

# DOCTRINE OR EXPERIENCE? A THEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF PERSISTENT HAND- CLAPPING IN CONTEMPORARY GHANAIAN CHRISTIAN PRAYER

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*Abstract: The phenomenon of hand-clapping at prayer meetings seems to have become so common across denominational groupings and congregations in contemporary times. Much as gestures are known and acceptable as a means of communication, this practice seems to have assumed a twist which suggests that it is a theologically appropriate gesture that has a catalytic power to ensure that expected results are obtained. The phrase; “sɛ meɔ mensam ɔ mpae a ...” literally “if I pray clapping my hands ...” is suggestive of this notion. The research therefore employed a mixed design in ascertaining the extent and the basis and reasons people assign to the practice of hand-clapping serving as a catalyst to receiving prompt responses to prayer. The paper concludes that the contemporary practice seems to lack theological credence as a biblical practice. It can, therefore, be best described as an experiential practice and not a normative biblical practice.*

**Key Words:** Prayer; Clapping hands; Ghana; African Christianity

## **Introduction**

Prayer is an important part of the Christian life and is believed to be the medium through which one can communicate with God and thereby invoke blessings and prevent the plan of the enemy from fruition. The practice of praying is pervasive in all religious traditions. Walter Brueggeman has argued that prayer is a common, ubiquitous and recurring human practice.<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee also considers a prayerless life as one of practical atheism.<sup>2</sup> Brueggeman and Fee are thus suggesting that, prayer is an indispensable practice of the believer and it plays a vital role in his or her life. In other words, it serves as a source of empowerment for a believer to find the strength to eschew all kinds of weaknesses in life. Highlighting on importance of prayer for a Christian,

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggeman, *Great Prayers of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 147.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1996), 149.

Stuart Robinson debates that the priority of prayer is stressed in the New Testament. To Robinson, Jesus emphasized on the preeminence of the Father in prayer (Matthew 6:9 Luke 11:2) and the more time is given to prayer, the more a relationship with the Father progresses and deepens in intimacy.<sup>3</sup> The implication seems to be that for Jesus, prayer was found to be a communion with God which can be likened to the way a son can speak to his father. The Son turns out to enjoy this relationship with his father and it inherently becomes part of his daily life.

In Ghana, prayer is an important fabric of the Christian life. The number of hours spent on prayer during religious programmes on radio and television, as well as the title or themes of revivals organized by churches on the subject of prayer testifies to the popularity of the practice. The practice of prayer is so prevalent that one can hardly find an unrestricted school field and a classroom that is not utilized for such meetings.

The prevalence of prayer sessions among African or particularly Ghanaian Christians could be explained in the context within which they live. Among traditional Africans, Sawyerr indicates that life threatening issues are mostly believed to be instigated by evil forces<sup>4</sup> and Okorochoa asserts that "it is at the altar of prayer that we find the sum of all his desiring – that is salvation."<sup>5</sup> This persistent notion of prayer as being a strategy to fight and destroy the plans of the evil one or destroy supernatural realities has hitherto, heralded various approaches people use to pray. Larbi cites Tabiri as claiming that "Binding", "Breaking", and "Bombing" are three strategies that the Lord revealed to him. Tabiri claims that after "Binding" and "Breaking", "Bombing" is the exercise that "completely destroys the force that is against the victim or the supplicant."<sup>6</sup> One of the most prominent among these strategies of prayer that seems to have attained prominence in its practice is hand-clapping.

It has become such an open practice in most prayer sessions of many Christian groupings today that, people engage in continuous hand clapping for one reason or the other, and apparently as a requirement for a more effective prayer. The insistence on the practice by some of the

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<sup>3</sup> Stuart Robinson, *Praying the Price* (Kent, UK: Sovereign Ltd., 1994), 25-26.

<sup>4</sup> Harry Sawyerr, *Soteriology Viewed from the African Perspective* (Nairobi: WSCF, 1972), 6.

<sup>5</sup> C.C. Okorochoa, *The Meaning of Religious Conversion in Africa* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1987), 51-52.

<sup>6</sup> Kingsley E. Larbi, *Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity* (Accra: Blessed Publications. 2001), 393.

leaders who instructs the congregants to clap in prayer, as this research has noted, gives the impression that prayer is made more potent when it is done accompanied by persistent hand-clapping. It is often presented as follows in the Asante twi language; “*sɛ meɔ mensam bɔ mpae a ...*” literally, when I pray clapping my hands, then there is the assurance that the petition will be fulfilled.

This again presumes that if one prays without clapping the hands nothing happens or certain objectives are not achieved. Cephas N. Omenyo and Abamfo O. Atiemo attest to the use of this phrase in prayer with the view of practitioners slapping the devil or whatever spirit is responsible for their reason for prayer.<sup>7</sup> The question then is whether it is a theologically correct interpretation or not? Is it a mere expression of emotions? Does it constitute a normative or an unconventional personal experience that is being presented as such? Could it also be that it has been employed consciously or unconsciously by certain people for other reasons than it is being portrayed?

Against this background, the paper intends to explore the phenomenon and evaluates its biblical-theological bases.

### **The Use of Gestures in African Traditional Worship**

According to Mbiti, African peoples respond in many and various ways to their spiritual world of which they are sharply aware. This response generally takes on the form of worship, which is eternalized in different acts and sayings. These acts may be formal or informal, regular or extempore, communal or individual, ritual or unceremonial, through word or deed.<sup>8</sup> It is, therefore, not uncommon to find in the African worship, spontaneous and practical expressions including hand-clapping.

Pobee affirms that this is reflected in the prayer practices of African Instituted (Indigenous, Independent) Churches (AICs). They are said to be “...primarily interested in the adaptation of Christian teaching and liturgy to indigenous cosmology and ways of worship; they stress

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<sup>7</sup> Cephas N. Omenyo and Abamfo O. Atiemo, “Claiming Religious Space: The Case of Neo-Propheticism in Ghana,” *Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 1, no. 1 (2006), 55-68

<sup>8</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 58.

expressive and emotional phenomena and cater for strong fears of witchcraft among Africans.”<sup>9</sup>

Pobee further indicates that all AICs have exuberant styles of worship which engage everyone present in song, clapping and prayer. Mbiti adds that, through music, singing and dancing accompanied by clapping of hands and beating of drums, people are able to participate emotionally and physically in the act of worship.<sup>10</sup> Shoko shares this view and adds that it facilitates the active participation of members.<sup>11</sup>

Hand-clapping can therefore be said to be acceptable in African Traditional religious practice as a means of facilitating the active emotional and physical participation of members in the worship.

### The Use of Gestures in Christian Prayer

The use of gestures has been an important part of worship since the earliest days of the church. Prayer is cited as one of the practices in which gestures play an important role.<sup>12</sup> In an article titled *Religious Symbolism and Iconography*, Goldammer notes that gestures and bodily movements play an important part in religious ritual and in religious conduct. Such behavior, he asserts, derives its meaning from the believer’s relationship to the holy.<sup>13</sup>

Catholics and, to some extent, Anglicans are particularly known to employ some gestures such as the *orans*<sup>14</sup> and *genuflection*,<sup>15</sup> among others, in their liturgy.

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<sup>9</sup> John S. Pobee, “African Instituted (Independent) Churches,” in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 61

<sup>11</sup> Tabona Shoko, *Karanga Indigenous Religion in Zimbabwe: Health and Well-Being* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 104

<sup>12</sup> “Gesture in Prayer,” <http://www.loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/prayer/personal-prayer-life/different-ways-to-pray/gesture-in-prayer>

<sup>13</sup> Kurt M.A. Goldammer, *Religious Symbolism and Iconography*, <http://www.britannica.com/topic/religious-symbolism> Last updated 12-7-2016. Retrieved 04-05-2017.

<sup>14</sup> Orans is a type of gesture during prayer in which the hands are raised, set apart, and the palms face outward. See Haymond Bryce, *Early Christian Orant Gesture in Prayer*, <http://www.templestudy.com/2008/02/12/early-christian-orant-gesture-in-prayer/>

<sup>15</sup> Genuflection is a traditional act of honor or worship. It consists of bending one knee to the ground. To genuflect is to drop to one knee and rise, an act customary in the Middle Ages, when respect for a king or noble was demonstrated by going down on one knee, often remaining there until told to rise. See Ron Rhodes, *Reasoning from the Scriptures with Catholics* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2000)

In Catholic prayer, some of these postures and gestures are accepted as prayer positions which are observed for various reasons. Among them are; sitting which is a posture of the body and implies listening or observing and standing at significant moments or to express more active participation. The head when held up high is also a posture in singing and when bowed low depicts reverence, such as before receiving Communion.<sup>16</sup> The eyes are not left out in prayer gestures. To open the eyes during liturgy is to experience the spectacle of public worship, but they are often closed in private prayer so that attention can be focused on God.

With the hands, reverence is portrayed when closed, but we might hold our hands open to receive the elements in Communion. The arms are sometimes raised in prayer as a plea to God. It can also be clasped or folded together before the heart. Such a prayer gesture is a symbol of obedience, submission, sincerity and repentance according to Donghi. Falling on the knees is also one of the gestures or postures which is done at special moments of great reverence, such as during the Canon of the Mass, and genuflection on the knees is also done before the Blessed Sacrament. Walking is also another of the gestures which is performed during processions or when praying the Stations of the Cross.<sup>17</sup>

As to the need of all these gestures, Longmans explains that prayer should involve our entire persons - not just our souls and spirits but our bodies as well. He then goes further to explain some more of these gestures and positions of prayer:

Laying flat on the floor, face down, with hands stretched out (also known as '*prostrate*'); standing, hands raised and spread, palms up, looking upward; standing, head bowed, eyes closed; sitting, head bowed, eyes closed, hands folded (the most common position today); kneeling, head bowed, hands folded; kneeling, head to the ground, hands face down on ground next to head; standing, eyes forward, facing the altar; sitting eyes closed, hands in front, palms up; laying flat on the floor, face up, palms up; slow leisurely walking (or sitting),

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<sup>16</sup> "Gesture in Prayer," <http://www.loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/prayer/personal-prayer-life/different-ways-to-pray/gesture-in-prayer>

<sup>17</sup> Antonio Donghi, *Words and Gestures in the Liturgy* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2009).

eyes open, in a place where one can safely pay very little attention to where one is going.<sup>18</sup>

Various postures, gestures and positions in prayer are clearly employed with diverse reasons and special meanings to believers. Standing with hands raised is typical of praise, celebrative prayer and thanks-giving. Kneeling and prostration show humility and recognition of a superior, and thus are especially well-suited to prayers of confession, repentance or awe.<sup>19</sup>

It is very clear from the foregoing discussion that gestures and postures feature in some Christian prayers prominently but mostly these are typical of the Catholics as the sources clearly indicate. When it comes to the contemporary situation, the type of gestures that are normally seen across the Christian divide are not these liturgical types but spontaneous expressions of emotionally attached gestures which suggest catalytic intentions.

### **Hand-Clapping in Prayer: Some Suggestive Biblical References**

With the exception of the tenth scripture text in the list below, Colley indicates that there are nine instances where clapping of hands is mentioned in the New King James' translation of the Bible. These are:

2 Kings 11:12; Job 27:23; 34:37; Psalm 47:1; 98:8; Isaiah 55:12; Lamentations 2:15; Ezekiel 25:6; Nahum 3:19; Ezekiel 6:11.<sup>20</sup>

He continues to posit that none of the references, all of which are in the Old Testament, points to hand clapping being done during worship to God. Most occurrences show God's enemies clapping. Two symbolically show floods and trees clapping. And in one instance, David encouraged the Israelites to clap their hands while they shouted to God in their excitements over military triumph.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> R. Longman, *Body Positions for Prayer*, [http://www.stjosephsite.com/SJS\\_Articles\\_prayin-hands.htm](http://www.stjosephsite.com/SJS_Articles_prayin-hands.htm)

<sup>19</sup> "Prayer Positions: Getting your Body into it." <http://www.spirithome.com/prayer-positions.html>

<sup>20</sup> Ezekiel 6:11 was not cited by Colley but was cited by many of the practitioners sampled as a biblical basis.

<sup>21</sup> Glenn Colley, *"Clapping, Shouting, Dancing in Worship: God Hath Spoken, Affirming Truth and Reproving Error"* (Memphis, TN: Memphis School of Preaching, 1999), 594-595.

Having identified some of the possible scriptural sources that anyone who wants to appeal to scripture (not withstanding its appropriate interpretation) could cite to defend the practice of hand-clapping, it is appropriate to have a closer look at the terminology 'to clap' and what it means in biblical usage and in the specific contexts cited. This will then serve as the basis for analyzing the meanings that are assigned by the practitioners of the act of clapping in prayer.

### **'Hermeneutics of Clapping' in the Bible**

#### **Psalm 98:8 and Isaiah 55:12**

Let the rivers clap their hands; Let the hills be joyful together before the Lord (Psalm 98:8).

For you shall go out with joy and be led out with peace; The mountains and the hills. Shall break forth into singing before you and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands (Isa 55:12).

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, revised edition interprets "clap" as a term that is used figuratively to denote nature's sympathy with God's people. It cites Psalm 98:8 which is a call on floods to clap their hands and "all the trees of the field shall clap their hands" from Isaiah 55:12.

Wiersbe, in *The Bible Expository Commentary on the Old Testament*, further comments on Isaiah 55:12 as describing both the joy of Israel's exiles on their release from captivity and their joy when they share in that "glorious exodus" in the end of the age and return to their land. When the kingdom is established, all of nature will sing to the Lord.<sup>22</sup> Hand-clapping in this text is an expression of joy and does not suggest any impact on prayer outcomes.

#### **Job 27:23**

Men shall clap their hands at him and shall hiss him out of his place.

Scholars do not agree on the interpretation of Job 27:23. The New American Standard Bible reads, "Men will clap their hands at him, and will hiss him from his place," and most translations agree with that; but

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<sup>22</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: Old Testament*, 4 (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2001-2004).

the word ‘men’ is not in the original text. It simply reads, "He claps his hands against him." Who is ‘he’? Elmer B. Smick in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* suggests that it might be God, and that v. 23 should be connected with v. 13 where "God" is the subject of the sentence. He translates v. 23, "He claps his hands against them and hisses at them from his dwelling [heaven]."<sup>23</sup>

Whether by God or men, there is rejoicing at the destruction of the wicked.<sup>24</sup> The clapping of hands therefore is an expression of joy at the destruction of the wicked and derision or contempt at the wicked. The NBC adds that hand-clapping in this context is “a token of indignation.”<sup>25</sup>

## 2 Kings 11:12

And he brought out the king's son, put the crown on him, and gave him the Testimony; they made him king and anointed him, and they clapped their hands and said, “Long live the king! (NKJV)

The Biblical record does not indicate exactly the nature of Athaliah’s reign in the text cited but in the earlier verses there is an indication that Athaliah had usurped the throne of Judah and her reign had been described by Matthew Henry as tyrannical.<sup>26</sup> The verses preceding v.12 indicate a carefully planned *coup d’états* that removed Athaliah from power and had Joash installed as king in Judah.

The joy that greeted the installation of the new king in place of the tyrannical Athaliah is what is depicted in verse 12 with the people clapping their hands and shouting to wish the king long life. Clapping of hands therefore is again an expression of jubilation.

## Job 34:37

To his sin he adds rebellion; scornfully he claps his hands among us and multiplies his words against God (NIV).

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<sup>23</sup> Elmer B. Smick, cited in Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 972.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> D. Guthrie and J.A. Motyer, ed., *The New Bible Commentary* 3rd Edition (Leicester: IVP, 1970), 435.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Electronic Database, Biblesoft, Inc., 2006.



For you have added rebellion to your sin; you show no respect, and you speak many angry words against God (NLT).

For he adds rebellion to his sin; He claps his hands among us, And multiplies his words against God (NKJV).

For he adds rebellion [in his unsubmitive, defiant attitude toward God] to his unacknowledged sin; he claps his hands [in open mockery and contempt of God] among us, and he multiplies his words of accusation against God (AMP).

For the references in Job, I have deliberately cited the same reference from four different versions of the Bible to indicate the danger of possible divergent, literal interpretations that could be given to these texts. All the scriptural versions cited portray an act of derision or contempt or mockery as in Job 27:23 and Lamentation 2:15. It is true that in our days, clapping of hands largely depicts approval or applause, but in this context, it could also be a gesture of mockery and contempt. It was therefore an expression of mood which the NBC asserts as a token of indignation referring back to Job 27:23.<sup>27</sup>

### **Job 27:23**

It claps its hands in derision and hisses him out of his place (NIV).

But everyone jeers at them and mocks them (NLT).

Men shall clap their hands at him and shall hiss him out of his place (NKJV).

[God causes] men to clap their hands at him [in malignant joy] and hiss him out of his place (AMP).

Heavenor explains hand clapping in this context as an expression of anger aroused by something unjust as in Numbers 24:10: “Then Balak's anger was aroused against Balaam, and he struck his hands together; and Balak said to Balaam, "I called you to curse my enemies, and look, you have bountifully blessed them these three times!” (NKJV).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Guthrie and Motyer, ed., *New Bible Commentary*, 435.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

Janieson Fauset on the other hand, is of the view that it was rather an expression of joy for God's judgment on the friend of Job as in Nahum 3:19.<sup>29</sup>

### **Psalm 47:1**

Oh, clap your hands, all you peoples! Shout to God with the voice of triumph! (NKJV).

William Wiersbe comments that we have moved from "Be still" (46:10) to shouting, clapping, and the blowing of trumpets. He reiterates how enthusiastic Jewish worship was but adds that, they also knew how to be quiet before the Lord and waited upon Him.<sup>30</sup> Hand-clapping in this context, therefore, could clearly be seen as a means of expressing joy or jubilation for a favorable experience or event. It was to acclaim Yahweh as King.<sup>31</sup>

### **Psalm 98:8/ Isaiah 55:12**

Let the rivers clap their hands; Let the hills be joyful together before the Lord (Psalm 98:8 NKJV).

For you shall go out with joy and be led out with peace; The mountains and the hills Shall break forth into singing before you, And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands (Isa 55:12 NKJV).

Wiersbe again commenting on this portrays it as a joyous celebration of all nature at the coming of the Lord, the God of Israel. It will be a day when all wrongs will be righted, and all sins will be judged, and the Judge will bring justice and equity to the earth.<sup>32</sup> Hand-clapping in this context is also an expression of the joys of liberation of the Lord's own coming as in Isaiah 55:12.<sup>33</sup>

### **Lamentations 2:15**

All who pass by clap their hands at you; they hiss and shake their heads at the daughter of Jerusalem: "Is this the city that is called 'The perfection of beauty, The joy of the whole earth'?" (NKJV).

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<sup>29</sup> Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary, Electronic Database, Biblesoft, Inc. 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Guthrie and Motyer, ed., *New Bible Commentary*, 481.

<sup>32</sup> Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 2004.

<sup>33</sup> Guthrie and Motyer, ed., *New Bible Commentary*, 619.

According to Keil and Delitzsch, the clapping of hands and shaking of the head are expressions of delight and scorn respectively by the enemies and strangers who travelled past Jerusalem over her loss of beauty and claim of being the joy of the whole earth.<sup>34</sup> This is clearly expressed in the exclamation “Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth?” Hand-clapping, here, therefore, is an expression of emotion. Jamieson, Fausset and Brown share this view in their commentary on Job 27:23 and 24:37.<sup>35</sup>

## **Ezekiel 6:11**

Thus, says the Lord God: “Pound your fists and stamp your feet, and say, ‘Alas, for all the evil abominations of the house of Israel! For they shall fall by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence’” (NKJV).

In this text, we read of the prophet combining speech and action (pounding the fist -clapping and stamping of the feet) in his lamentation against the abomination that his people had committed. In 21:14 and 17, these actions represented God's response to the invasion and assault of the Babylonians. From the context, when Ezekiel struck his hands together, it symbolized the marching of soldiers and the clashing of the swords as God's wrath was "spent" or "accomplished" against His disobedient people.<sup>36</sup> The striking of the hands and the stamping of the feet were express instructions given to the prophet as a demonstration of judgment which the prophet had already enacted in chapter five.<sup>37</sup> Adam Clarke comments that it is a show of the utmost marks of astonishment and indignation, a dread of the evils that are coming upon them.

On the propriety of clapping and stamping of feet in contemporary Ghanaian prayer, making reference to this scripture raises contentions some of which question the capability of those who are either attending or conducting the worship of God. To be consistent, Clarke insinuates that they should copy the prophet in his other typical actions, such as lying on their left side for three hundred and ninety days, and on their right side for forty days; shaving their heads, burning their hair, baking their bread with dung among others. Clarke concludes that all these things, because they were specifically commanded, were proper to the prophet

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<sup>34</sup> Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: New Updated Edition*, Electronic Database. Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.1996.

<sup>35</sup> *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary*, Electronic Database. BibleSoft, Inc., 2006.

<sup>36</sup> Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 2004.

<sup>37</sup> *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Cook Communications Ministries. BibleSoft Inc., 2000.

but not a normative part of God's worship or the reasons for what God did.<sup>38</sup>

### **Ezekiel 25:6-7a**

For thus says the Lord God: "Because you clapped your hands, stamped your feet, and rejoiced in heart with all your disdain for the land of Israel, indeed, therefore, I will stretch out My hand against you, and give you as plunder to the nations; ... (NKJV).

This was a caution to the Ammonites from the Lord that because they had rejoiced at the defeat of Jerusalem, the Lord was going to give them as a plunder to the nations. Wiersbe<sup>39</sup> and Cook<sup>40</sup> among others, affirm this position that clapping of hands in this context was an expression of joy over the defeat of Jerusalem. The NBC describes it as an expression of their malicious joy at Israel's distress.<sup>41</sup>

### **Nahum 3:19**

Your injury has no healing, your wound is severe. All who hear news of you will clap their hands over you, for upon whom has not your wickedness passed continually? (NKJV).

This is also an expression of joy and relief from the oppression of Nineveh at her demise. Clapping of hands here is therefore an expression of joy and relief.<sup>42</sup> This view is shared by many other commentators including Matthew Henry in his commentary on the whole Bible.<sup>43</sup>

It is clear from the foregoing survey that, in line with Colley's assertion, none of the references that have employed the use of the word 'clap' or 'clapping' or any other forms of the word seem to reflect the notion that hand-clapping is an enhancement of the potency of prayer<sup>44</sup> neither does it suggest a normative practice.

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<sup>38</sup> Adam Clarke's Commentary, Electronic Database. Biblesoft, Inc., 2006.

<sup>39</sup> Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 2004.

<sup>40</sup> *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 2000.

<sup>41</sup> Guthrie and Motyer, ed., *New Bible Commentary*, 676.

<sup>42</sup> *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 2000.

<sup>43</sup> *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, 2006.

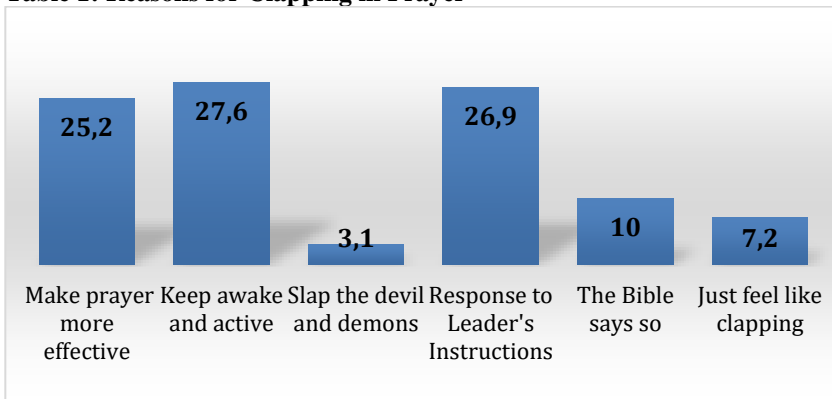
<sup>44</sup> Colley, "Clapping, Shouting, Dancing in Worship," 594-595.

### Reasons why People Clap in Prayer: Field Survey.

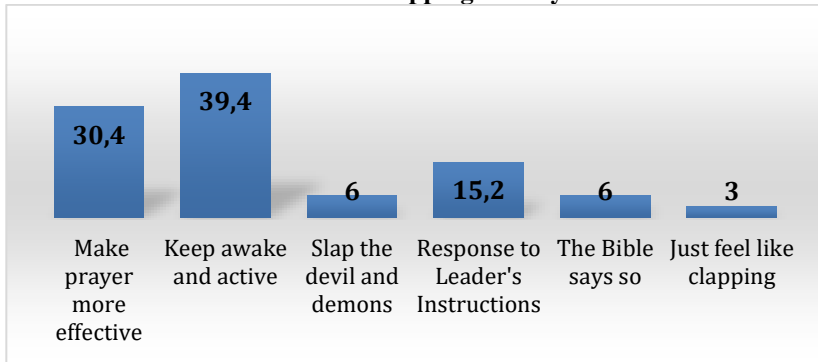
To ascertain what informs the practice among various Christians, a survey was conducted. Questionnaire were purposively administered to Christians categorized into Catholic, Protestant (Methodist, Presbyterian and Anglican) and Pentecostal (Church of Pentecost, Assemblies of God and some independent prayer groups and ministries). Six (6) Churches and Ministries which have regular prayer meetings were targeted and twenty key participants including the leaders were purposively sampled to give responses to six simple close-ended questions with a seventh option to give any other comment. In total, one hundred and seventy (170) questionnaires were administered and a hundred and thirty-five (135) constituting seventy-nine (79.4%) percent were filled and received back.

The graphics below show responses given by various respondents for why they clap their hands in prayer.

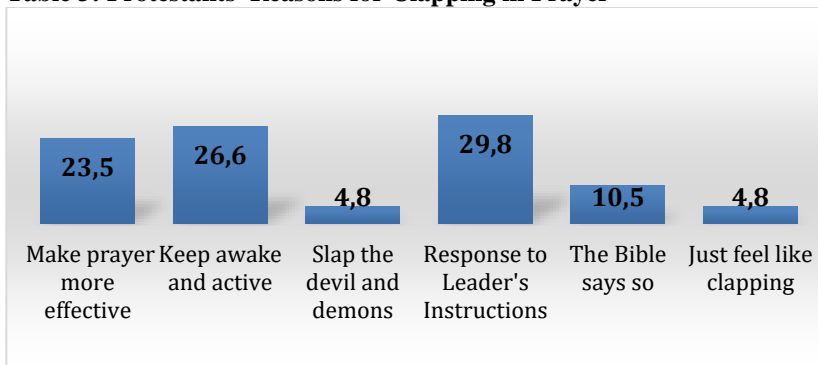
**Table 1: Reasons for Clapping in Prayer**



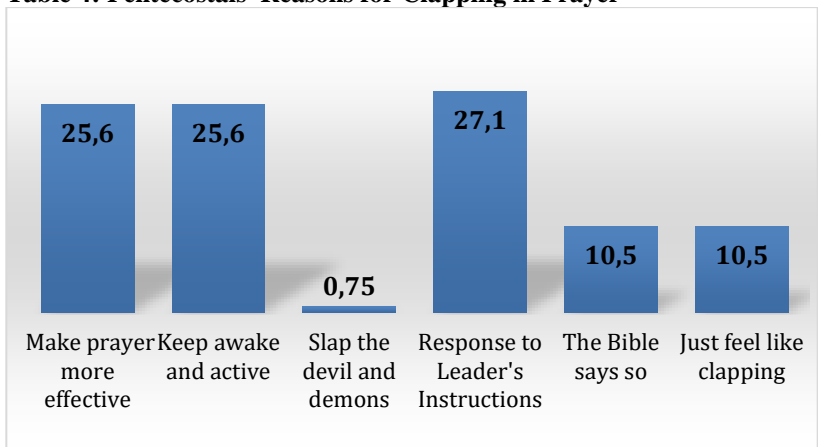
**Table 2: Catholics' Reasons for Clapping in Prayer**



**Table 3: Protestants' Reasons for Clapping in Prayer**



**Table 4: Pentecostals' Reasons for Clapping in Prayer**



From the responses, the three dominant reasons respondents generally gave for clapping in prayer were “to keep awake and active”, in “response to leaders’ instruction”, and to “make prayer more effective”.

### **Clapping to Keep Awake**

Clapping to keep awake in prayer makes it purely a physical activity that has no biblical connotations. That being a reason therefore, does not raise any theological concerns. Other strategies that are sometimes employed to keep people awake include; walking around, standing and praying audibly.

### **Clapping in Response to Leaders’ Instruction**

This raises a lot of concerns about the role of leadership in every activity. In Christian fellowships or churches, leaders can wield a lot of authority and some of their instructions could be taken as scripture itself depending on the congregation and their level of understanding. There are people who can go to the extent of imitating everything about a leader they admire including even the way they walk and talk.

To some people, to disobey the instructions of a leader is to disobey God. Some have actually been taught to hold on to this position where you do not question anything that “the man/woman of God” says. They would therefore uncritically comply with whatever the leader says. This is partly due to the respect and perceptions that some of the congregants have about the role of the pastor or leader. According to Gbekor, people who have problems expect their pastors to have some revelation, see some vision or perform some miracle to solve these problems.<sup>45</sup> This informs the reason why some of the congregants would do anything they are instructed to do by the leadership. There are instances where leaders have been widely shown on social media platforms instructing congregants to eat grass, eat dead mice, snakes, drink gasoline and other weird and unthinkable things that have no biblical basis at all and the people have gullibly complied. Without recourse to the reasons for those instructions by the leadership for hand-clapping in prayer, the fact

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<sup>45</sup> Christian F.W. Gbekor, “The Impact of African Religion and Culture on Christian Leadership in Ghana”, in *The Bible, Cultural Identity, and Missions*, Daniel Berchie, Daniel Kwame Bediako and Dziedzorm Reuben Asafo, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 100.

still remains that many have done it and are doing it in simple response to leaders' instruction as indicated in the survey.

### **Clapping to make Prayer More Effective**

This is an area that borders on the effectiveness of prayer. Is prayer simply made effective through hand-clapping? To be effective is to be successful in producing the desired or intended. Since the focus of this research is not so much on the effectiveness but the biblical basis of the presumed catalytic impact of hand-clapping in prayer, I would rather look closely at that issue. It is clear from the survey that not many of the practitioners' appeal to scripture.

### **The Bible Says So**

Generally, ten percent of the one hundred and thirty-five respondents appealed to scripture among others as their source of the reason for their practice. The dominant scriptures cited are Ezekiel 6:11 and Psalm 47:1 which were cited eighteen (18) and eleven (11) times respectively.

Considering the interpretations that have been made on Ezekiel 6:11, it is true that clapping of hands and stamping of feet are mentioned. However, there is no justification that it has any effect, whether positive or negative, on the response. The clapping of hands as the prophet was instructed by God to do was not responsible for the judgment that was coming on the people but an expression of indignation and derision at their sins. Gill comments on the hand-clapping and the stamping of the feet as gestures of persons in distress and agony, who, to show their trouble and grief, smite one hand against the other; or smite with the hand upon the thigh, as in Jeremiah 31:19.<sup>46</sup> The action was not on the initiative of the prophet but on the instruction of God to express His indignation at the sins of the people and the judgment He was bringing on them. It does not therefore constitute a normative practice in Christian prayer to catalyze the results of prayer.

Psalm 47:1 which was the next most cited reference in support of hand-clapping as in the context of this study is clearly an expression of joy or jubilation for a favorable experience or event. It has been demonstrated

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<sup>46</sup> *Gill's Commentary on the Entire Bible*. Online: <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/ezekiel/6-11.htm>



from the various interpretations given to the references related to hand-clapping that, the practice can be an expression of joy or derision.

### **Just Feel like Clapping**

Clapping in prayer as an expression of an emotion, whatever it is has no biblical connotations. The bible is replete of expressions of various moods of various people in various ways. The publican in Luke 18:13 beat his chest in deep contrition; Hannah wept before the Lord about her barrenness in 1 Samuel 1:7. Hannah's is just one example of numerous cries unto the Lord for various reasons. Jesus himself wept and prayed for Lazarus' restoration back to life (John 11:35-43) but it does not imply that to pray for the sick or dead people one must necessarily weep as a condition for the prayer to be answered.

### **Clapping to Slap the Devil and Demons**

Though a paltry 3.1 percent of the total number of respondents, the indication is that some people clap in prayer with the view to slapping the Devil and demons. None of those that indicated this position could appeal to any scripture but simply based on some experiences that they had heard others recount. There is absolutely no biblical basis for this as a normative Christian practice. It is therefore a purely experiential practice and must not be made a doctrine.

### **Conclusion**

The study has clearly indicated that much as gestures including hand-clapping can be, have been and are justifiably employed in prayer for various reasons, its use as a catalytic action which expedites the response to prayer as suggested by the practice under study, cannot be proven in scripture. Its use in contemporary prayer in this context can, therefore, be described as a pure experiential practice and not a doctrine of any scriptural basis. This calls for a lot of caution for leaders of prayer sessions in various church meetings. It should be noted from this study that, many are the followers who simply take any instruction given by leadership as direct instructions from God. They therefore do not question its veracity and biblical basis.

A number of these have become conventional practices in many Christian gatherings which over time are likely to be elevated to doctrinal status but without any cogent biblical or theological basis. As a tool to keep believers awake and actively participate in a prayer fellowship, it

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is absolutely acceptable as an experience. So can people employ it as an expression of emotion which does not contravene any biblical doctrine, but to assign a scriptural basis and reasons for the practice as having catalytic power to release responses to prayer requests is without any theological basis. It can therefore be described as an experience and not a doctrine.

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