Kent views the hands as symbolic of a holy lifestyle.<sup>6</sup> Fee believes the

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<sup>2</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> The great commission has a main verb followed by three participles. These participles 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 considered independent actions.

<sup>4</sup> “If a participle makes good sense when treated as an adverbial participle, we should not seek to treat it as attendant circumstance” (Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 640).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Lea, *First and Second Timothy, Titus* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 94.

<sup>6</sup> Homer Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 104–5.

point is not that men should pray or lift hands, but rather when they do pray and lift their hands, as was common in the first century, they are to do it without wrath or dissension.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, 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 during 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 New Testament that refers to the use of hands in a reverent context 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 Old Testament has numerous references to lifting hands in a variety of situations, several of which are examined below in biblical order.

### **Genesis 14:22**

*And Abram said to the king of Sodom, “I have sworn<sup>8</sup> 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.

### **Deuteronomy 32:40**

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

Within the context of a poem, Moses affirms 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.

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<sup>7</sup> Gordon Fee, *First and Second Timothy* (San Francisco: Harper Row, 1984), 36.

<sup>8</sup> Literally, “lifted my hand.”

## **I Kings 8:22ff.<sup>9</sup>**

*(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 before 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 verse 38 when an individual is described as lifting up his hands with an afflicted heart.

## **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 a geographical journey, but also a spiritual one. Just as they left Babylon, they should leave sin behind them. Here Ezra is confessing, on behalf of the nation, the sin of intermarriage. Although he himself is not guilty, he leads the people to be contrite and sorrowful for their sin through example and through recognizing the corporate ramifications for individual sin. Ezra lifts his hands in confession and lament.

## **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.*

As the Word was read the people lifted hands and shouted "Amen." This response to the reading of God's law seems at first to be one of exuberance and praise. We must not take

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<sup>9</sup> 2 Chronicles 6 records the same events.

the modern practice of saying “amen” as a joyful affirmation to color our view of the Israelites’ response. Here the nation is agreeing with the reading of 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. The agreement of the people results not in hands lifted in exuberance, but rather the hands are lifted as they fall on their faces. It is a time of lament and grieving (v. 10).

The Old Testament 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 Old Testament narrative examples lead us to assume that lifting hands in worship was an expression of lament. Perhaps the Hebrew hymnbook is more applicable for our discussion of contemporary worship practices.

### **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 and makes clear that David is desperate for help which is expressed 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” refers to the Holy of Holies.<sup>10</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 the temple provided a palpable aid in worship. David, in a time of despondency, prayed and used his hands to reach toward this God-ordained reference point in his culture.

### **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>11</sup> The reference is not an action directed toward YHWH, but rather a denial that the people had “spread out their hands” to foreign gods, which would have been an act of pleading for help during a time of war. The psalm is affirming that though times were hard the people did not appeal to other gods. The way of expressing that appeal in this time of defeat is, again, the lifting of hands.

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (Dallas: Word, 1983), 238.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

### Psalm 63:4

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

This psalm has been described as a trust psalm or as an individual lament.<sup>12</sup> It has a theme of hope, but this hope or trust comes out of anxiety that is so strong that it affects David physically. 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.” After an affirmation of God’s steadfast love in 2–3, he cries out, “in your name I will lift up my hands.” The lament continues to the setting of remembering the Lord in the middle of the night. Thus, the lifting of hands to the Lord is associated with negative emotion so strong that it affects the body and keeps one up at night.

### Psalm 68:31

*Ethiopia will quickly stretch out her hands to God.*

Thus far the references are to the Israelites lifting hands, but here even gentiles are described as stretching out their hands in a time of need. Here the people of Ethiopia, or Cush, are stretching their hands to God because of his judgment on them. A literal translation would be, “They will run their hands to God.” Most translations add the word “stretch” to give clarity, for the Hebrew only has the verb “run,” which gives a sense of urgency. The NIV interprets the image as submission: “Cush will submit herself to God.” Whether one takes the metaphor as showing submission or requesting assistance, the hands are still a symbol of needing the help and mercy of God in a time of great need.

### 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 Kohathite guild of musicians. As described in 1 Chronicles, Heman, along with Asaph and Ethan, was one of the three musical directors appointed by David. This trained musician in this lament is spreading out his hands to God in a cry for help much as David did in Psalm 63. Here, hands are used to help express that his life is “full of troubles” (v. 3), to the point of feeling that he is in the “depths of a pit” (v. 6) and even afraid for his life (vv. 5, 15). One cannot read this Psalm without feeling the extreme harshness of his situation.

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<sup>12</sup> Bernhard Anderson, *Out of the Depths* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 175.

## 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.” Apparently the worshiper is visiting the Temple at night, or had in the past, and wants to address those who guarded the Temple at night.<sup>13</sup>

The Hebrew word used to express when the worship was taking place is *lahyill*, which refers to deep night and is sometimes translated midnight.<sup>14</sup> This time would be after the evening sacrifice and after the Temple had finished its official worshiping. This indicates that the psalmist had visited or was associated with the Temple at midnight hours. It is possible that this worshiper had come at night due to a discouragement or perhaps 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, experience indicates that special times of prayer are called when there is a crisis rather than a time of joy. Nighttime prayer meetings are most often in times of great need, such as those that took place on September 11, 2001. 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.

## 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>15</sup> Here the lament inspires 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.” The depth of the cry for help comes out of the core desire for life. What makes this Psalm all the more significant in our study is that the lifting of hands takes place in a time of corporate worship. The evening sacrifices were a scheduled time for the Jews to worship and though the sacrifices might be

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<sup>13</sup> Allen Ross, *Psalms: Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Dallas: Victor, 1985), 888.

<sup>14</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 538.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, 177; Willem A. VanGemeren, “Psalms,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, ed. Frank Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 847.

offered for and by an individual, it was still in the context of other worshipers. So while the motivation seems to be lament, the physical context is corporate worship.

### **Psalm 143:6**

*I stretch out my hands to you;  
My Soul longs for You, as a parched land.*

Here the hands are not lifted but stretched to God, which seems to be a similar action to lifting. It is easy to see that the context here is also lament, for in verses one and two, supplication is made for judgment to be withheld. The following verses are clearly a time of great need for the psalmist, who fears going into the pit and needs deliverance from his enemies.

Without exception all the references to the lifting of hands to God in prayer examined to this point are associated with times of varying degrees of despair. The uplifting of the hands in the book of Psalms is not in praise or thanksgiving but rather in petition. And the petition is an intense emotional cry for help that comes out of desperation 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 crisis.

There are no references to lifting hands in prayer or worship in the wisdom literature, so we now turn to the last portion of the Old Testament, the Prophets. The majority of references to lifting of hands in the prophets is in the book of Lamentations. Isaiah and Jeremiah mention the practice, but lifting hands is repeated numerous times in the book that is focused on a painful cry to the Lord.

### **Isaiah 1:15**

*So when you spread out your hands in prayer,  
I will hide my eyes from you.*

God, through Isaiah, warns His people by referring to them as the “rulers of Sodom,”<sup>16</sup> indicating that their prayers will not be heard because they are living in disobedience. Again, this is not the context of praise but of God’s judgment against His people. One could say that the spreading of hands was an act of worship and praise, but offered with an impure and disobedient heart, just as the sacrifices were (v. 11). The sacrifices were certainly a clear command of God but were rejected by Him because of the people’s evil deeds. The spreading of hands to God may have been worshipers offering praise, but these worshippers are no example to follow, for the spreading out of hands to God is followed by the image that these hands are covered in blood.

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<sup>16</sup> John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 77.



## Jeremiah 4:31

*For I heard the cry of a woman in Labor. . .  
Stretching out her hands, saying,  
“Ah Woe is me, for I am faint before murderers.”*

Jeremiah’s message of judgment describes how the Israelites will act when the judgment comes from the Babylonians. They will run and hide, or they will try to lure the enemy like a harlot. The image is turned sharply and harshly to a woman, not one that is alluring paramours, but one that is in labor facing murderers. This lifting of the hands is not specific as to the object of the lifted hands, but the context is unquestionably one of great despair and need.

## Lamentations

*(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 each of these passages, the prophet Jeremiah expresses a desperate call to God. The first is a general appeal 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.

## Conclusions

After examining all the references to lifting hands in prayer<sup>17</sup> some conclusions are in order. In the New Testament we examined Paul’s desire for “men” to pray with the possibility

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<sup>17</sup> The following are other references to the lifting or the spreading of hands. These are situations that are not in the context of praying or praise to God. When referring to a person lifting a hand or hands, they are often a gesture associated with an oath or a blessing upon someone, or an image of harm towards a person. In some cases it is God’s hand that is lifted in action: blessing or judgment. In Habakkuk it is the “deep” lifting its hands apparently in response to God’s command. While I believe these references, when combined with those mentioned in the article, form an exhaustive list of some form of lifted hands in the Scriptures, I am ready to receive other references that I overlooked. These references could well be studied as to what they teach regarding the use of hands in oaths and blessings, and the meaning of the metaphor of God’s hand being lifted is certainly worthy of study. However, these do not have a direct bearing upon the use of hands in prayer and worship, thus they are only briefly mentioned here.

of lifting hands. Since there was no further description of the type of prayer associated with lifting hands, we turned to the Old Testament. The practice of “lifting hands in prayer” in the Old Testament is always associated with lament.<sup>18</sup> The only exception might be Psalm 134, but it is at least possible that this psalm was written in 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 the context of 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 study Paul’s word to Timothy to “pray, lifting hands,” we must remember that Paul was well versed and well-practiced in Old Testament 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 lifting hands may accompany prayer, but the attitude of humility and desperate dependence is essential.

Scripture tells us to be careful not to offend a brother (Romans 15) and to maintain the unity (Ephesians 6). 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

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Exodus 9:29–30. Moses spreads out his hands to stop the plague of thunder and hail.

Leviticus 9:22. Aaron lifts his hands to bless the people.

Deuteronomy 32:40. Hands are raised in an oath.

2 Samuel 18:28. Men lifted their hands against David.

I Kings 8:54, 2 Chronicles 6:12. Solomon lifts his hands to bless the people.

Esther 8:7. Haman stretches out his hands against the Jews.

Psalm 10:12. A request for God to raise his hand to help the afflicted.

Isaiah 26:11. God lifts his hand in action.

Isaiah 49:22. God lifts his hand in blessing.

Isaiah 65:2. God spreads his hands either in judgment or mercy.

Daniel 12:7. A man clothed in linen in Daniel’s vision swears an oath.

Micah 5:9. God lifts his hand against his adversaries.

Habakkuk 3:10. The deep lifts its hands.

Luke 24:50. Jesus blesses his disciples.

<sup>18</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 because the lifting of hands is not to God or in prayer, but to His written Word. Although this act of lifting hands is in the context of joy and not in prayer, it can still be seen as an expression of dependence upon the commandments of God.

hands. We can choose to put our hands down, but we must never put down unity, and though we raise our hands, we must strive to never raise an offense.

Christ was very clear in the Sermon on the Mount that we are not to draw attention to ourselves when we pray (Mt 6:5–6). In some settings, lifting hands would draw undue attention to the person and thus should be avoided or at least tempered with restraint. In some 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. Perhaps a few lifted hands, though not lifted in the same spirit of those in the Psalms, might help some of our churches breathe a little more deeply of the joy that should be part of our worship.

So, is a pastor who lifts his palms in a discreet expression of worship contradicting biblical teaching? Are congregants 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 these who lift hands in praise obeying Scripture? When a charismatic pastor quotes a Psalm and tells us that we *must* lift our hands, is he on solid ground? 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 demonstrated or mandated.