

Dance and Worship

Sensual or Spiritual?

Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil.

Paul, 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22, KJV

“It’s difficult to get people to come to church” said A.W. Tozer, “when the only attraction is God.” So churches now offer enticements. Driven by the “wants” and “needs” of the audience, people come to church for “therapy” rather than expository-biblical preaching. Welcome to “the church of Me.”

Churches call their worship services “celebrations,” and offer a smorgasbord of attractions including rock music, drama, multimedia presentations and now liturgical, or sacred, dance. Recently, a website advertised a book with the title, *Dancing into the Anointing: Touching the Heart of God through Dance*. Of course, practitioners of all these so-called worship activities attempt to find justification for dancing into the anointing somewhere in the Bible.

At least two psalms invite the Hebrew nation to praise the Lord “**with dancing**,” to “**Praise Him with timbrel and dancing**” (Psalms 149:3; 150:4). They did it. Why shouldn’t we? If persons like David danced before God (2 Samuel 6:14), then why shouldn’t churches take cue from the king and do the same? But do these injunctions from Psalms and the example of David provide justification for employing liturgical dance in the church’s worship as advocates of it claim they do?

In the context of any “worship” based upon the Old Testament, questions about dance arise. Are we to bring sacrifices to church? Is dance, we might ask, a means of grace that can draw worshippers into the heart of God? For that matter, does God need or want the dance of moderns to praise Him?

Dance in the Old Testament

It must be known that between the biblical and contemporary worlds, there exists a cultural divide. The dance of today does not necessarily equate to the dance of that day. It does not follow that because God invited the Israelites to dance before Him under the Old Covenant He now invites worshippers to dance in the church under the New Covenant. The Hebrew culture was wedded to dance. Occasions for dancing were important. The feasts and sacred days of Israel’s religious calendar provided occasions for Israel to express their praise to the Lord via the medium of dance. At those times, even the bed-ridden were exhorted to exalt the name of their God! (Psalm 149:5). One scholar summarized, “Much of what we consider everyday life was so bound to sacral concerns in biblical times that the cultic/secular dichotomy is not as useful in classifying dance as the occasions on which it was performed.” [1]

As has been pointed out, those who employ dance in contemporary worship use certain Psalms as justification for doing so. But it should be noted that accompanying dancing, the psalmist

invited Israel to spontaneously praise the Lord *with trumpet, psaltery and harp, timbrel and dance, stringed instruments and organs, upon the loud cymbals and upon the high sounding cymbals* (Psalm 150:3-6). Mention of these instruments highlights the cultural disparity between our day and that of ancient Israel. If the instruments are foreign to our culture, then might it be suggested that the type of dance the Hebrews offered to God also differed? Do proponents of modern liturgical, or sacred, dance also advocate using such instruments to accompany their dance before the Lord? Or is contemporary “worshipful” dance choreographed for and then accompanied by softer, and perhaps, and more sensual music?

In the Hebrew religion and culture, dance was a participatory and spur-of-the-moment exercise of praise to God, rather than an artistic activity performed by dancers before a worshipping congregation. Furthermore, the invitation to dance was open to the whole congregation, not restricted to a performance by a dance troop in a worship service.

A Definition of Old Testament Dance

Dance in the Old Testament was processional. Of the several words used for dance in the ancient Hebrew language, the root meaning of the most frequently used word (Hebrew, *hwl*) means to “perform a whirling dance.” It describes the post-war emotions of the Hebrew people who expressed “the emotion of joy, particularly as the way to describe women who danced when their men returned safely from war.” [2] The word connotes spontaneous, as opposed to choreographed, bodily movements. As such, Hebrew dancing suggests something like the physical exhilaration and celebration NFL fans feel and demonstrate when their favorite team scores a touchdown, or wins a championship game.

Shall the Church Dance Like David?

In discussing the merit of dance in worship, advocates of it invariably seize upon the Old Testament example of King David. As Robert Webber defines it, liturgical dance is the “expressive use of the body similar to that used by David, who danced before the Lord.” [3] It is argued that, like David, congregations ought to offer sacred and celebratory worship to God through the medium of dance. David, says the historical record, danced “before the Lord,” so why shouldn’t we? (2 Samuel 6:14). The answer to this question lies in our understanding of both the occasion and the description of what David actually did before the Lord when the ark was rescued from the Philistines and brought back to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6).

The Occasion

From the days of aged Eli and Samuel, a state of war existed between Israel and the Philistines (1 Samuel 4:1-2; 5:25). Early in that war, the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of the Lord’s Divine Presence with the nation. For one-hundred long years the ark had been separated from the tabernacle. Initially, for several months it stood under Philistine control. Then, it rested for a short time at Beth Shemesh. But for the duration, the ark was held captive at the town of Kiriath Jearim. All the while though, the placement of God’s ark lawfully belonged in Israel, not Philistia.

When after Saul’s death and the defeat of the Philistines David consolidated his reign over Israel, the king determined that the ark should be returned to its rightful place, to the tabernacle in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 4-6). But while moving the ark, a disaster occurred.

Instead of moving the ark in a manner prescribed by the law—it was to have been shouldered by Levites with poles run through the ark's golden rings—David moved the ark like the Philistines had on other occasions, “on a new cart” pulled by oxen (Compare Exodus 25:13-14; Numbers 4:15, 20; 1 Samuel 6:1-21; 2 Samuel 6:1-11.). As the ark moved, Israel rejoiced with musical celebration (2 Samuel 6:5; Psalm 150).

When the celebratory procession reached “the threshing floor of Nacon,” the cart and the ark suddenly wobbled. To keep the ark from falling over, Uzzah instinctively reached out to steady it. In that instant, “the anger of the Lord burned against Uzzah, and God struck him down there for his irreverence; and he died there by the ark of God” (2 Samuel 6:7). In the midst of the celebration, why did God smite Uzzah? He died because the ark was not moved “according to the ordinance” of the Lord (1 Chronicles 15:13). In other words, the Israelites were breaking the law of God by transporting the ark in an illegal manner that they had learned from the pagan Philistines, and Uzzah touched the forbidden and paid the penalty.

Some lessons to be gained from this incident are: *First*, God's children must not imitate the ways of the world (i.e., the way the Philistines moved the ark) in how they conduct His business and worship Him. *Second*, they must not profane the sacred, and if for some reason they do, no amount of ceremonial hoopla will compensate for indifference to, or variance from, God's standards.

In the aftermath of this tragedy, and emotionally smitten by anger and fear over what had happened, David ordered the procession and celebration to stop. For a cooling off period of three months, the ark was stored in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. When it became apparent that God blessed Obed's household for reason of the ark's presence, David concluded that it would be safe to make another attempt to move the ark to its rightful place. To usher the ark into Jerusalem, the king organized a second procession. This time he determined to move the ark according to the law of the Lord, and not according to the pagan example of the Philistines. It was during this procession that in exuberance of soul David was seen “dancing before the Lord.”

David's Dance Described

David's Position

As the ark was being transported into Jerusalem, David's position was “before the Lord” (2 Samuel 6:14, 16). In that the ark symbolized the dwelling presence of God, the preposition “before” suggests that David danced in the Lord's presence. Yet such understanding does not exhaust the meaning of David's position. In the context, “before the Lord” means that David danced “in front of” the ark. As Youngblood notes: “In this context, ‘before the Lord’ (v.5; cf. v.14) is virtually tantamount to ‘before the ark’ (a literal translation of ‘in front of it,’ v.4).” [4] We understand that David's dance was processional, “in front of,” or, before the ark.

David's Movements

The Scripture says that, “David was dancing (the verbal form suggests rapid and repeated whirling movements) before the Lord, with all his might” (2 Samuel 6:14, 16). David's movement could be interpreted that that he repeatedly performed athletic spin moves—“360s” or “180s”—as he led the procession, or that as the procession and carriers transported it into the

city, David circled about the ark, [5] or that the king of Israel engaged in “an old ritual dance.” [6]

Added to his whirling dancing, the scene also describes him as “leaping” before the ark as it entered the holy city (2 Samuel 6:16). The word “leaping” (Hebrew, *pazaz*, Piel participle, signifying intense action) suggests “to leap, show agility.” When the two descriptions are combined (“dancing and leaping”), a picture emerges of David spontaneously and athletically jumping up and down in a whirling fashion in front of the ark as the procession transported it back to Jerusalem. The physical demands of David’s movements may explain why he “uncovered” himself by removing the cumbersome royal garments to wear only “a linen ephod,” an undergarment like that typically worn by Levites (2 Samuel 6:14, 20; See 1 Chronicles 15:27.). Track athletes do not run their races in their warm-up suits.

David’s Strength

One final point: David danced “with all his might” (2 Samuel 16:14, Hebrew, *oz*). His movements were physically demanding and might be compared to the most exhausting of today’s aerobic workouts.

David and Today’s Sacred Dance

One can only compare the spontaneous, athletic, and aerobic dance of David to the choreographed and scripted dance advocated within contemporary evangelicalism to see that the form, occasion, culture and motivation of it is a world apart from modern “worshipful” dance. Ancient Hebrew and modern liturgical dance simply do not belong to the same genre. So let’s stop promoting the use of sacred or liturgical dance in the modern church by referencing it to the example of David. On this point, apples are not being compared with apples.

When the dance of David is studied, it becomes difficult to see any resemblance between it and the liturgical dance of today. Robert Webber justified the use of sacred dance “similar to that used by David.” In his book *Worship Is a Verb*, he describes the dance of a young girl that he once observed during an ordination service at a local Baptist church, a service crafted and choreographed to present mystical imagery and symbolism to the congregation. [7] We need not fear this type of dance he wrote, because it “certainly will not turn us into worldly Christians, nor impede our worship or produce unclean thoughts.” [8] Assuming his point for a moment, that such dance will not turn us into worldly Christians or corrupt our thoughts, then neither does it follow that dancing turn us into spiritual Christians either. In fact, as is the instance of the “golden bull,” it may serve notice that something ominously unspiritual might be happening.

The Golden Calf

In that most often it involves bodily movement scripted to rhythmic music, dancing primarily appeals to humanity’s fleshly nature. Like the worship expressed in the ancient fertility religions, Israel’s passionate and physical worship of the golden bull was idolatrous. Exodus records that after offering sacrifices to the molten calf, the Israelites “rose up to play” (Exodus 32:6). The word for “play” (Hebrew, *tsachaq*) can possess a sexual meaning as when Abimelech observed Isaac “caressing” (*tsachaq*) Rebekah, or when Potiphar’s wife accused Joseph of attempting to “mock” (*tsachaq*) or make sexual “sport” (NASB) of her (See Genesis 26:8; 39:14, 17.).

Associated with the Israelites' sexual playing was their dancing. "And it came about, as soon as Moses came near the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing; and Moses' anger burned, and he threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain" (Exodus 32:19). Based upon this incident, Paul warned the Corinthians, "Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to dance'" (1 Corinthians 10:7, RSV). Warning: contemporaries who employ dance ought to be concerned that what they are doing is really "sporting," not worshipping.

The Absence of Dance in the New Testament

Having observed the cultural disparity between ancient Hebrew and modern sacred dance, it must now be asked whether, or not, the New Testament encourages praising and worshipping of God through dance. With the coming of the Christ, the expression of worship of God became distinct from that engaged in by the Hebrew people. As signified by God's tearing of the Temple Veil from top to bottom when Jesus died, the Old Testament cultus ended as the era of worshipping the Father in spirit and truth commenced (Compare Matthew 27:51; John 4:21-24.). In the worship of the church, any precedent for the employment of liturgical dance in the New Testament is absent. Even though people danced in the context of the Greek and Roman cultures, such activity never found entry into the worship of the early church, and for good reason. Dance was irrelevant to the simple form of worship embraced by the apostolic church (Acts 2:42). The transition from the Old to the New Testament marked a cleavage between the "spectacle" and the "spiritual" in worship.

Dance in the Apostolic Church

Hebrew dance was not used in the worship of the apostolic church. While its service order derived in part from the Jewish synagogue, the early church's expression of worship distinguished itself from Judaism for both theological and cultural reasons.

The End of the Old Order

Upon Jesus' death, "the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (Matthew 27:51). With the breaking down of the old order, the church grew to embrace both Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2:14-16). A new age had dawned, and along with it, a spiritual setting in which there would no longer be "Jew nor Greek," but rather, "all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). The Law descended from God through Moses, but "grace and truth" had come through the Lord Jesus Christ (John 1:14). In the ongoing drama of redemption, the time had arrived when the temple and its services would no longer be employed to worship of God because Jesus' death brought the whole cultus to an abrupt end. Those who would authentically worship the Father would do so "in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). The Lord's announced judgment upon the temple, its services, and its celebrations also served to nullify the old order of worship (Matthew 24:1-2).

With the obvious change of worship "style" between the testaments, it should come as no surprise that sacred or liturgical dance finds no reference in the life of the apostolic church. [9] If dance, as some moderns suggest, is a viable expression of worship, then why does it not find mention in or encouragement from the New Testament writings? Could it be because the ceremonial law and its practices had become obsolete in the life of the church? (See Colossians 2:16-17.). With the birth of the body of Christ, Jewish feast days and national celebrations were no longer relevant to the church's worship. In other words, occasions for dance had ceased.

Dancing into the Mysteries

As a religious observance and ritual, dancing to worship pagan gods occupied a prominent place among the gnostic religions of the ancient world. However, as has been pointed out, the activity is not mentioned in the era of the apostles (A.D. 35-100). Dancing began to be incorporated in the life of the Church sometime during the patriarchal age (circa A.D. 150-450). Of this intrusion of the dance exhibition into the church's worship, E. Louis Backman wrote:

[T]he Jewish dance ceremonial determined in a high degree the development of Church dances. But in all probability the highly-developed dance customs of the pagan mysteries cannot have been without influence on the development of the Church dances of Christianity. The terminology used by the patriarch Clement of Alexandria and Ambrose regarding the meaning of the Church dances . . . is the pure language of the mysteries and employs clearly and openly the terminology of the mysteries. **[10]**

If sacred dance was that noticeable in the surrounding culture, then its absence in the New Testament is telling. Admittedly, this is an argument from silence, but the silence is deafening. Perhaps, the absence of dance's mention in the New Testament can be explained for a number of reasons.

Why not?

First, the apostolic church did not practice dance because it represented the intrusion of "spectacle" upon what otherwise was its practice of a simple expression of spiritual worship involving "the apostles' teaching . . . fellowship . . . the breaking of bread and . . . prayer" (Acts 2:42). The early church distinguished itself by focusing upon doctrines to be believed, and not upon fasting, feasting, and festivals (See Colossians 2:16-17.). There is no evidence that dancing was practiced in the simple church of the apostolic era, and such apostolic practice, we might assume, would have been consistent with apostolic precept.

As to the difference between culture and Christianity, Professor Ramsay MacMullen defines culture as "the way of doing things." Christianity he describes as belief, and a Christian as someone who has "seized upon a doctrine" by which his life is wholly directed and shaped. The difference between culture and Christianity may be compared to the difference between folkways and faith. To the extent that the Christian faith remains centered upon the teachings in a book, the Word of the New Testament, the book then becomes the filter through which the Christian religion should be, and most often is, defined. MacMullen says that the role of Scripture "will screen out, it will simply not allow as 'religion,' dancing and other communal or individual cult acts." **[11]**

Second, the apostolic church did not employ dance because of its association with the old order of things—the ceremonies, feasts, and sacred days of Judaism. After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, the day came when no longer would worship take place on Mt. Zion with its required sacrifices, ceremonies, and rituals, but rather, would take place in a manner consistent with how the Father seeks to be worshipped; that is, "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23). The Father no longer seeks to be worshipped according to some outward form and spectacle, but from a spirit of inward faith. While Jews comprised the vast majority in the initial Christian church, the

church's practices and emphases were distinct from Judaism (See the book of Hebrews.). The tearing of the veil in the temple at the time of Jesus' crucifixion possessed tremendous implications regarding the passing of the old and the emergence of a new way of worship (Matthew 27:51).

And *third*, the church hesitated to use dance in worship because of its association with paganism. One scholar observed, "The universal importance of dance as part of the induction of new adherents into the mystery cults of the Greco-Roman period . . . made dancing highly suspect for Christian worship." [12] Another wrote, "Dancing as a religious activity was not prominent in early Christianity, probably because of its pagan licentious associations." [13]

On this point, it might again be pointed out how some contemporaries are employing dance. [14] Recently a symposium, celebrating the merger going on between faith and science, featured performances by the *Ad Deum* [to God] Dancing Company, a dance group that expressed "worship through dance at various times throughout the symposium." [15] Described in redemptive terms, the work of this dance troop was billed as follows: "God truly has a redemptive and reconciling plan for the arts and for artists to shine as a light in this world." [16] The dance group *Ad Deum* seeks to provide, "A visual fusion of faith and artistry, relevant and redemptive for our time." [17] Given that the "Arts & Media" is one of the 7 mountains Dominionists seek to conquer to "redeem the culture," and that the symposium's focus was upon the integration of faith and science, questions arise: What connection does dance have with the faith-science merger? Why include the visual and performing arts in a symposium dealing with merging faith and science? At first glance, the combination seems peculiar.

Was dance simply "an attraction" for what otherwise possessed the potential (considering the subject matter) to be another boring academic symposium? Or, was dance being employed in order to visualize what many perceive to be a growing connection between the cosmos and the human consciousness of it? Was the "dancing to God" meant to celebrate a "romance" that is taking place between faith and science, between physics and metaphysics, between the visible and invisible universe, with the dancers serving as priests and priestesses of the emerging new religion? Does dance function like a sacrament helping people visualize and experience synchronicity (i.e. spiritual oneness) with the vibrations inherent in the universe in both its gargantuan and quantum dimensions? After all, the symposium bore the title of, "The Vibrant Dance of Faith and Science."

Filtered Out

The early church discerned and filtered out from its corporate worship those activities associated with and advocated by surrounding Jewish and pagan cultures, dance being one of the religious activities that the apostolic church refused to incorporate into its assembly.

"Once upon a time" Protestants agreed that the Spirit mediated spirituality through the Scriptures as together they witnessed to God's works in history and to Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:21; John 5:39; 17:17). But modern evangelicalism is forsaking "spirit and truth" worship and turning to spiritual arousals stimulated by spectacles like those of sacred dance.

ENDNOTES

- [1] Eleanor B. Johnston, "Dance; Dancer," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, General Editor, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979): 856-57.
- [2] David S. Dockery, "2565 hwl," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Willem A. VanGemeren, General Editor, Volume 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997): 46
- [3] Robert E. Webber, *Worship Is a Verb* (Nashville, TN: Star Song Publishing Group, 1992): 194.
- [4] Ronald F. Youngblood, "1, 2 Samuel," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 3, Frank E. Gaebelein, General Editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992): 870.
- [5] S.R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Samuel* (Winona Lake, IN: Alpha Publications, 1912): 269.
- [6] Joyce G. Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988): 209.
- [7] Webber, *Worship*, 194-195.
- [8] Ibid. 195.
- [9] Some church fathers tried to justify dance in Christian worship celebrations, and did so by attempting to distance it from the sensual dancing performed by Herod's daughter, Salome (Matthew 14:6). See Johnston, "Dance; Dancer," 858. Nevertheless, dance is not advocated by the apostles in the New Testament as a means of sanctifying grace by which to draw the audience closer to God. Rather, it is a mechanical and mystical ritual employed to induce experiences in the souls of spectators.
- [10] E. Louis Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and Popular Medicine*, Translated by E. Classen (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1952): 1-2.
- [11] Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to the Eighth Centuries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997): 106.
- [12] Johnston, "Dance; Dancer," 858.
- [13] R. K. Harrison, General Editor, "Dancing," *Encyclopedia of Biblical and Christian Ethics*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1987): 101.
- [14] See Pastor Larry DeBruyn and Sarah Leslie, "Dancing With the Stars: The Vibrant Dance of Faith and Science, A Cosmic Two-Step," *Herescope*, November 9, 2010. Online: <http://herescope.blogspot.com/2010/11/dancing-with-stars.html>.
- [15] Billed as "How Science Supports Christianity and Christianity Supports Science," on October 26-28, 2010, in Austin, Texas, Christianity Today co-sponsored a symposium called "The Vibrant Dance of Faith and Science: Empowering the Church to Transform the Culture."
- [16] "Welcome to the Web World of Ad Deum Dance Company," *Ad Deum Dance Company, Relevant and Redemptive Artistry: Passion, Athleticism, Beauty, Grace*. Online: www.danceaddeum.com/.
- [17] Online: www.danceaddeum.com/id48.html.