



A

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to

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A Time to Dance?

by Tim Fisher

“If David danced before the Lord, then why can’t I dance too?”

THOUGH DANCE may not be an issue yet in your church or Christian circle, this for several years now has been the most-often-asked question I am faced with. The issue of dancing is not on the horizon, it’s already here. Evangelical Christianity has for some time embraced dance as a “vital aid” for private and corporate worship. Contemporary Christian music artists regard dance as a necessary ingredient in their concerts and an indispensable tool for evangelism. Consider the following statements:

“In Ecclesiastes it says there is a time for dancing. ‘Wow,’ I thought, ‘when is it my time for dancing?’”
“Dance gets people’s attention. It draws them in.”
(CCM performer Kim Boyce: *CCM*, 9/91, p. 12)

“Dance helps me communicate with the kids I am trying to reach.” (CCM dance performer Tim Miner: *CCM*, 9/91, p. 12)

“When Moses led the children of Israel across the Red Sea, what did they do when they reached the other side? They danced. They went for it and danced and sang and played tambourines because of the miracle God gave them. I’m sure Miriam and the girls weren’t belly dancing. At the same time, I’m sure it was very expressive.” (CCM rap artist Mike E.: *CCM*, 9/91, p. 12)

“There is a time for words. It has lasted from the Reformation to the present. Now we are sick of being inundated in an ocean of verbiage.” (*To A Dancing God* by Sam Keen. New York: Harper and Row, 1970, p. 160)

The acceptance of dance should not surprise any observer of modern church trends—on the contrary, it defines the direction the church has been headed all along. For the most part, the American church has lost the music battle—rock is not only accepted as the norm in most churches—it is encouraged and defended.

Consider this cultural/spiritual decline from another perspective. Those who travel from church to church observe that Hollywood movies are no longer considered “taboo” by the average Christian. If Christians don’t wish to go to the theater (and there are very few who even hold to that standard any more!), they can always stay home and see whatever they desire on their VCR. Even Christian homes regard the PG rating as “pretty good.” Should it then surprise us that, since these activities are accepted so widely in so many churches, dance should be forbidden? Quite the contrary: Sensual music and sensual viewing will inevitably end in sensual actions. Unfortunately, dance is just the beginning.

The defenders of dance here will answer, “But dance is mentioned several times in the Bible! Can you forbid that activity?” Let me make it clear at the very beginning of this discussion: *I am not against Scriptural dancing*. Though that may surprise you, let’s take some time and see exactly what the Bible calls dancing and how it was done, then we can draw the correct conclusions. I am glad to permit what Scripture permits.

One more word before we begin our study in detail. We are limiting our discussion here to the area of personal dance as it is distinguished from performance or group dancing. It is not within the scope of this article to discuss the dangers or merits of barn-dancing, waltzing, or slow dance. Nor will we consider ballet or other such performance dances. Though these may be areas of concern for some (and they may need addressing at one time or other), we are not considering them at this time. We shall analyze dance only as it relates to sacred activity in worship.

For further reading I would draw your attention to a book that I shall quote often in this discussion and was a great help to me when preparing this article. Though I spent much time looking up words and references before reading this book,

reading it helped me to further analyze and organize my material. The book is *Shall We Dance* by Brian Edwards (England: Evangelical Press, 1984). I should tell you that Mr. Edwards is not totally against the practice of dancing, but gives, nonetheless, the best and most honest discussion of the topic I have read yet.

If our discussion is to have any validity, it must begin and end in the Bible. "The Authorized Version is probably more generous than most translations in using the word 'dance' . . . and even then it only employs the word 'dance' twenty-six times in the entire Old Testament" (Edwards, p. 60).

The Biblical Evidence: David

The Scripture verses most often quoted by those who wish to defend the practice of sacred dance are 2 Samuel 6:14,16: "And David danced before the LORD with all his might; and David was girded with a linen ephod." "And as the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal Saul's daughter looked through a window, and saw king David leaping and dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart." A parallel passage for this occurrence is found in 1 Chron. 15:29: "And it came to pass, as the ark of the covenant of the LORD came to the city of David, that Michal the daughter of Saul looking out at a window saw king David dancing and playing: and she despised him in her heart."

The Hebrew word translated *dance* in both verses in 2 Samuel is *karar* which literally means "to whirl." In verse 16 we are also told that David was "leaping" (Hebrew word *pazaz* meaning "leaping for joy"). 1 Chron. 15:29 uses two words: "dancing" (Hebrew word *raqad* meaning "to spring about wildly or for joy") and "playing" (Hebrew word *sachaq* meaning "to laugh in pleasure"). In other Old Testament passages where the word *sachaq* is used (2 Sam. 2:14; 2 Sam. 6:5; Jer. 31:4; Judges 16:25) the word is also translated "to celebrate" and "to entertain," and even refers to fighting in combat! It should be noted that none of these three words are ever used in the Bible plainly meaning "dance." The word *karar* found in 2 Sam. 6:14 can mean "rotate" (*Jewish Encyclopedia*), "advance or spring" (*Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*), "whirl about" (*Oesterly*), or simply "move around" (*Young*). "One thing is clear: the idea behind the

word is swift action; the noun for a dromedary comes from the same word because of its agility. David obviously gyrated for joy” (Edwards, p. 56).

The word *raqad* can also be translated “to skip” and is used in Isaiah 13:21 referring to the movement of wild goats, in Job 21:11 with reference to a family playing together without care, and in Eccl. 3:4 as the opposite of “mourning.” In fact, since opposites are employed throughout this passage in Ecclesiastes, a more exact rendering of that verse might be “a time to mourn and a time to jump for joy.”

So using the example of David as an excuse to dance is extremely tenuous at best. Brian Edwards states it this way:

It may be hard to accept the conclusion, but to use David as an example of dance in worship is to force far too much into the words employed by the Holy Spirit to describe his activity. A matter of particular significance is the fact that there is only one Hebrew word that clearly refers to dancing and that word . . . is never used with reference to David! If someone still insists, in spite of the evidence, that David’s activity before the ark was dance, then they must concede that it was his first and last recorded excursion into dance in worship and that none of the later kings copied him, nor the priests, nor the prophets (p. 57).

I find it interesting that so many in defense of Christian rock music in American churches today speak of its evil only by cultural association. They say that everything has to be contextualized—in other words, interpreted in the light of the culture in which something exists (i.e., “Rock music is only considered evil today because it is being produced and performed by an evil culture. We as Christians should redeem the art for Christ.”) Yet when it comes to David, these people just blindly assume that, since he “danced” thousands of years ago in a Jewish culture totally different from ours, surely it must be the same as what we call “dance” today. David also had several wives and repented in sackcloth and ashes, yet strangely enough I do not see young people today fighting for those same privileges. Still others will say that we can and must redeem all

forms of fine arts for God's use. This might form the topic of another future study, but for now I think it appropriate to offer a quotation from the great preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon who was asked about redeeming the theater in his day:

I see it publicly stated by men who call themselves Christian that it would be advisable for Christians to frequent the theatre, that the character of the drama might be raised. The suggestion is about as sensible as if we were bidden to pour a bottle of lavender water into the great sewer to improve its aroma. If the Church is to imitate the world in order to raise its tone, things have strangely altered since the day when our Lord said, "Come ye out from among them, and touch not the unclean thing." (quoted from *The Sword & Trowel*, Sept. 1879)

Other Biblical Evidence

As we continue looking at the Biblical evidence for dance, we consider a few other words that are given in the Old Testament. One is given to us in 1 Samuel 30:16, referring to the Cherethites and their victory over the Philistines: "And when he had brought him down, behold, they were spread abroad upon all the earth, eating and drinking, and dancing, because of all the great spoil that they had taken out of the land of the Philistines, and out of the land of Judah." The Hebrew word used here is *chagag* and it means "to move in a circle, to march in a sacred procession, to observe a festival." Another word is used twice in Judges 21: "And see, and, behold, if the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in dances, then come ye out of the vineyards, and catch you every man his wife of the daughters of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin" (vs. 21). The same word is used again in verse 23. The Hebrew word used here is *chuwl* and can be translated "to twist or whirl" and also "to writhe in pain or fear." Clearly contextualization does not give us much evidence in support of modern religious dance in these verses. Though dance obviously was involved in certain cultural activities, these verses lend no support for using dance specifically in Hebrew expressions of worship.

The final word we shall consider is the Hebrew word

machowl. It is used several times in the Old Testament and it, without question, should be properly translated “to dance.” It is used in Exodus 15:20 concerning Miriam dancing after the crossing of the Red Sea; in Judges 11:34 concerning Jephthah’s daughter celebrating victory; in 1 Sam. 18:6 concerning the women of Israel dancing upon the return of David and Saul after the death of Goliath; in Jeremiah 31:4,13 concerning Israel “dancing with the joyful”; in Lamentations 5:15 concerning dancing being turned into mourning; and, probably the two best-known uses, in Psalms 149:3 and 150:4.

It is only in the last two references (Ps. 149:3, 150:4) and possibly in Judges 21:21 (if you wish to stretch things quite a bit), that you can possibly say dance is associated with worship. The context of the Psalms is clear: Everything that has breath should praise the Lord. Edwards makes the observation, “They [Psalm 149, 150] refer to the joy of God’s people overflowing into music-making and dancing. However, these two verses alone provide no evidence that dancing did form, still less that it should form, an essential part of worship” (p. 60). “The psalmist works out his theme that everything the people of God do should honor God. This includes their worship in the assembly (149:1, 150:1), their dancing (149:3, 150:4), their music (149:4, 150:3,4) and even their wars (149:6-9). These two psalms do not set out to discuss the content of Jewish worship in the temple” (p. 61). Edwards goes on to draw this conclusion:

We cannot allow the formal religious procession to be called dance, neither can we allow every hop, skip and jump of holy joy to be called dance. It would be absurd to suggest that the worshipper who raised his hands in prayer or praise is dancing; it is equally false to suggest that David leaping with joy demonstrated an artistic form of religious dance. The only Hebrew word that refers clearly to dance (*mahol*) is not used of David’s joy before the ark or of any activity in worship. The two Psalms [149,150] that are so frequently quoted do not obviously refer to dance in the service of worship but as an expression of holy joy in God. It *may* be inferred that this permits it in worship. But an inference is not an authority; at best it is a suggestion (p. 61).

When we continue to look at Biblical evidence, consider that in the Old Testament we read of teachers of singing, teachers of various instruments, choir leaders, orchestra conductors, leaders of praise, but *never* choreographers. If dance was such a “vital aid in worship,” would God have overlooked so important and essential a matter—especially when He was so clear and concise in every other detail of Old Testament worship? Furthermore, consider that dance was the exception rather than the rule throughout the Old Testament—it was reserved for very special occasions. Another important point is that dance is never described in Scripture as an activity between men and women. This distances the practice considerably from what is going on today. Finally, dance is never described as being performed in the temple or tabernacle.

Still others argue that Israel was constantly integrating the worship habits of the pagan nations around them. Therefore, they contend, it is logical that dance had to take root in Israel’s worship traditions. Unfortunately this scenario was often true—but we cannot say that it “sanctified” the activity! Consider the passage in Exodus 32:19: “And it came to pass, as soon as he [Moses] came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf, and the dancing: and Moses’ anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount.” Dancing in this passage was directly related to the worship of false gods. It is correct to argue that this is the very reason God sent the prophets—to warn Israel. Much of the Old Testament is written by those prophets warning Israel that they were becoming *too much like the world!* “The modern, formal, well-planned and rehearsed dancing movements were unknown to the religious life of the Jew and there is no evidence in the Old Testament that they were known to his social life either” (Edwards, p. 61).

A final word about New Testament references to dance. There are only three and they originate from the Greek word *orchos* (literally, a row or ring) from which we get the word “orchestra.” These references concern children playing (Matt. 11:17, Luke 7:32), the actions of Herodias’ daughter (Matt. 14:6, Mark 6:22), and the celebration over the return of the prodigal son (Luke 15:25) which might be transliterated “choros.” Obviously, none of these can be interpreted as having anything

to do with worship or its forms. The total absence of New Testament references might tell us that dance had nothing at all to do with church activities of the early Christians.

The writings of the early church fathers make no mention of dance except to condemn it. There is simply no Biblical or historical evidence to show that dance was a regular part (or any part at all) of worship in the church. So why do those who support dance in the church call it a “revival” or a “renewal” when it never really existed in the first place?

Some Conclusions

Still there are those who insist that dance must be an essential part of worship and is an effective tool to witness. Again I quote from Edwards who states:

The idea that dance [is] . . . essential to worship and evangelism is evidently false on two grounds. Firstly, if [it] were essential, we would expect the Bible to give us clear guidelines for [its] use, or at the very least it would command us to use [it] and give an illustration or two of [its] employment in the Christian church. To claim, or imply, an exaggerated importance for the arts is to fly in the face of Scripture. Nothing is *essential* that is not found in the Word of God. Secondly, the history of the church proves beyond question that the church can be alive and vigorously evangelistic without dance On the other hand, whenever the Christian church was at its most healthy and vigorous, dance . . . [was] either small concern or totally opposed (p. 81).

Let's get to the heart of the matter. In almost every instance we have examined in Scripture, dance was a spiritual response to God's special blessing—music had absolutely nothing to do with it. The dance that is being promoted in churches today is, on the other hand, a sensual response to rock music—there is no indication of a special blessing (other than the charismatic confusion of “blessing” and “feeling”). I will agree that in both cases the response is physical, but the causes are vastly different. By simple observation we can turn on a TV dance program and see that the physical movement is dictated by the music being heard. An examination of Christian concert videos reveals

exactly the same thing: The audience is moving to the music! In the Bible, music was not even a major contributor to the dancing of God's people—in most churches today it is the only necessary ingredient. Which leaves us with the question, "Are we witnessing a response to music or to God's blessing?" If we are observing a sensual (as opposed to just a physical) response, can God even be a part of it (Gal. 5:17)?

In *Shall We Dance* Edwards gives pros and cons of using dance and drama in the church. During the course of the book he lists seven arguments most commonly given against dance and drama. These are excellent observations and can serve as the basis for further thinking in this matter:

1. Dance and drama reflect the worst of society's standards;
2. Dance and drama are always in danger of trivializing the serious;
3. Dance and drama avoid direct and personal confrontation;
4. Dance and drama have generally to be interpreted;
5. Dance and drama are neither natural nor the most effective methods of communication;
6. Dance and drama are frequently no more than escape from reality;
7. Dance and drama are particularly open to sensual responses.

This takes us back to the simple principle that it is still God's plan to reach the world through the foolishness of preaching the Word of God. See in the list above the weaknesses and dangers of substituting music or drama or anything else for the clear witness of the Word of God.

As I stated early in this discussion, I am not writing to categorically forbid dancing as an individual expression before God, because clearly the Bible does not do that. But I would argue that the emphasis we are seeing about dance in the church today has little if anything to do with the blessing of God and has everything to do with the sensual music to which we have allowed ourselves to be subjected. If young people want to express their joy in response to God's special blessing, then let them go before

God Himself in private and “dance” all they wish. If our young people are arguing for a more spiritual lifestyle, there are ways other than dance to obtain it. If young people feel that these arguments are too restrictive and that we are limiting their “fun,” they show that they don’t understand a thing that we have been discussing here. I close with another perceptive observation by Edwards:

The personal dance in worship that is spontaneous and reflects the jump for joy has broken out occasionally in times of revival. No one can speak against that. Providing it is clearly spiritual . . . then some may find it to be a natural expression of holy joy. However, nothing that the individual does in his or her corporate worship should distract or embarrass others. That is a fundamental requirement of corporate worship. The encouragement to “let yourself go and forget everyone around you” is contrary to the whole purpose of meeting together. The individual can worship God in the privacy of his home any way he finds helpful. He may stand on his head to pray if that really leads him to heaven. But to do this in the community is hardly likely to encourage others into the presence of God. The personal dance in worship is over-used today. It becomes a test case of spiritual life in some quarters. Such a claim becomes in itself the evidence of spiritual arrogance. The *total* lack of sure biblical evidence for dance in worship must warn us to place it in a very small corner. It would be better to leave it alone until the Spirit comes in revival. He knows how to control it (p. 96).



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