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Dance: Playful Praise

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Dance is a very sensitive issue for some. Historically, the instituted church, especially since John Calvin, has had a negative attitude toward dance. Today, however, some church leaders are trying to reverse this attitude, claiming that the Christian is called to redeem the dance to a God-honoring use. While some find the very thought of combining redemption with dance a perverse contradiction in terms, others uncritically approve. This latter group will find the ponderings which follow to be at least rather wearisome, at most simply more icing on their cake. Nevertheless, I want to address those Reformed Christians who are *concerned about dance*.

A. The Communal Context.

In our increasingly complex age Christian insight is no luxury. Christ our King summons His children to also be His servants—to work

for the expression of His kingdom everywhere and in every area of life. On every front, however, the world challenges us either to conform to its ways or to give due account of our “ab-normal” actions and intentions.

To be “normal” in the eyes of the world is, in the short run, easier than to be continually renewing and reviewing our lives in the light of Scripture. To permeate all of one’s activities with the spirit and teaching of Christ is much more of a challenge. If the Christian community is going to face this challenge we must seek to educate God’s people to discern the spirits of our age and to genuinely reform every area of life.

Leading the Christian community to see issues correctly is a heavy responsibility. One important facet of this responsibility is that leaders must be and remain sensitive to the religious perspective and the various and changing concerns of the Christian community.

In addition, no one institution can lead in every instance. No one body or group can "go it alone." Biblically honed, historically sensitive Christian action must be rooted within the Christian community, in which both institutions and individuals, like congregations, homes, schools, businessmen, politicians, plumbers, cooks, and garbagemen, are expected to participate and in their way and place to give leadership.

Although there are many others, one of the concerns of the Christian community, one felt most within families with teen-age children and, hence, on Christian high school and college campuses, has to do with dancing. Some parents urge Christian schools to address this matter in a positive way: to provide their students with a sense of discretion, while at the same time opening up the healthy and beautiful possibilities which familiarity with dance will afford. Others want their children's teachers to condemn all dancing. Still other parents remain quietly indifferent on this point.

Neither indifference, indecision, or euphemism is an adequate response to this concern. Indifference reflects a lack of responsibility. Indecision, choosing not to choose, amounts to putting one's head in the sand. And euphemisms (like "square skip" and "foot functions") lead to hypocrisy. Christian colleges and high schools must also realize that their decisions in this regard will have consequences beyond the confines of their campuses. Students move on after four years and ought to be prepared for the years that follow. Given the formative stage of their students and the long term contribution of these educational institutions, their leadership must certainly be both sound and Biblical. The scholarship and training which goes on within their walls must in the end lead to a deepened understanding of the demands and implications of the religious perspective these schools and their supporting societies hold so dear. The entire Christian community is involved.

Christian teenagers are no exception to the rule that God's children are surrounded by the subtle influence of the spirits of our secular age, by the difficulties and problems, as well as by

the various and sundry enticements of the modern world. Given this situation, both curricular and "extra"-curricular activities should prepare students to advance the claims of Christ over all areas of life. By understanding their historical place and cultural task, by developing their abilities and skills, our children and, subsequently, the Christian community will be better equipped to obey God's call to serve Him today.

B. The Biblical Parameter.

Our world belongs to God. He made us and we are His. We know that from Scripture and confess it in our hearts. We also know that human sin affected and affects, in fact, pervades God's creation in its full extent; but also that through the grace of God, the work of Jesus Christ, and the leading of the Holy Spirit, our hearts and lives have been reformed, been turned back to God. In other words, both who we are and what we do has been cleansed, been made free from sin. Sanctified by grace, we have once again been set on the road of life. Once directed away from Him, but now converted, we stand free from the power of sin and death, free to live, permitted and commanded to praise and serve Him with fear and trembling in everything we do, through the power of His Spirit.

The victory has been won and yet the battle which rages for the sake of creation continues. As a result we see in everything we do, as well as in every area of life, the antithetical opposition between the remaining power of sin and the permeating power of salvation. Our place is on the side of the latter. Convinced that God claims every square inch of our world as His own, we know that the redemptive power of the Holy Spirit of our Lord, Jesus Christ, is cosmic in scope and radical even in regard to particulars. Seven days a week, from sunrise to sunset, from the clothes we buy to the detergent we use to wash them, when we are concentrating or relaxing, alone or with others, whether at work or play (as we know from Scripture) everything we do is to be done humbly and with thanksgiving to the glory of

His Name, in obedience to His Word and will for our lives.

There are usually many things that we can and ought to do in the course of a day, not all of which we have time for. Not all of these good things to do are listed in the Bible. Visiting the sick is, but writing our congressman is not. However, the Bible does mention that God's people periodically danced. We read of young ladies and children dancing, of the ecstatic dance of prophesying prophets, of processional dances welcoming victorious armies, and of King David's dancing in praise before the ark of the covenant. In another vein, we read of mountains and hills dancing and of the Lord's turning Israel's wailing into dancing. Not all of the dancing recorded in the Bible was to the glory of God, as Elijah well knew when watching the frustrated prophets of Baal, and as John the Baptist must have concluded upon hearing his fate. One possible reaction to such mis-use is, of course, dis-use. But it is, by the power of God, not the only one.

In the course of a day, Christians may very well find reason and maybe even time to dance. God made us that way. But if and when we dance, we must dance to the glory of His Name. That, of course, is easier said than done. Interestingly enough, the psalmist goes beyond saying that we *can* praise the Lord with dancing. He beckons with emphasis when he writes: "Praise the Lord with dancing!"

C. Dance.

I take dance to be that peculiarly human activity described as rhythmical movement to musical accompaniment; or, more precisely, as a series of rhythmic and patterned human movements usually performed to music. I include folk-dance, aerobic dance, communal or social dance, interpretive dance, modern dance, ballet, and liturgical dance. These different types of dance, as every other human activity is, all are expressions of the human heart, something *people do* wholeheartedly either to the glory of God or not.

Dance is not a thing, but a human activity. In that sense it is just like walking, talking, smil-

ing, whistling, buying, working, and relaxing. Dancing can best be seen in the context of play, of human playfulness. Play is a natural, that is, God-given and created, component of being human. It is not simply a passing stage in child development.

In the lives of young as well as of mature Christians, human playfulness is expressed in a number of very explicit ways. We play games: basketball on Saturday mornings, softball on summer evenings, and maybe chess with the kids on Sunday afternoon. Or we play with instruments (as children play with toys): a frisbee, a surfboard, the sabersaw in the basement, or that motor we keep tinkering with. Some of these instruments, of course, make noise, which with some training can be used to make music: we play violin, harmonica, and piano. Some people periodically play the part of some character in the annual theatrical production, or possibly come to realize they have a knack with pen and ink or brush or palette knife. We even play with words: we all know a perpetual punner and at least of one poignant poet. It is here, with play, that dance fits in.

Play is often contrasted with work. They are certainly distinct. Yet play for some has everything to do with work. This is true not only in the sense that an intramural basketball game, or an intensive session of aerobic dancing, can be a real work-out. With guidance, training, experience, discipline, in short, when one takes time to work at play, better playing is usually the result. After all, no one is born playing the flute, or chess for that matter. Nor are lessons enough. One has to want to work at it. Few become full-time, professional players. For most it is not even a matter of part-time, but, more often than not, of spare-time. And although few of us want, or need, to go to school to perfect what we enjoy doing in our spare-time—that often takes the "fun" out of it—it certainly helps a great deal if someone teaches us the basics, presenting them clearly and in perspective.

All of these examples of play are legitimate pastimes; normal ways of being human; natural expressions of the human heart. And the very real fact that what *people do* can in turn so

possess them that they become enslaved addicts of their own making does not change their being valid creaturely activities. What has changed is that what is normal in the context defined by human living is now allowed to re-define what living is all about. What is natural, i.e., creaturely, has in effect become an idol, often one among many, in that person's life.

Dancing is just one expression of human playfulness. It is not the same thing as moving a rook or running down the court while bouncing the ball, but there are similarities. Dancing is

all are examples of human rhythmical movement to musical accompaniment and all are done, knowingly or not, before the face of God. We can dance and we may dance. But then from the heart, in thankful gratitude to Him, be it to celebrate a joyful event, or to display artistically the talents He has given us, or simply when moved by a wholesome desire to interact with others in a relaxed atmosphere. *Soli deo gloria!* To God alone be the glory!

Whoever lives, lives before the face of God. Whoever dances, does so too. And in both

In the course of a day, Christians may very well find reason and maybe even time to dance. God made us that way. But if and when we dance, we must dance to the glory of His Name. That, of course, is easier said than done. Interestingly enough, the psalmist goes beyond saying that we can praise the Lord with dancing. He beckons with emphasis when he writes: "Praise the Lord with dancing!"

different from singing in a choral concert or playing the timpani in an orchestra, but it has much in common with these activities. They all take time, concentration, and control; are all done in time or turn with others; require seeing the difference between a right step and a wrong one and having a "feel" for the dynamics of the situation; require a trained, intuitive sense of what should come next. They also, in their own way, foster a sense of community, communality, and camaraderie; a sense of belonging and participation. But for all the similarities, and there are more, each of these activities is different. Dancing, too, is different from any other expression of human playfulness. A unique and wholesome ability that comes with being human, dance is a unique and valid mode of playful expression.

There are many types of dance, ranging from "ring around the rosie" to a "pas de deux." Whether done simply with others, or also performed for the aesthetic enjoyment of others,

cases what makes *the* difference is whether one does it to the glory of His Name or not. And that is why we have to take the next point very seriously.

D. Pressing Present Dangers and Fears.

Dance as it is present today in our society is seldom an appropriately exuberant response of the human heart to a gracious and covenanting God. While dance at one time had, for example, an acceptable place in Israel's corporate worship and communal life, dance today is more often than not an occasion for degenerate revelry. Christians *have to* realize that contemporary ("*everybody* does it") dance, and the music which accompanies it, is by and large not conducive to Christian participation. Our forefathers saw this as well and sternly advised against it.

Even when we look back into the distant past the situation seems hardly different. The early

church already denounced dance for its licentiousness. Given the tribal dances developed by the Greeks and the commercial dance events at which the Romans gawked, the church wasted no time in developing an ascetic attitude to dance. Even the "sacred" dance, tolerated within the church until the twelfth century, was eventually banned because it became associated with wanton behavior. And although the Reformation brought Christian renewal to many things, it left the dance on the wrong side of the tracks. John Calvin, too, declared himself against the dance because it arouses passion and leads to promiscuous relationships.

Although few within the Christian Reformed denomination (CRC) noticed, her synod's decision of 1928 on "worldly amusements" (theater attendance, card playing, and the dance) did state that dancing as such cannot be said to be morally wrong. But "not wrong" was not meant to imply across the board that dancing was "all right." Holding on to Calvin's word, that it arouses sexual passion, the synod saw dancing as permissible only between a husband and his wife. "Social dance," however, was frowned upon because "it is in principle immoral," because it becomes "the stepping-stone" to promiscuity and immoral behavior.

For the sake of clarity it should be noted that this synod equated "the dance" with "social dance," explaining that by "the dance" they did *not* refer to the folk dance, the liturgical dance, or the interpretive dance, but *only* to the promiscuous dance, thus also equating "social dance" with "promiscuous dance." The church having tainted the word "social," we do well to talk about communal dance rather than social dance.

More important, however, is the implicit short-sightedness concerning promiscuity and immoral behavior in identifying one kind of dance, the "social dance," with *promiscuous* dance. In limiting themselves to "social dance" the Synod of 1928 was in fact not being radical enough: In demanding that Christians side-step (promiscuous) dance completely, it, as did Calvin, was rightly warning against the sexually wanton behavior which can result from the *indiscriminate mingling* of the sexes, more

specifically, against the *sexually unchaste, seductive suggestiveness* potentially present between two or more (not only unmarried) human beings together moving rhythmically in sexually titilative proximity to each other. That, after all, is what "promiscuous" is referring to: *indiscriminate mingling* and *sexually unchaste, seductive suggestiveness*. In this connection it is good to keep the following in mind:

First of all, God created us male and female. In other words, our sexuality is part of our human creaturely condition before God and is not to be shunned or downgraded. Even though we rightly cover our nakedness, we remain sexual beings in everything we do.

Secondly, not all indiscriminate mingling is between (unmarried) members of the same or different sex. For a Christian to spend a whole day in the shopping mall can be equally seductive: it is very easy to indiscriminately participate in the mesmerizing "more!" mentality, softly massaged into our heads, that the customer is king and his card a scepter, in this climatically controlled consumers's paradise. Seduction, in other words, is immoral, but is not always sexual.

Third, we should remind ourselves that sexually unchaste, seductive suggestiveness is found not only on the dance floor, let alone when dancing a certain kind of dance: ballet, even folk-dancing, and, of course, aerobics can also be sexually titilating. Once again, mis-use does not necessitate dis-use; suggestively seductive clothing, for example, should never lead us to conclude that clothing is a bad idea.

And finally, dancing, as everything else people do, can be the steppingstone to all kinds of immorality. With disco dancing, for example, the atmosphere drips with escapism; an environment which stimulates an obliterating, self-gratifying, narcissistic response. The din shouts: "Do your own thing!" i.e., do what is right in your own eyes. Of course, it is only shouting what modern culture is saying.

All these things considered, it ought to be stated explicitly and clearly that *anything* which leads to sexual promiscuity, which is immoral, or which leads to immorality should be avoided in every case.

Even the so-called "innocent" forms of dance can be misused and we do well to be aware of potential dangers. For example, the folk-dance is a gratifying activity for young and old alike. It is an excellent opportunity for communal socializing and relaxed interaction. But folk-dancing can become an obsession. In larger cities people have been known to spend every available night square-dancing, just as others spend/waste every available hour of the day or evening in front of the television.

Aerobic dancing has obvious physiological benefits. It is also a catalyst for communal socializing and interaction in a relaxed, working-up-a-sweat-together atmosphere. And yet, in light of our society's fascination with youth and glamorized "beauty," this variation of the dance can also very easily become an obsession in the same way that preparing one's face for Sunday worship services can become an obsession.

The liturgical dance has recently been given some serious attention in the Christian Reformed denomination. Reflection on this matter must continue. It is possible that some dance forms may be fitting in the liturgy. The Bible even relates a number of instances where dance and the service of worship go hand in hand. But the domination of one component of the worship service *can* lead to the demise of others, so if the dance is used, it must be used to enhance worship. A dynamic liturgy is not an alternative for the sound exegetical preaching of God's Word.

The interpretive dance usually takes its place among the performing arts. Although I know of few Christians in either professional or amateur dance companies, many musicians, vocalists, and even a number of artists and actors attest to the challenges, possibilities, and rewards which await Christians who take the time and effort to develop their talents in this area. Some have even been able to make it (e.g., playing a violin) their life's work. But here too the power of sin so often prevails. The pressures of publicity and success seem to breed narcissistic introverts who are possessed by their art.

To conclude that we can disobey God's will for our lives today with each and every dance

form should not surprise Christians. We know from the Bible that after the Fall, human beings began to exploit creation for their own glory and satisfaction, and not take care of it as the kingdom of God. Since then, what is true for dancing is equally true for everything else human beings have tried to do on their own.

To end on this note, however, would not only doom Christians to attempt asceticism, but would also ignore at least two very important points.

In the first place, we would have forgotten what God promised Adam and Eve already right after the Fall, repeated when He renewed His covenant throughout the centuries, and finally made manifest in the person and work of Jesus Christ. That is to say, we would fail to take seriously what all Christians believe in their heart and confess with their mouth: that He who is Lord and Giver of Life has made an everlasting covenant with His children, who though sinful by nature and under God's judgment, are washed clean from sin through the shed blood of Christ and are called to do His will on earth, here and now, with joy and thanksgiving.

In the second place, we would have forgotten that "dancing as such," just like "agronomy as such," "business as such," and even "confessing as such," is an abstraction when it comes to knowing and doing the will of the Lord. As is abundantly clear from Scripture, anything "as such," like offerings, for example, is an abomination to the Lord. What He demands of us is a broken spirit and a contrite heart. Only then is what we do from A to Z before His face pleasing to Him, be that our agriculture, business, confession, dance . . . or zoology.

These realities do not dissipate the problems and struggles we face as Christians. We have to look carefully as we walk. But walk we must, redeeming the time in the light and wisdom of His Word, because, as the Apostle Paul puts it, the days are evil. To approach dancing from the perspective of the scriptural mandate to redeem every area of human talent and culture in the name of Christ is easier said than done. We say it from the heart. By the power of His Holy Spirit it can be done; humbly and joyful-

ly, with fear and trembling.

E. Dance in the High School or College Curriculum.

Artistic expression is a powerful and often perverting influence in our world and in our lives. Nevertheless, Reformed Christians have long recognized the need to be involved in the arts—to uncover and unfold our task, responsibilities, and God-given aptitude, as redeemed people, in aesthetic activity. Instrumental music, voice, theater arts, and the plastic arts—each has its place in high school and college curricula because the Christian community is convinced that these areas deserve attention, at least as electives, in the educational program of their children.

Curricular changes rightly reflect new and changing vistas in society at large or in the present needs of the Christian community. “Computer Science” and “Christian Marriage and Family” are two such examples. Few parents question the validity of incorporating these into the courses offered at our Christian high schools and colleges—as long as they are taught from a Christian perspective by qualified teachers. The same should hold for dance.

But where does one begin when it comes to dance? Certainly not with shallow guidelines. To maintain that dance is simply a spontaneous effervescence flowing from a pure joy in living, and let things “happen” from there on in, is dangerously simplistic. And well-meant intentions, while they do make a difference, certainly do not make all the difference. The difference will come when the Christian community clearly defines and implements the following educational tasks:

1. The Christian community must develop physical skills. Training in dance is to a large extent learning a skill, understanding and mastering the movement of one’s body.
2. It must ground instruction in dance on a Biblical perspective of human nature and human activity, as well as of the place of dance in the life of the Christian.
3. It must carefully hone the student’s aesthetic sensitivity. They must not only be

able to distinguish the diversity in music and step, but to discern the limits and liberties which a Christian must and can allow.

4. It must emphasize that dance, as theater, is a communal activity and demands that students recognize a common task and a dependence on others.

Properly trained, aesthetically sensitive teachers of dance could be scarce, at least initially. Neither the Reformed community nor the Calvinist tradition has a time-tested choreographic library to introduce us even to the first steps. Such a person would certainly have to be well-qualified in dance, but also to have investigated and elucidated basic contextual issues. If, on the one hand, an instructor cannot be found who meets both criteria, no courses should be offered. But then, on the other hand, the Christian community should encourage and support, also financially, any of its number who wishes to study dance, so that the next generation will be able to obey Psalm 150:4 and praise God with dancing.

F. The Place of Dance on Campus and in the Christian Community.

People may take time to dance for a host of reasons: to unite around the truth of Easter, to relax after a hard week of work, to celebrate family festivities, or to mark the beginning or end of the semester.

When it comes to the place of dance outside the classroom but within the context of the high school or college, the school should take specific measures in at least the following areas:

1. It should guarantee a wholesome atmosphere for dances organized by or in the school.
2. During such events those in charge should give explicit attention to the fact that our deepest motivation, also for our dancing, lies in the peace and freedom granted us in Christ, and that we have to apply ourselves with equal, if not greater enthusiasm when it comes to the daily activities to which our Father has called us.
3. It should limit the repertoire to wholesome music and appropriate dancesteps.
4. It should involve the entire Christian com-

munity in the following ways:

a. Games with musical accompaniment should become part of our community, family, and school recreation programs.

b. Rhythmic and graceful use of the human body should become part of our physical education programs.

c. Writing and evaluating dance music should become part of our music programs.

d. Expression and interpretation of life (including human aspirations) via the medium of bodily movement should become part of our music and drama programs already in grade school.

e. The possible inclusion of dance, procession and pageantry in events sponsored by schools and congregations should receive the serious attention of the appropriate committees and sub-committees.

Such communal involvement is necessary, not only to develop a Christian perspective and discerning participation in the dance, but also to teach the Christian community to accept the dance.

G. In Conclusion.

For many years Christian high schools and colleges have been providing their students with an education centered in Christ and based upon the Word of God as interpreted in the Reformed Confessions. All along they have been struggling to keep their promise to train their students in the way of the Lord. The introduction of course offerings in dance would not signal a change in their commitment to educate students to live the Christian life in its fullness, before the face of God. Rather, it would implement one facet of their stated purpose.

I realize that among students as well as in the supporting communities there are presently two generally defined ways of dealing with dance: "conservatives" prohibit and refuse to participate in dance and are inherently opposed to communal, artistic, or liturgical dance; a minority of "liberals," on the other hand, without an eye to its sanctification, do accept and participate in social dancing and would

rush to introduce artistic and liturgical dance. I also realize that most young people in the church, at one time or another, do dance and that they eventually, if no further work is made of these matters, will become either "conservative" or "liberal" in their attitude toward dancing. Unfortunately so, in either case. Neither rejecting dance out of hand or blindly embracing it are viable options for the Christian. Followers of Christ need not comply with either of these "alternatives."

To take seriously the mandate to redeem the dance, that is, to dance as obedient children before the face of our Lord, with joy and thanksgiving, but also as His servants, spiritually discerning His will for our time in order to do His will, is not the easy way to deal with dance. We are going to have to test the spirits, to probe and try new things, to be prepared for mistakes, to be open to each other's suggestion and correction. "Not easy" is even an understatement. "The will of the Lord" is not to be had at the five and dime. And what will keep some from using "redeem the dance!" to rationalize an acceptance of the dance in its secular form, in much the same way that a similar statement has been used to rationalize a most-everything-goes acceptance of the film in its secular form? On that score, those who are not concerned about these matters are missing the train to glory in Christ. With the "liberals" they are playing with fire, flirting with the Devil.

There are usually many things that we can do in the course of a day. Exercising our bodies and kinesthetic control are important. Attending sensitively to the aesthetic dimension of life as well as opening up its possibilities are no less significant. These activities, like everything else we do, take time. And we have to use our time, that is, the time God gives us, wisely. But nothing we do, not even not dancing, will save us. What we have to do all of the time is to take seriously Him who saved us, at His Word and through His Spirit. His Kingdom is coming; there (where) His will is done. We do not have to dance. We may. But if we do, we will have to take time to work at playing to the glory of His name.