

Whatever Happened to Kneeling?

DEAN MERRILL

The scene is the main ballroom of the Washington Hilton, January 1991, where 2,000 politicians, captains of industry, and other notables have gathered for the annual Leadership Luncheon. The Gulf War is now two weeks old. Under the glistening chandeliers, necks crane for a bitter-sweet look at cancer-stricken Lee Atwater, one-time pit bull of the Republican National Committee, now softened and attending virtually his last public event.

On the dais waits the main speaker, television luminary and Atlanta pastor Charles Stanley. His text is the familiar James 5:16: "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

He preaches eloquently and fervently about the need for America to humble itself before God—as Elijah did, and as Solomon and others did. But near the end of his message, he creeps out on a limb. Without raising his voice, he muses, "What would happen today if 2,000 people got on their knees, humbled themselves before God, and cried out for forgiveness?"

He drops a few more hints and gradually the crowd realizes he's serious. He is talking about *them* getting on their knees—in their Brooks Brothers suits. He allows that some may not be physically able, but for the rest he says: "Unless God does something in this nation, we are going to be humiliated in some fashion, at some time. . . . I want to ask you if you'll join me on my knees . . . and pray until whenever the moderator thinks the time is over." With that, he turns and drops from sight. End of sermon.

The ballroom goes quiet. There's a gradual shuffle of chairs, and before long most of the crowd has followed his lead. A sober, reverent mood fills the room.

Out of style?

What Charles Stanley had the nerve to ask that day pertains to an ancient practice gradually fading from contemporary Christianity. Who can deny that over the past 25 years we have been kneeling less and less? Certain formal occasions still require it, of course: weddings, ordinations, commissioning services for overseas ministry, and the Eucharist in some traditions. Otherwise, we don't kneel before a holy God much anymore. Instead, we face one another and join hands. Kneeling is being replaced by our more interactive, "let's share" approach to spiritual matters.

Of course, it doesn't really matter, does it? Certainly God can hear us from any posture. If modern folk would rather not be bothered, why press them? The important thing is that they pray at all.

And let's face it: kneeling *is* a tad uncomfortable. With all the bad backs in America today, we wouldn't want to aggravate already-tender disks. Furthermore, it is rather unflattering, is it not? Nobody looks terrific from behind.

The great Reformer John Knox had a far more serious complaint about kneeling; he viewed it as a "Romish" deception. Fully justified Protestants, he reasoned, ought to face God with more confidence and self-assurance. (The example of such kneelers as Solomon, Ezra, Daniel, Peter, Paul, and Jesus didn't seem to count.)

Reasons to "bother"

Modern sophisms notwithstanding, I still find myself wondering if kneeling doesn't hold some value. When I get down on my knees to pray, the quality of my interaction with God is somehow changed. And I don't think it's just the nostalgic memory of boyhood days

when, as a preacher's kid in the Midwest, I knelt on a plank floor with the rest of the congregation at our Wednesday-night prayer meetings. I benefit from the practice now.

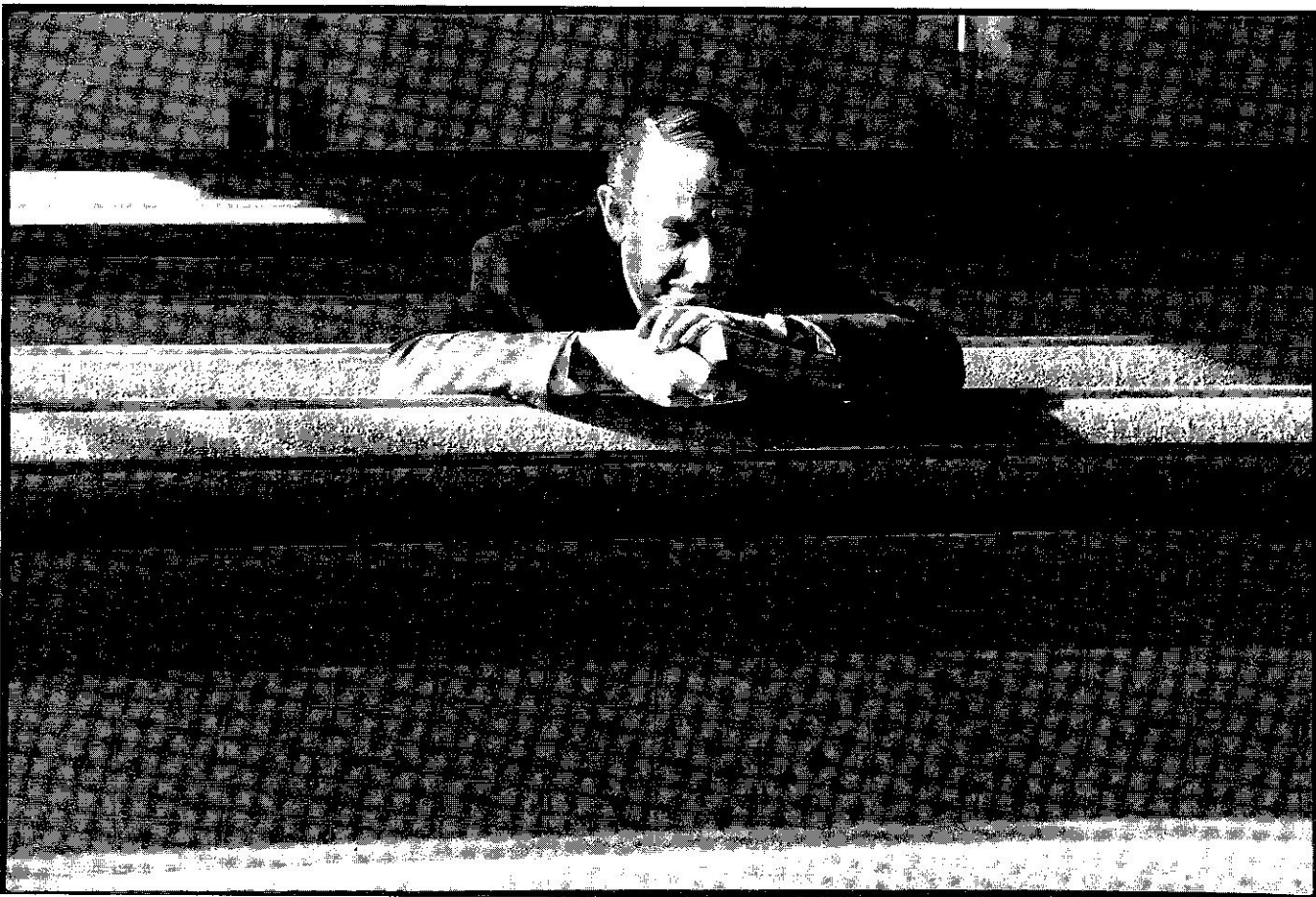
The biggest benefit is that *kneeling reminds us who's who in the dialogue*. Prayer is not a couple of fellows chatting about the Dallas Cowboys. It is a human being coming face to face with his or her Supreme Authority, the ineffable God who is approachable but still the One in charge.

Thus, kneeling is a way of saying: "I fully understand who's Boss here. Far be it from me to try to manipulate you or play games with you. I'm well aware of my status in this relationship, and I deeply appreciate you taking time to interact with me."

An analogy comes to mind: Last summer, our family moved to a new city. Having not sold our home in California, we found it necessary to rent. I hadn't looked at a house lease agreement in 20 years. Reading the three pages of fine print, I got a new education in landlord-tenant affairs: the teeter-totter is far from evenly weighted!

If I break something, I fix it. I'm not to put any holes in the ceilings, floors, or woodwork. No, I may not keep a pet. Yes, I have to keep all plants, shrubs, and trees looking good—and I hate gardening. If the landlord thinks a vehicle in my driveway is "unsightly," I get three days to move it—or he'll have it towed and sold. He can ring the doorbell for an inspection at any time. When I move out, he will be the sole judge of whether the place is in good order and repair. And if, when the lease is up, I move out a few days early, I don't get a refund. But if I hang around a few days extra, I pay a full month's extra rent.

Everything tilts the landlord's way. Why? Because it is his house. And in



that house, I am merely a guest.

Perhaps we should pay closer attention to who owns our world and our lives. We are not God's peers. We never will be.

Maybe we ought to revise that familiar chorus so that it reads as follows:

*He is Landlord, he is Landlord,
He is risen from the dead
And he is Landlord.
Every knee shall bow. . . .*

We have been better at singing "He is Lord" than at living it. Kneeling humbly before God, we can regain the right perspective.

Added benefits

I have noticed some side effects to kneeling that also deserve mention.

One is that *kneeling reduces our temptation to make speeches to God*. Our flowery, oratorical prayers just don't seem to fit the occasion. In addition, those praying with us are not in a position to appreciate our grandstanding; so we've lost our human audience. The sound of our voices is aimed downward, not outward. So we might as well be straightforward with God.

Another benefit is that *kneeling reduces visual distraction during prayer*. We can't see a whole lot on our knees. It

is hard to glance at the clock and check whether we "really ought to be going now." We don't notice other people in the room (or the church) quite so easily. Our field of vision is greatly narrowed, forcing us to deal with the Person at hand. Kneeling therefore aids concentration.

Finally, *better concentration leads to better thought and better expression*. When I ask God, "What do you think about this?" or "How should I solve that?" while I am on my knees, I am continually amazed at the concepts that silently enter my thoughts. It has happened so many times over the years that I am tempted to suggest there is a physiological connection between kneeling and clear-headedness. But whatever the cause, I seem to find the mind of God more quickly and cogently on my knees than in any other posture.

Of course, we cannot claim that God likes kneelers better than nonkneelers. And we can point to no Scripture that *commands* us to kneel when we pray. But neither should we ignore the practice because it is mildly inconvenient.

Nor should we discount the biblical prototypes. It would not hurt us to remember James, the Lord's brother and and godly leader of the Jerusalem church until A.D. 61—when he was

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stoned to death. According to Hegesippus, quoted by Eusebius, "He was in the habit of entering alone into the temple, and was frequently found upon his knees begging forgiveness for the people, *so that his knees became hard like those of a camel*, in consequence of his constantly bending them in his worship of God" (italics mine).

There are not too many camel knees among North American Christians, I suspect. But if we want to lead today's church with the steady wisdom and divine touch of James and his contemporaries, we might reconsider their habits of prayer and their posture of devotion. □

Dean Merrill is vice-president of periodicals for Focus on the Family, Colorado Springs, Colorado, and the author or coauthor of a dozen books.