

TO DANCE OR NOT TO DANCE: EXPLORING CONSIDERATIONS TO DETERMINE  
HOW DANCE CAN BELONG IN THE CHURCH AS A WELCOME WORSHIP PRACTICE

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## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
PART ONE: BIBLICAL WORSHIP .....	3
The Purpose and Principles of Worship.....	3
Adiaphora and Christian Freedom .....	8
What does this mean for dance? .....	11
PART TWO: SETTING THE STAGE FOR DANCE .....	22
History of Dance in Christianity.....	22
Culture of Dance in Christianity.....	29
What does the Bible say about dance?.....	37
PART THREE: ADORATION THROUGH DANCE .....	41
Challenges.....	41
Blessings.....	44
CONCLUSION.....	49
APPENDIX—INTERVIEW QUESTION GUIDE .....	52
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	54

## ABSTRACT

Dance can become a respectable and godly practice in churches when understood and approached with the right considerations. This thesis seeks to expand churches' perspectives about dance in two major ways. First, to recognize that dance is an art from God to be used to his glory and not disregarded. Second, to be able to determine their ability or inability to embrace dance as a worship practice. In order to assist churches in this determination and not disregard this art from God, this thesis is divided into three parts: (1) What does biblical worship mean for dance? (2) How do history, culture, and Scripture set the stage for dance? (3) What are the blessings and challenges of adoration through dance? These three parts will reveal the necessity for churches to reclaim this art from its secular uses for its sacred uses for worship and ministry, as well as to reevaluate the value of dance in certain communities and cultures. This thesis aims to *start* the conversation that dance does belong in the church once it has been claimed by the church to be utilized for the glory of God and the building up of the church.

## INTRODUCTION

*To dance or not to dance? That is the question—Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of ecclesiastical reservations, or to take arms against a sea of skepticism, and, by opposing, end it?*<sup>1</sup>

While the issue at hand is not the Shakespearean theme of choosing between life and death, it is the choice between letting dance live or letting dance die. Although articulated a bit strongly, this is the issue this thesis confronts churches, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), by asking, “To dance or not to dance?” Shall we permit the incorporation of dance into worship, or not? The answer to this question is not as easy as a simple “yes” or “no.” There are legitimate reservations churches may have about dance. There are legitimate reasons for churches to be skeptical about dance. However, have a church’s reservations and skepticism toward dance become *excuses* to not even consider and explore how dance could be an edifying element of worship?

Christian churches have explored and utilized the fine arts in a wide variety of ways. From the music heard, played, and sung through diverse arrangements of instruments and voices to the artwork seen in paintings, sculptures, stained-glass windows, and architecture. However, what about the fine art of dance? Have churches and WELS neglected to make the most of what dance can offer as a fine art and gift from God? Have churches and WELS become too comfortable leaving dance to secular uses and not considering its sacred uses for worship and ministry in various cultures? Have the slings and arrows of ecclesiastical reservations and the sea

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1. This opening is inspired by William Shakespeare’s famous line in *Hamlet*: “To be, or not to be? That is the question—Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer/The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,/Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,/And, by opposing, end them?”

of skepticism been legitimate or unnecessary? These are the two barriers dance must overcome: Reservations and skepticism. Now, while not wrong in and of themselves, they still pose as barriers—whether helpful or unhelpful ones—for dance to prove itself worthwhile and beneficial. So, if a church is considering a proposal to incorporate dance into worship, what can be done to overcome those barriers? Or, if a church has already incorporated dance, could it be improved to further overcome those barriers? Or, should dance even be a part of a church’s worship and ministry in the first place? Again, it boils down to the single question, “To dance or not to dance?” This is the question this thesis aims to address.

This thesis does not seek to offer a “how-to” for incorporating dance into worship or to offer an absolute “yes” or “no” to the incorporation of dance into worship. Rather, this thesis will offer worthwhile considerations for churches to begin recognizing the value of dance in worship and determining their ability to incorporate it. My thesis will achieve this by exploring and understanding three main areas: (1) The purpose and principles behind biblical worship and how dance pertains to such a discussion, (2) what history, culture, and the Bible reveal about dance in worship settings, and (3) the blessings and challenges of adoration through dance. In these three areas, I will demonstrate to churches the seriousness the art of dance deserves, as well as its propriety. Churches must expand their consideration and appreciation for God’s art of dance because, in the appropriate contexts and conditions, dance belongs in worship as a worthwhile and godly element that can uniquely edify worshipers through movement, glorify God in an excellent manner, and ensure the gospel’s centrality.

## PART ONE: BIBLICAL WORSHIP

### **The Purpose and Principles of Worship**

It is important to understand two major things before churches broach the subject of incorporating dance into worship: (1) the purpose of worship, and (2) the principles of worship. This will assist churches to understand what they are doing, who they are doing it for, and why principles exist to keep the *what* and *who* in focus.

What is meant by “worship?” In this thesis, whenever the term “worship” is used as a noun it will mean this: *the gathering of believers to offer together their praises, prayers, and thanks to God, and to proclaim the gospel in Word and Sacrament for faith to receive, be nourished by, and grow in God’s grace, truth, and knowledge in Christ Jesus.* With this in mind, one begins to answer the question, “What is the purpose of worship?” It is not as simple and straightforward as, “To praise God!” The purpose is more involved than that.

Worship in the church is multi-dimensional. Paul Meier talks of Lutheran worship as four-dimensional: downward (worship is a profound encounter with God and his manifold gifts to his people), upward (worship is an expression of our faith or a response to what God has done for us in Christ), inward (worship as education teaches the faith and nurtures the faithful), and outward (worship as evangelism expresses our faith so others may see).<sup>2</sup> In both the inward and outward dimension, it can be added that worship also expresses and strengthens the fellowship of believers in faith. So, with this multi-dimensional aspect in mind, what is the purpose of worship? Without attempting to offer *the* perfect articulation, it seems the purpose could be generally described as three-fold in nature: (1) For faith to *receive from* God (Ps 24:4–5; Heb

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2. Paul M. Meier, “Getting to the Heart of the Matter: Lutheran Worship, Evangelical Worship, and the Evangelical Lutheran Pastor” (An essay presented to the Fox River Valley Pastoral Conference September 27, 2011 at Bethany Evangelical Lutheran Church in Appleton, WI), 3.

4:16), (2) For faith to *respond to* God (Ps 29:2; Heb 12:28), and (3) For faith to *grow before* God (Ps 92:12–15; 2 Pet 3:18).

This three-fold purpose suits well the multi-dimensional aspect Meier described of worship. It recognizes God is the one who establishes worship (Deut 6:13; Luke 4:13), is the one worthy of worship (1 Chr 16:25–26; Ps. 96:4; 145:3) and from whom we receive his manifold gifts and blessings for faith through the Means of Grace in Word and Sacrament (Rom 10:17; 1 Cor 1:21; Eph 3:12–19; Col 1:5–6). Christian worship is theocentric. The actions of God are central. Word and Sacrament are vital. Christ’s words and works predominate. Ritual, music, and the fine arts fill the space to focus the worshipers’ attention on Jesus.<sup>3</sup> This theocentric nature defines confessional Lutheran worship. It avoids subjectivism and “stresses the objective presence, power, and grace of God.... Far more important than [our] subjective feeling about being saved is God’s objective promise which establishes [our] salvation.... More important than reinforcing [our] feelings is reinforcing an awareness of God’s promises.”<sup>4</sup>

This three-fold purpose also recognizes the dynamics of the vertical (God and believer) and horizontal (believer and believer) relationships occurring in worship. Faith responds to God with praise, prayers, and thanks for what he has done for us in Christ. Worship carried out by believers is a *response to* God’s grace, not an act which prompts God’s grace. “The Greek word that gives us our word liturgy (*leitourgew*), as well as its close companion *latreuw*, emphasize the response of the believer to God.”<sup>5</sup> This response is carried out on an individual basis between

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3. Notes from Professor James Tiefel’s church architecture course WLS PT5072.2 in June 2019 at the Western Wisconsin District Conference.

4. Pastor Bryan M. Gerlach, “Our Lutheran Heritage in Worship” (An essay delivered to the Northern California Delegate Conference in Concord, CA on May 2, 1987, and Parish Music Workshops on November 5 and 14, 1987 in Glendale, AZ and Garden Grove, CA), 10.

5. Professor James Tiefel, “Liturgical Worship for Evangelism and Outreach” (Nov. 2, 1990), 3.

the believer to God to grow, be strengthened, and be renewed in faith by God (Eph 4:15–16; 2 Pet 3:18). This response is also carried out on a communal basis between believers with each other to God to grow, strengthen, and enjoy the fellowship of faith (Eph 4:3–6; Heb 10:24–25).

The three-fold purpose of worship also fits with how Timothy Maschke describes worship: “Worship is God’s service to us as His gathered guests and our faith-full response to Him in Christ. Worship is also an opportunity to grow and develop as a community and for the community to be empowered to go out into the world.”<sup>6</sup> The *what* of worship encompasses God acting and God’s people responding. The *who* of worship encompasses God the worshipped and God’s people the worshipers. Now, what are the principles of worship that keep the *what* and *who* always in focus? The three principles are: (1) excellence in carrying out worship, (2) edifying worshipers while beautifying worship, and (3) centrality of Christ and his gospel.

In order to ensure excellence, “Worship must be what the church does best, for in our worship we minister to the greatest number of our members and introduce visitors to our Lord. Our worship is still the most apparent statement of the ‘worth’ we ascribe to our God.”<sup>7</sup> Worship is not to reflect a God of mediocrity and disorder, but our God of majesty and order who condescended himself in the person and work of Jesus.<sup>8</sup> Greg Scheer notes this about excellence: “We should always strive for excellence, but we shouldn’t confuse excellence with perfection. Excellence is our best offering in response to God’s love. Perfection is the impossible taskmaster of those who are trying to win God’s love and people’s affection.”<sup>9</sup> Excellence calls for doing all

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6. Timothy H. Maschke, *Gathered Guests: A Guide to Worship in the Lutheran Church* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2003), 20.

7. Tiefel, “Liturgical Worship,” 17.

8. Aaron Christie—Professor of Worship and Homiletics at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary—in an interview conducted on October 28, 2020.

9. Greg Scheer, *Essential Worship: A Handbook for Leaders* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 129.



things faithfully to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31), to the best of one's ability (1 Pet 4:10–11; 1 Cor 14:12), with a heart of love and thankfulness to God (Ps 9:1–2), and to make everything accessible for the congregation (1 Cor 14:16–17). Excellence seeks creativity and consistency to provide an environment for faith to be nourished by God, in awe of God, and respond to God.<sup>10</sup>

In order to ensure that a church edifies worshipers while beautifying worship, there are two major questions to ask. The first: What will build up the faith of the individual congregant and the congregation as a whole? The most important answer to this question must be Scripture and its truth—in Scripture readings, sermons, hymnody, music, etc. “A mutual relationship always exists between liturgy and doctrine because liturgy communicates doctrine and affects the lives of those who worship.”<sup>11</sup> This means evaluating and shaping what is done in worship in light of what Scripture teaches.<sup>12</sup> The second question to ask is: What will enhance the worship service? Professor James Tiefel notes this:

It is not enough for Lutherans to hide behind a book or a liturgical form expecting the unchurched to drop into the pews informed about and appreciative of the liturgy. We must work to present the form in a way which neither confuses nor confounds the visitor or new Christian.... The challenge for Lutherans today is to combine the best of our tradition with contemporary communication, to be both faithful to Scripture and relevant to contemporary life, to touch head and heart with the message of sin and grace in an age of anti-Christian philosophy, to lift refugees from a jaded generation in praise to their God.<sup>13</sup>

“In a way which neither confuses nor confounds” and “touching head and heart” say it well.

Considerable attention must be given to the mode of the message (gospel truth) in order to ensure the clearest communication of the message. “As 1 Cor. 14 indicates, worship does indeed have a

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10. Maschke, *Gathered Guests*, 25.

11. Maschke, *Gathered Guests*, 12.

12. Maschke, *Gathered Guests*, 13.

13. Tiefel, “Liturgical Worship,” 17.

rational side.... It is wrong to picture this working of the Spirit as something confused, disordered, obscure, or even as something excessively emotional. The Spirit is lucid. The Spirit creates ‘order.’ The Spirit illumines reason. The Spirit speaks in intelligible words.”<sup>14</sup> The Holy Spirit not only works supernaturally—working his Word in hearts—but also psychologically, making his Word accessible to human intellect, emotions, and will.

Finally, in order to ensure the centrality of Christ and his gospel—perhaps the most important of the three principles of worship—great vigilance is called for. Peter Brunner notes that the “Word that edifies, nurses, nourishes, leads, and preserves the congregations always contains, in substance, the Word which founds the congregations, even though the expression, the form, the thought-pattern, and the function of the Word may change.”<sup>15</sup> The *way* in which the Word is delivered or communicated may change, but the Word itself which “founded the congregation”—created faith in members’ hearts—must never change or be lost. In worship, the highest function of language is to proclaim God’s grace in Christ for us, and the highest function of art is to tell the story of God’s grace in Christ for us. Christ must be and will always be the center of Christian worship (Rev 5:12–13).

These three worship principles keep the *what* and *who* of worship in focus. They ensure congregations understand *what* is being done in worship—God acting and God’s people responding. They ensure congregations understand *who* is involved—God the worshipped and God’s people the worshipers. These three worship principles support the three-fold purpose of worship—for faith to receive from, to respond to, and to grow before God—to assist churches in understanding what worship is. Again, what is worship? It is the gathering of believers to offer

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14. Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, Translated by M.H. Bertram (St Louis: Concordia, 1968), 199.

15. Brunner, *Worship*, 127.

together their praises, prayers, and thanks to God, and to proclaim the gospel in Word and Sacrament for faith to receive, be nourished by, and grow in God's grace, truth, and knowledge in Christ Jesus.

### **Adiaphora and Christian Freedom**

What is the specific way to carry out worship? In this thesis, I do not wish to investigate this deeper because the Bible does not offer specific worship blueprints. In addition, the diversity of cultures adds another level of complexity to that question. However, there are two truths that are essential to keep in mind when determining how to *wisely* carry out worship: (1) adiaphora, and (2) Christian freedom.

The Formula of Concord defines adiaphora in this way: "Ceremonies or ecclesiastical practices that are neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word, and are introduced in the church for the sake of good order and decorum."<sup>16</sup> The Formula of Concord continues: "We believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every place and at every time has the authority to alter such ceremonies *according to its own situation*, as may be *most useful and edifying for the community*."<sup>17</sup> The Bible does not spell out specific ceremonies or ecclesiastical practices for churches. There is freedom to incorporate, alter, or discontinue them; however, this must be done with wisdom. A church wisely considers how to proceed *according to their own situation* and what is *most useful and edifying for their community*. When the Formula of Concord uses these words, it follows what Paul writes in 1 Cor 6:12 and 10:23–24.

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16. Formula of Concord, Epitome, X, 1 in Robert Kolb and Timothy J Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 515.

17. Formula of Concord, Epitome, X, 4 in Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 515. (emphases added)

Christian freedom recognizes that everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial or constructive. Christian freedom asks: What is best for a person's faith? For the community of believers? For the community around a church? Does it give glory to God? The law of love (Matt 22:37–40) is to be the guiding principle for Christian freedom. Luther comments on this matter: "For even though from the viewpoint of faith, the external orders are free and can without scruples be changed by anyone at any time, yet from the viewpoint of love, you are not free to use this liberty, but bound to consider the edification of the common people."<sup>18</sup> He elaborates further: "But you are bound to consider the effect of your attitude on others. By faith be free in your conscience toward God, but by love be bound to serve your neighbor's edification... For we should not please ourselves, since Christ also pleased not himself, but us all."<sup>19</sup> Love for God and love for neighbor are the lenses through which pastors and worship leaders determine the wisest course for worship.

However, as pastors and worship leaders attempt to determine the wisest course, there are two extremes to be aware of:

[Professor John Schuetze] repeatedly warned us [Don't drive into the left ditch to avoid the right ditch] about two false extremes to avoid in the ministry. The "right ditch" is legalism—insisting upon laws or customs which are not decreed in Scripture and, as a result, replacing the gospel with the law. The "left ditch" is libertinism—exerting Christian freedom to the point that it scandalizes and confuses other Christians and distorts the gospel. Both movements are alive and well in the church at large today. Both movements threaten a clear and proper understanding of the Word of God in general, and the gospel of Christ in particular.<sup>20</sup>

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18. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, *Liturgy and Hymns*, Edited by Ulrich S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 47. (Luther has in mind here 1 Cor. 6:12; 8:1; 14:40.)

19. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, 48. (Luther has in mind here Rom. 15:2 and 2 Cor. 10:8.)

20. Johnold J. Strey, "Neither Papistic nor Karlstadtian: Luther's Principles of Adiaphora Applied to the Liturgical Life of the Church" (An essay delivered at the WELS Arizona-California District Pastors' Conference at St. Paul's First Evangelical Lutheran Church in North Hollywood, CA, October 20, 2009), 1.

Legalism and libertinism are two extremes to watch out for. Falling into one extreme or the other leads to conflict and confusion. Luther states, “Now even though external rites and orders... add nothing to salvation, yet it is un-Christian to quarrel over such things and thereby to confuse the common people. We should consider the edification of the lay folk more important than our own ideas and opinions.”<sup>21</sup> Again, the law of love is to be the guiding principle. It avoids falling into the “right ditch” of legalism and the “left ditch” of libertinism.

So, what does this mean for pastors and worship leaders? Pastors and worship leaders are to use traditions wisely in the local congregation to feed and strengthen the people of God with his Means of Grace. In addition, it also means they are to be discerning when utilizing worship practices outside of traditions in the local congregation to feed and strengthen the people of God with his Means of Grace.<sup>22</sup> “Liturgical worship neither insists nor expects that every congregation will worship in lockstep formation. Not only our doctrine but also the Liturgy allows freedom and variety.”<sup>23</sup> However, it is important to consider this when exploring variety:

Any innovations in worship should be understood as another means to communicate God’s love in Christ.... The incorporation of other cultural or historical elements may be more readily accepted if they reflect particular ways of telling the Good News. Legislated or coerced changes typically result only in discord, and the Gospel message may be lost. But when variety is considered as an opportunity to speak the Gospel in a new way, God’s gathered guests will see tremendous results.<sup>24</sup>

The law of love wisely seeks to communicate the gospel in such a way that it is not lost in the worship service, nor lost in the hearts and minds of the congregation. Variety may very well be beneficial and constructive, and edify a congregation; however, Christ and his gospel must

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21. *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 53, 47.

22. Maschke, *Gathered Guests*, 44.

23. Tiefel, “Liturgical Worship,” 11.

24. Maschke, *Gathered Guests*, 448.

predominate in worship. The way worship is carried out demonstrates both love for God and love for the congregation.

### **What does this mean for dance?**

So, what does this all mean for dance? How does dance relate to biblical worship? It is perhaps worthwhile to consider the following quote first:

Lutheranism considers art to be a part of worship, and, therefore, calls for the giving of one's best to God. Whether in music, poetry, sculpture, tapestry, or painting, whether in historic or contemporary form, Lutherans bring their art first to God. But Lutherans also bring their art for the benefit of their fellow believer and employ it in the church to affect intellect and emotion for the strengthening of faith. Thus, art proclaims Christ and glorifies Christ at the same time.<sup>25</sup>

Dance should be included in this as well. It is a gift from God to be used to the best of one's ability to both proclaim and glorify Christ. It is unwise to speak of dance as irrelevant in Christianity and to underestimate how constructive and beneficial it may be in worship.<sup>26</sup> However, there are three questions to address for dance to be beneficial and constructive in worship: (1) How does dance fulfill the purpose of worship? (2) How do the principles of worship guide dance? (3) How does Christian freedom handle dance as a worship practice?

Can dance fulfill the three-fold purpose of worship—for faith to receive from, to respond to, and to grow before God—and thus enhance the service? Yes. Dance can be a form of praising and glorifying God (Exod 15:20; 2 Sam 6:14; Ps 30:11; 149:3; 150:4; Eccl 3:1, 4), as well as serve as an additional element of worship. “Worship involves more than our minds and lips; our whole body may be involved” (Rom 12:1; 1 Cor 6:19–20).<sup>27</sup> We would be limiting ourselves to

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25. Tiefel, “Liturgical Worship,” 13.

26. Paul van Thiel, “Spontaneous Creativity and African Sacred Music” in *AFER* 27.2 (1985), 84.

27. Maschke, *Gathered Guests*, 29.

assert that dance cannot be a form of praising and glorifying God, or an element of worship that communicates meaning through movement. In dance, “all the sensations of the body, which is both mover and moved, are connected in a certain order—that they call and respond to each other.”<sup>28</sup> What does this mean? This simply means an intertwined relationship exists between dancers, music, and spectators. The dancers process the music individually and as a group. Then, they gather significance to communicate through movement the appropriate meaning in their setting and for their audience’s understanding. In the context of the church, if dancers understand what worship is, understand its purpose, understand the setting, congregation, and music, then their dance will work well. However, the challenge arises when it comes to *actually* incorporating dance into worship. This is where the principles of worship become useful.

How do the principles of worship guide dance? A helpful way of answering this question is to think of these principles as reins that pull and tug dance as a worship practice in the wisest direction. It is important to recall the three principles mentioned previously: (1) Excellence in worship, (2) edifying worshipers while beautifying worship, and (3) centrality of Christ and his gospel. Each principle determines how suitable or not dance may be for a church’s worship service, and guides leaders in what will be most beneficial and constructive for the congregation.

While excellence in carrying out dance in worship may seem obvious, it can be a struggle. Just as pastors spend many hours in sermon preparation, so worship leaders should not shy away from spending much time in preparing to visually communicate to a range of people and ages in the church.<sup>29</sup> Throwing choreography together and finding not-so-willing people or awkwardly coordinated (BUT PASSIONATELY WILLING!) volunteers will leave a distasteful

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28. Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen, *What is Dance? Readings in Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford, 1983), 60.

29. Maschke, *Gathered Guests*, 176.

impression on those viewing the dance. Willingness does not always correspond with ability. Willingness must always be accompanied with training and teaching, especially when it comes to something as visual as dance. Finding willing, able dancers and choreographers—or at the least, those able to learn, grow, and improve—is imperative for executing dance well, with the result that the congregation can grasp the meaning of the dance. The same effort and attention that go into organists, pianists, choirs, or other musical accompaniments carrying out their task well, must also be the case for dance. It would be a great disservice not to do so. In addition, showing grace should not be an excuse for permitting persistent mediocrity.<sup>30</sup> Showing grace means encouraging—not coercing—excellence for the best offering to God. It means avoiding the “right ditch” of legalism (demanding perfection) and the “left ditch” of libertinism (allowing anything). When it comes to dance, excellence seeks the best offering to God that also builds up the church. It does not seek perfection to gain God’s favor and people’s affection.

So, what does this mean for the new mission church starting from scratch? Or in the church that really has nobody who can carry out dance well and are desperate to take anyone they can get? Perhaps therein lies an answer to the question. Desperation cannot be a reason for incorporation. However, what about churches that currently incorporate dance into worship? These churches should then ask themselves: Is this our best offering to God? Could it be improved? Do we need more willing and able volunteers? Does it *need* to be a part of worship if there has been struggle in ability? Would it be worthwhile to withdraw dance altogether or for a period of time? These are important questions to consider. This art is a gift from God that deserves acute attention when considering its incorporation. However, when training, practice, and rehearsals are accompanied with encouragement, perseverance, and prayer, Kevin Navarro

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30. Kevin Navarro, *The Complete Worship Service: Creating a Taste of Heaven on Earth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 55.



offers this: “In time, this will start to impact your musical culture. Never forget, musicians attract musicians, and good musicians attract good musicians.”<sup>31</sup> In the same way, dancers attract dancers, and good dancers attract good dancers.

However, even though a dance may be excellent, how will it edify worshipers while beautifying worship? This principle of worship ensures that dance builds up faith, as well as enhances the worship service. It also ensures that dance does not become the service—predominates more than Christ and his gospel—nor solely “wow” the congregation:

If dance is to play a role in the church’s life comparable to that which music already plays, it is important, when dance is presented in worship, *not* to create a service that is ‘about’ dance. The point rather is to create dance that kinetically illumines a scripture reading, communicates scriptural truth, or a liturgical moment that would be part of the normal worship experience whether or not dance were present. Otherwise, dance remains an occasional and special interest.<sup>32</sup>

Dance cannot merely exist as an ambiance or pleasantry in the service. It must have substance and depth, uniformity and purpose that showcase excellent harmony of music, movement, and meaning for the beautification of worship and edification of worshipers’ hearts. It is nearly impossible to separate music and worship. Music is an intrinsic component and enhances the central feature of worship, the Word of God (Ps 33:2-4). In order for dance to be remotely edifying, an intimate relationship has to exist between music and dance. Music must be swallowed by movement for visual meaning.

Music will dictate what will happen in the dance and the meaning the dance is to portray. “To make the dance a work of art requires [the] translation of kinesthetic experience into visual and audible elements” with the discipline to ensure clear communication of meaning to the

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31. Navarro, *The Complete Worship Service*, 55.

32. Judith Rock and Norman Mealy, *Performer as Priest and Prophet* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 88–89.

audience.<sup>33</sup> There must be clarity—whether in music or dance—in how churches convey and communicate the Word since the Word clearly conveys and communicates God’s promises in Christ Jesus. Cardinal Arinze notes this importance: “What we sing should manifest what we believe and should nourish our faith and not just think anything [sing whatever we want]. It should be theologically deep, liturgically rooted, and musically acceptable.”<sup>34</sup> The same must go for dance. If a church cannot manifest the truths and promises of Scripture through music or dance, I must ask, “How edifying really is it in the worship service and for worshipers’ faith?” In addition, attaching ecclesiastical adjectives—liturgical, praise, worship, sacred, etc.—before the word “dance” does not necessarily give the dance instant credibility.<sup>35</sup> Terminology is meaningless if nothing of substance is offered to build, nourish, and enhance. Although, if a church can achieve and produce an edifying dance, then great! However, there is still another principle of worship that functions as the most important rein that guides dance: the centrality of Christ and his gospel.

Is the message of Christ remaining central, or is what I am doing becoming the message? Navarro comments: “The quickest way for worship services to degenerate into humanism is to remove Christ from the chorus.” The same could be said of dance. The mode cannot become the message, but it must be the humble *carrier* of the central message of Christ. There are many components to consider in the form of dance that can very easily become the message—the choreography, dress, music, expressions, usage of space, etc. This visual art confronts churches

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33. Copeland and Cohen, *What is Dance?*, 43–44.

34. Cardinal Arinze in “Liturgical Dance & Cardinal Arinze,” YouTube.com (Dec. 26, 2008) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9rJFdmqj\\_s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9rJFdmqj_s).

35. Insight drawn from LutheranLayman.com: “The LCMS church we used to attend regularly has what's called the "Liturgical Dance Troupe." Lovely, isn't it? As if the inclusion of the word "liturgical" gives the whole practice instant credibility or something.”

with the challenging—but not impossible—task of ensuring Christ and his gospel remain central. Not dance and not the people themselves. The dance is not to turn worshipers inward towards themselves—or towards the dance itself—to feel “spiritual” or “fulfilled,” but rather away from themselves to the God who fills with truth and certainty in Christ (Rom 15:13; Phil 1:11; Col 1:9). Constance Cherry makes this observation:

When I ask my students how they can know whether a service was pleasing to God, I often hear remarks such as these: “I felt close to God,” “There seemed to be a lot of people ‘into’ worship,” or “Someone was converted.” I suggest, however, that these are human standards for measuring the quality of worship. While the above may be desirable occurrences and while the experience of worshipers matter, the standard of measure must primarily lie elsewhere.<sup>36</sup>

That standard of measure must rest in Christ. Christ determines the quality of music and dance because they are vehicles through which his Word must be communicated. Christ and his gospel must not be obfuscated or replaced by anything in worship, dance included. If so, then, like Luther insisted, “If the Word is not proclaimed, one had better neither sing, read, or even gather together.”<sup>37</sup> It is imperative that dance suit the purpose and principles of worship; however, there is still one key component to consider: Christian freedom.

To continue with the illustration of worship principles functioning as reins, Christian freedom can be thought of as the *driver* guiding the reins in the wisest direction; determining when to pull back, give slack, and direct down a specific path. It is important to remember that the guiding principle of Christian freedom is the law of love—love for God and love for neighbor (Matt 22:37–39). Recall that adiaphora are things neither commanded nor forbidden in

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36. Constance M. Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), xii.

37. Tiefel, “Liturgical Worship,” 2.

God's Word—this includes dance. So, how does Christian freedom handle the adiaphoron of dance? The Formula of Concord sheds some light on this question:

Therefore, we believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every time and place has the right, power, and authority to change, reduce, or expand such practices according to circumstances in an orderly and appropriate manner, without frivolity or offense, as seems most useful, beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the building up of the church.<sup>38</sup>

Christian freedom recognizes that dance can be incorporated as a worship practice; however, it must ask the following questions: Do the circumstances and culture of my church and community allow for dance as a worship practice? Will this cause offense or affect consciences negatively? Will this be most useful, beneficial, and best for good order in my church? Can this line up with Christian character and responsibility? Is this useful for evangelical decorum—in a manner that suits the gospel, carries the gospel, and does not hinder the gospel? Does this build up the church? Answers will vary in different churches in different contexts; however, one question is perhaps more worthwhile to ponder: Will this cause offense or affect consciences?

The Formula of Concord states: “All frivolity and offense must be avoided, and special consideration must be given particularly to those who are weak in faith.”<sup>39</sup> For as physical and visual of an art as dance is, it is perhaps the art that proves the most challenging for a church to accept as a worship practice. When the term “dance” is mentioned, it is hard not to think of secular dance and music. It becomes much easier to simply avoid the art of dance, leave it alone, and let it exist in the secular sphere, not the ecclesiastical sphere. However, simply avoiding dance, or forcing its incorporation, does not solve the issue of helping troubled consciences and weak faith to embrace it. The art of dance is a gift from God. Christian freedom recognizes the

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38. Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, X, 9 in Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 637.

39. Formula of Concord, Epitome, X, 5 in Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 515.

necessity of teaching about this art, its various styles and cultures, and informing the congregation of how dance could be incorporated into worship in a beneficial and constructive way. Gloria Weyman and Lucien Deiss articulate this importance well:

The careful preparation of the congregation, so that they understand and accept dance as prayer is as important—if not more important—than the training of dancers. If the time can be taken to prepare the dancers, then the time must be taken to prepare those who will see the dancing. If a truly beautiful and reverent dance creates scandal instead of prayer in a community, then those scandalized did not really understand what the dancing was all about. And if that lack of understanding arose because the people were not properly prepared, or if dancing was just thrust upon them with no preparation at all, then the lack of preparation is the real scandal.<sup>40</sup>

Careful preparation and teaching of the congregation about dance cannot be emphasized enough. Christian freedom understands the people, context, community, and culture that are served. Christian freedom seeks the wisest course to avoid scandal, offense, and stumbling blocks.

However, how should one church view another church that incorporates dance into their worship service? Should a church become involved in another church's business? The Formula of Concord, once again, sheds some light on this: "We also believe, teach, and confess that no church should condemn another because the one has fewer or more external ceremonies not commanded by God than the other has, when otherwise there is unity with the other in teaching and all the articles of faith and in the proper use of the holy sacraments."<sup>41</sup> The Formula of Concord lines up very well with what Paul writes in Rom 14:1–8, and calls for respect for a church's independence. What does this mean? It means the small-town church must have a certain level of respect for the big-city church, and vice versa, since each church will have very different cultures, communities, and traditions. It means being cognizant of people's consciences

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40. Gloria Weyman and Lucien Deiss, "Movement and Dance" in *Pastoral Focus Liturgical Ministry* 2 (Spring, 1993), 73.

41. Formula of Concord, Epitome, X, 7 in Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 516.

and faith, showing consideration and compassion without deteriorating into legalism and libertinism. Where there is unity of faith, matters of adiaphora should not create division, but rather diversity in the administration of God's gifts and blessings among his people. Christian freedom safeguards unity with responsibility. Christian freedom seeks diversity in practices and traditions with care, asking, "Why are we doing these?"

Churches must "always guard against the temptation to misuse the arts to seduce people into coming to church for something other than what worship is meant to provide."<sup>42</sup> The excitement and uniqueness a new worship practice, such as dance, can offer is certainly a blessing, but it cannot be the *only* answer to a church's struggles with worship attendance. Churches must be able to understand that corporate worship and evangelism are not the same. Each has its own purpose and approaches. "Worship is *leitourgia*; witness is *kerygma*."<sup>43</sup> While there is wisdom in developing different approaches in worship to assist in interesting and attracting the unchurched to create opportunities for witnessing, worship and witness must be distinct. Worship is our response to God's grace and goodness in Christ in the gathering of believers. Witness is proclamation of God's grace and goodness in Christ in accordance with the Great Commission. There is crossover, but there is responsibility to distinguish the roles of worship and witness in how the gospel is presented and communicated. If the gospel does not predominate, then worship itself deteriorates in every way.

On another note, if the underlying motivations for incorporating dance are to do away with ancient traditions, then a church disregards the wisdom of her forefathers. It is concerning if a church either sticks to tradition for tradition's sake, or departs from tradition for novelty's sake.

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42. A. Daniel Frankforter, *Stones for Bread: A Critique of Contemporary Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 162.

43. Tiefel, "Liturgical Worship," 4.

Traditional or novel worship practices are permitted as they fall under adiaphora; however, the fine line of adiaphora's freedom is crossed when either one is insisted upon or despised. It cannot be said "Dance should *never* be a part of worship because it is not traditional" or "Dance should be a part of worship since tradition has not worked and is old." Professor Tiefel comments:

Anyone who insists that visitors are "turned off" by liturgical worship must first ask himself if it is the Liturgy or the way the Liturgy is done which offends. If the charge has any validity that we have failed to put our best efforts into worship, we have come to a serious matter. If we give less than our best in worship, we offend God, for we take advantage of his gracious offer to receive our praise. But even more we offend our visitors, because we give them the impression that it is permissible to take advantage of God's grace. Let's not dwell on the abuses, however, but rather on better uses of a liturgical style of worship.<sup>44</sup>

Whether a church's worship be traditional or novel, if it is not carried out well, people will naturally be turned off by the worship service. Simply jumping from a traditional style to something more novel—or vice versa—will not solve attendance issues if worship is not done well. The mode does not save, nourish, and build up faith. The message does. The motivation for a better style of worship must be for a better, clearer communication of the gospel.

There is no need to despise the past for the sake of the present, but rather there is a need to honor past Christendom to counsel present Christendom moving toward the future. Pastors and worship leaders must ask themselves what it means to be contemporary, novel, or "with the times." Current music and media styles are not the only ways to remain relevant to the world around us. Tradition does not necessarily make us inaccessible to modern worshipers. We are a part of a continuum of worship throughout the history of Christendom. We serve as bridges between the past and present, grounding ourselves in what has gone before and gleaning what is most beneficial in what is current and trending.<sup>45</sup> Tradition provides perspective in this changing

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44. Tiefel, "Liturgical Worship," 15.

45. Scheer, *Essential Worship*, 131.

world. “Tradition is not ‘the dead faith of those who are living’; instead, it is the ‘living faith of those who have died....’ Tradition provides us with a powerful acknowledgment that change is neither new nor is it always bad or good.”<sup>46</sup> Times change, styles change, but our God never changes (Heb 13:8). There are many elements to cherish in both past traditions and present novelties. Both can convey and communicate the unchanging God and Word in worship through various styles in the appropriate contexts, communities, and cultures of churches.

So, what does all this really mean for dance? Why does part one discuss at length what biblical worship is and its importance? Why not address the matter of dance immediately? Well, the art of dance cannot simply be dispelled or embraced without considering these many elements and layers that exist in biblical worship. Dance is a gift from God that falls under adiaphora that Christian freedom wisely and responsibly utilizes to the glory of God and the building up of the church. Any element of worship—dance included—must emphasize the central feature of worship: Christ and his gospel. Part one has highlighted the *focus* dance must have in worship, while part two will highlight how history, culture, and the Bible have set the stage for how dance must *function* in worship. We must establish the focus in order for the function to have purpose.

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46. Maschke, *Gathered Guests*, 37–38.



## PART TWO: SETTING THE STAGE FOR DANCE

### History of Dance in Christianity

Did dance ever have a place in worship in the ancient Christian Church? What about during Medieval times? Colonial times? Modern times? While we can say “yes” that dance has had a place in modern Christianity among various denominations, it is when we reach further back in history where things become interesting. Why? “The history of dance in Christian worship leaves its clues sparingly . . . Christian religious dance presents a meager account.”<sup>47</sup> However, despite this “meager account,” it is still worthwhile for us to explore what can be found regarding dance throughout Christian history to further inform ourselves as we ponder the possibility of incorporating dance into worship.

Exploring the history of dance in Christianity is a fairly young field of research that has often been viewed as lacking academic value or substance, resulting in a hesitancy to question the few sources available.<sup>48</sup> It can seem these few sources are authoritatively “enough” to speak on this field of research; however, Laura Hellsten states, “In my work I have thus put a strong emphasis on [scrutinizing] and re-interpreting older sources and am hopefully not following their accustomed patterns of interpretation.”<sup>49</sup> She then makes the following comment:

[P]hilosophical and theological concepts . . . seem to value only that of the mind or that which pertains to the world of ideas. That which is sensual seems to be avoided because it is not lasting. The materiality or fleshiness of the body seems to be an echo only of lust, destruction and a blind, meaningless see-sawing. One of the most common reactions I get when telling people I am writing on dance and theology, is a perplexed look. Often the look is combined with the question “Isn’t dancing a sin?” To be speaking about dance in the Western Christian tradition seems to be understood mostly as something abnormal.<sup>50</sup>

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47. Daniel A. Kister, “Dance and Theater in Christian Worship,” *Worship* 45.10 (1971), 588.

48. Laura Hellsten, “Dance in the Early Church: Sources and Restrictions,” *Approaching Religion* 6.2 (2016), 58.

49. Hellsten, “Dance in the Early Church,” 58.

50. Hellsten, “Dance in the Early Church,” 56.

Hellsten reveals that dance is something churches have viewed as something to be avoided, rather as something to be investigated more deeply. “[D]ance does not figure prominently in religious studies or other [non-dance] scholarly disciplines. Words take pride of place over kinetic images.”<sup>51</sup> Further research and investigation of dance are necessary not only in its practice in worship, but also its history. Due to the few sources and young field of research, this section will briefly share what some sources have recorded on the history of dance in Christianity.

Regarding the Early Christian Church period, E. Louis Backman suggests:

The dances were mostly choral dances and ring-dances, probably always to the accompaniment of hymn-singing and psalms. Occasionally the musical accompaniment may have been more elaborate. Sometimes the dance had a different character, as when there was a solo dance. Romping dances [lively and rowdy in nature, and not necessarily sexually driven] also occurred, sometimes hopping and leaping and also gyrating (Ambrose, indirectly). Sometimes there was a real rotation dance, signifying, in the matter of mysteries, an approach to God (Gregory of Nazianzus). All the dances appear to have been led by a rhythmic clapping of the hands, which was probably only intermittent, and by a stamping of the feet.<sup>52</sup>

During this period and moving forward, one could also look at how superstition and medieval mysticism have an influence, such as in the churchyard dances. “The churchyard dances for the martyrs were an act of grace and signified a triumph, and the dance was still allied to faith. The churchyard festivals of song and dance for the martyrs involved, according to Gregory of Nazianzus, a threefold benefit: the suppression of the devils, avoidance of disease and knowledge of things to come.”<sup>53</sup> In the fourth century, “Dancing becomes a clearer, more public,

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51. Judith Lynne Hanna, “The Representation and Reality of Religion in Dance,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56.2 (1988), 281.

52. E. Louis Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and Popular Medicine*, Translated by E. Classen (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1977) 38–39.

53. Backman, *Religious Dances*, 328–329.

and more controversial feature of Christian devotion...when commemorations of the saints took on forms related to local festivals and processions, and hence ushered in a new phase of cultural adjustment and identity formation.”<sup>54</sup>

“Other evidence for dance from the period before 300 is mostly hints or allusions.”<sup>55</sup> An example of this is Philo of Alexandria who “had reported in the first century on the Therapeutae, an ascetic and philosophically minded Jewish community that sang, ‘original hymns in honour of God in many meters and tunes, at one time all together, and at another in answering harmony, gesturing and dancing.’”<sup>56</sup> Another example would be the discovery of the “Hymn of Christ” (also referred to as the “Dance Hymn”) in the apocryphal writing *The Acts of John*. It relates the celebration of the Last Supper, but includes Jesus inviting his disciples to dance in a circle and sing in a reciprocal, poetic, trinitarian litany.<sup>57</sup> Some will emphasize this account to assert dance’s early appearance in Christendom; however, nothing more is said about the form of the dance itself. “While intriguing, we do not know how it quite relates to any actual liturgical practice.... The dance could represent a custom of the community in which the work was produced; in that case, it was apparently an accompaniment to a meditative hymn of praise, an adjunct to the song and vice versa.”<sup>58</sup>

However, despite these hints and allusions of dance, prohibitions would soon arise:

From the fourth to the end of the eighteenth century ecclesiastical and lay authorities issued one prohibition after another against dancing in churches and church porches, in churchyards and for the dead. Every century, without exception, has such prohibitions: by

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54. Andrew B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 132.

55. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*, 131.

56. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*, 130.

57. Hellsten, “Dance in the Early Church,” 58.

58. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*, 129.

Fathers of the Church, popes, archbishops, bishops, missionaries, councils, synods and state authorities. They were most frequent at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of modern times. They are directed mainly against the debasement of the dance, against the participation of women and against crude magical churchyard dances.<sup>59</sup>

“The early church was eager to distance itself from the worldly connotations of dance in pagan worship and secular entertainment,”<sup>60</sup> as well as the superstitious “magic” practices. It seems the early church’s prohibitions against dance seemed more prevalent than their support for dance. It sought to keep dance separate from the church, and rightly so, considering the context.

Stephanie Scott continues noting the church’s relationship with dance:

As the church grew in Western Europe, a distinction developed in the worldview between sacred and secular activities. The result was a break in the relationship of dance to Christian worship. From the fourth century through the fourteenth century European Renaissance, there are accounts of church councils taking stands against dance... Although no longer accepted in sacred settings, dance flourished in the Western European secular world... Removed from the context of the sacred, it became art instead of worship... Removing dance from the sacred arena and restricting it to an art form impacted the way dance was embraced later as a part of Euro-American Christian worship... the relationship between the dancer and the congregation was one of performer and audience.<sup>61</sup>

Marilyn Daniels expands further regarding the Renaissance period:

During the Renaissance the dance in Christianity flourished in the theatrical allegorical ballets, in processional celebrations, in the oratorio, and in the interpretation of hymns and psalms in worship. The Church itself put a stop to these acts of worship in the post-Renaissance period. Neither the Roman Catholic Church nor the Protestant Christian Churches would allow sacred dances in their services. There were a variety of reasons for their decisions. Although they themselves had used it, they did not approve of the theatrical use of the dance. They found the folk acceptance of the dance to be pagan and without credence. With the printing of tracts, pamphlets, and books the mind became all important and the body was thought to be useless to religious growth.<sup>62</sup>

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59. Backman, *Religious Dances*, 331.

60. Scheer, *Essential Worship*, 184.

61. Stephanie S. Scott, “The Language of Liturgical Dance in African-American Christian Worship,” *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 27.1–2 (1999) 252–253.

62. Marilyn Daniels, *The Dance in Christianity: A History of Religious Dance Through the Ages* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist, 1981), 61.

Despite dance seeming to have some semblance of support during the Renaissance, resistance arose in the post-Renaissance period against dance as an act of worship. This view towards the body at this time is articulated well by Michael Amoah:

Doubtless, “bodiless music” [reserved or conservative bodily response to music] is essentially a medieval influence upon Christian theology. . . . In addition to Augustine, a number of notable figures including John Calvin and John of Salisbury expressed concern about the sensual uses that music could be put to within the church setting through body language of a sensual and seductive nature. However unnecessary “hostility to the body” might be, its occurrence in medieval Christianity seems to be due to anxieties about the sensual nature of dance.<sup>63</sup>

Although this “hostility to the body” would be a strong influence on Christendom, along with removing dance from sacred settings, a shift begins to occur in colonial and modern Christianity.

The First and Second Great Awakenings had a significant impact on how the body was used to express worship:

Beginning in the 1700s, two ‘Great Awakenings’ aimed to restore the fire of faith. Preachers such as George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, and Charles Finney held open-air sermons and camp meetings that led to waves of revival throughout America and England. By the end of the Great Awakenings a number of worship innovations were introduced: display of emotion, bodily/vocal expression, minimization of Calvinism, outdoor meetings, multiethnic gatherings, and folk music used in worship.<sup>64</sup>

This revivalist mode of worship would spread worldwide as missionaries were sent out. In eighteenth-century America, “The Shaker communities. . . were known for their spontaneous and choregraphed dances in worship, as well as the shaking and twitching that gave them their name.”<sup>65</sup> Also, “Worship among African-American slaves was marked by ecstatic movement,

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63. Michael Amoah, “Christian Music Worship and ‘Hostility to the Body’: The Medieval Influence versus the Pentecostal Revolution,” *Implicit Religion* 7.1 (2004), 64.

64. Scheer, *Essential Worship*, 60.

65. Scheer, *Essential Worship*, 184.

most notably the ‘ring shout.’<sup>66</sup> This was a precursor to the ‘praise break’<sup>67</sup> in modern African-American worship and surely influenced Pentecostals who are known for their ‘dancing in the Spirit.’<sup>68</sup> W.O.E. Oesterley describes this ecstatic movement:

The ecstatic dance is performed as the outcome of strong religious emotion; it begins quietly and without any indication of what is to come; but the intention to increase it gradually to an extravagant pitch is there from the commencement, and it continues until semi-consciousness, and even total unconsciousness is reached. The excitement caused by the dance frequently becomes contagious, so that others join in.<sup>69</sup>

If there is any one movement that has had significant influence on dance in Christianity, it would be Pentecostalism.

Scheer briefly observes Pentecostalism’s rise:

Pentecostalism...exploded into the public arena in 1906 with the Azusa Street revivals, and quickly spread through the United States and beyond...In the 1960s Pentecostal traits emerged in mainline denominations in the form of the Charismatic Movement...In the late 1960s, the Jesus People married hippie culture to evangelical belief with a Pentecostal-leaning worship style. This soon birthed the contemporary praise genre, reconnecting with Pentecostalism most clearly in the Vineyard movement. Whereas traditional Pentecostalism focused on exuberance and spiritual gifts, this new Vineyard-inspired Pentecostalism focused on expression and intimacy. The latter proved to be much more marketable. Indeed, a new generation of praise and worship songs exploded beyond the boundaries of the local church and quickly became a global phenomenon.<sup>70</sup>

“Pentecostalism’s Charismatic liturgy—its worship, music and dance—is its most attractive feature. Some have argued that by privileging experience and performance, Charismatic religion

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66. A ritual in which worshipers move in a circle while shuffling and stomping their feet, as well as clapping their hands.

67. Spontaneous displays of praise and worship that can involve shouting, dancing, and other ecstatic outbursts. Often caused by the emotional intensity of the music or individuals feeling the intense urge to give praise to God.

68. Scheer, *Essential Worship*, 184.

69. W.O.E. Oesterley, *Sacred Dance in the Ancient World* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2002), 135.

70. Scheer, *Essential Worship*, 62–63.

engages the whole person instead of emphasizing reason.”<sup>71</sup> Scheer continues by describing Pentecostal worship:

Pentecostals are proudly spontaneous, rejecting repeated worship patterns in favor of following the Holy Spirit in the moment. Pentecostal worship is exuberant, reviving biblical practices such as clapping, dancing, and raising hands. More than expressing mere human exuberance, Pentecostals aim to be Spirit-filled. They are best known for manifestations of the Spirit such as speaking in tongues, miraculous healings, and being ‘slain in the Spirit’ (falling down when overwhelmed by the Spirit’s power). Pentecostal worship is music-intensive. Whereas evangelical music might be merely functional, Pentecostal music is essential . . . . The Pentecostal experience is personal. While they gather in groups like every other church, in Pentecostal worship there is an expectation that the Spirit will meet each person in a unique and powerful way.<sup>72</sup>

This emphasis on the individual, emotionalism, and sensationalism in the endeavor to be Spirit-filled would be appealing features to the Western culture of America.<sup>73</sup> No wonder Pentecostalism has taken off. No wonder dance seems to be so prevalent among Pentecostal churches. It suits their theology very well.

So, what does all this history mean for Modern Christianity? For WELS Lutherans? From hints and allusions of dance, to prohibitions against dance, to sensational displays of dance, this means a call for wisdom for *all* Christians. For something so closely related to the secular world, incorporating dance into worship requires that a church dedicate time and effort into ensuring that it be distinguished from the secular world and other denominations differing in doctrine and theology, especially for us confessional Lutherans. We want to ensure our worship suits our doctrine and theology and not associate ourselves with doctrines and theologies that conflict with Scripture. We do not want anything to lead to confusion and division (Rom 16:17; 1 Cor 1:10) or

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71. Ogbu Uke Kalu, “Holy Praiseco: Negotiating Sacred and Popular Music and Dance in African Pentecostalism,” *Pneuma* 32.1 (2010), 17.

72. Scheer, *Essential Worship*, 62.

73. We in the WELS believe in the Means of Grace. Scripture reveals and teaches that the Holy Spirit chose to work in us and fill us *mediately* through the Means of Grace in Word and Sacrament (John 6:63; Rom 10:14–15, 17; 1 Cor 1:21; 12:3; Titus 3:5; Jas 1:18; 1 Pet 1:23).

lead others to stumble in their faith (Rom 14:13–21). We want to clearly communicate Christ to worshipers without obstruction. We also want to be faithful representatives of Christ to worshipers without offense. This requires that dance fit the purpose of worship and communicates what God has done for us in Christ, rather than fit human purposes of what we can do for God to gain and experience God. Worship is not about us. Worship is about God and to God; worship is God for us and with us. History offers perspective to churches in the present to determine the wisest steps moving forward in their worship.

### **Culture of Dance in Christianity**

While exploring the history of dance in Christianity certainly offers some perspective, we must go further than history. We must also explore how the culture of dance in Christianity further informs us in determining whether to incorporate dance into worship or not. This section will explore how culture affects both how one sees and utilizes dance.

What comes to mind when the word “dance” is mentioned? Ballet. Maybe hip-hop. Maybe parties and clubs. Perhaps even polka. Certainly, varieties of musical genre. The word “dance” opens up an extensive world and language that encompass varieties of styles, cultures, and genres, so extensive that this thesis could not begin to scratch the surface. However, what comes to mind when the word “liturgical dance” is mentioned? Perhaps the 1970s. Modern dance, ballet, or interpretive dance in church. Costumes, banners, and flags. Maybe dance movements that seem out of control. Probably feelings of being uncomfortable, elements of awkwardness, and being entertained. Or maybe not. Maybe pleased, fulfilled, and edified. The differences between “dance” and “liturgical dance” are quite stark.



“Liturgical dance” can be a loaded term. What does it exactly mean? Should we rather use “praise dance” or “sacred dance” or “sacred movement” or “worship dance?” What would be a sufficient term to clearly convey to people dance in worship settings as opposed to dance in secular settings? The important matter for consideration is not just a matter of terms, but a matter of educating what is meant by the terms. Scott captures well a definition for liturgical dance:

When speaking of dance as a language for relating spiritual experiences in the Christian worldview, the term liturgical dance is used. The ability to distinguish dance as liturgical comes from the understanding of liturgy as the work of the people in service to God. The dance is liturgical because it gives testimony to God's work in the life of the dancer and the dancer's work in service to God.<sup>74</sup>

“Liturgical” understood in this way captures well the purpose dance should have in worship settings: The work of proclaiming Christ and his gospel in service to Christ and his gospel. However, this still leaves the term “dance.”

“The... word ‘dance’ in some languages and cultures seems to have no other connotation than something tied with love, with diversion, with [the profane], with unbridling of the senses... [it] can too easily and incorrectly be associated with a personal or group activity that is ‘not pure’.... Such a mindset prejudices an objective discussion and judgment about liturgical dance.”<sup>75</sup> The culture of Christianity in the western world, generally, is more wary and conservative when it comes to dance as a worship practice:

Many Christians would be uncomfortable with the idea of communicating truth nonverbally. We are, after all, people of the Word. Does it not follow that words are the best—or only—way of communicating the Word?... If verbal message were the only necessary tool to communicate truth, think how easy parenting would be—we would simply tell our children all the right things to do and their education would be complete! But we all know this... method doesn't work.... Of course, the arts shouldn't be set in opposition to word-based communication. They are commonly partners with words.<sup>76</sup>

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74. Scott, “The Language of Liturgical Dance,” 250.

75. Thomas A. Krosnicki, “Dance within the Liturgical Act,” *Worship* 45.10 (1971), 350.

76. Scheer, *Essential Worship*, 126–127.

The non-verbal nature of dance should not disqualify it as a worship practice because dance is often accompanied with music—vocal and instrumental. If the harmony between music and dance function well, naturally, the message needing to be conveyed will be clear.

Judith Rock and Norman Mealy comment on the non-verbal nature of dance:

Biblically rooted music and dance deepen our knowledge of God, ourselves, and each other. Composers and choreographers working in religious settings or with religious material are creating and presenting theological images. These nonverbal statements have great power to shape our understanding and action—often greater power than verbal communications have.<sup>77</sup>

How could dance have greater power? A simple illustration of the powerful impact dance can make is the impact of making the connection between a person's name and face. The impact of connecting a person's name with his or her face is identity. In a similar way, the impact of music, movement, and message connecting results in spectators finding significance. This is especially impactful for visual learners. The relationship between spectators and the dance becomes meaningful in real, visual time as the dance progresses. Rock elaborates on this relationship:

Dance finds the congregation in one place, and by the end has made its impact by what it has communicated through movement. The congregation is an outwardly passive audience, but inwardly there is activity in processing, pondering, and significance. This is accomplished in part by means of kinesthetic identification. If a choreographer has used his or her tools well, the congregation will be physically galvanized [drawn in], though they appear to be sitting still. They will have a physical sense of identification with the movement taking place before them.... These physical events and sensations are the heart of dance, and the key to its communicative power.<sup>78</sup>

There is value to the art of dance as a visual vehicle carrying communicative power to proclaim Christ and his gospel.

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77. Rock and Mealy, *Performer*, 43.

78. Rock and Mealy, *Performer*, 6.

However, this communicative power is only effective and edifying in the appropriate contexts and cultures. “Diverse cultural backgrounds and personality types make it highly unlikely that a one-size-fits-all Sunday suit can be tailored to clad all Christians.”<sup>79</sup> God is the source of all good things in all cultures.<sup>80</sup> A church is responsible to ensure that God and his gifts to different cultures are reflected in worship as blessings. One must understand the congregation’s community and culture in order for something as unique as dance to be a beneficial and constructive worship practice. Cultures are dynamic, not static; no one culture stands absolute over another, all cultures are relative to their contexts and communities. There must be a genuine respect for differing cultures in the exchange of cultural meanings.<sup>81</sup> This is where critical contextualization can be helpful in determining what will be most meaningful.

Critical contextualization harmonizes—strikes the balance between—scriptural faithfulness and cultural relevance.<sup>82</sup> W. Jay Moon describes this in reference to discipleship:

Instead of uncritically mixing Scripture and culture (syncretism) or isolating Scripture from culture (split-level Christianity), critical contextualization engages Scripture in a hermeneutical community to critique culture for discipleship. Some aspects of culture will need to be changed or modified. Some aspects of culture will need to be rejected, while other aspects can be accepted and used in Christian discipleship.<sup>83</sup>

What Moon says here applies to what churches do with dance. There may be a specific dance in a culture that needs to be rejected, but perhaps not with other dances in other cultures. If not rejected, then the next challenge is considering how the gospel can be conveyed clearly and

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79. Frankforter, *Stones for Bread*, xi.

80. Aaron A. Chisha, “Praise the Lord with Dancing (Ps. 50),” *AFER* 25.1 (1983), 31.

81. Krosnicki, “Dance within the Liturgical Act,” 357.

82. W. Jay Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship: Learning from Global Approaches to Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 38.

83. Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship*, 36.

meaningfully. Excluding dance only inhibits critical contextualization, and is a missed opportunity at best and a deep disservice at worst to any dance culture or community receiving the gospel.<sup>84</sup> It would be worthwhile to briefly explore how the different cultures of Africans, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders view and utilize dance.

“It has been said that Africans sing and dance their theology. Oral learners value learning that is empathic and participatory instead of objective distanced. Through dancing, people participate in the song and feel the theological meaning, not merely gain more head knowledge.”<sup>85</sup> A college dance professor in Ghana tells how vital dance is in African culture:

In Africa the performing arts are not just for the stage. They are part of the life of the people—a language that is seen in everyday activity. It is therefore sad that Christianity has not explored using much of the arts as they already exist in Africa. Songs that came with the faith are foreign. Our many traditional musical instruments were all rejected. So even though our people embraced the Christian faith, it is still seen today as a European religion. This is why it is necessary to initiate moves that will lead to the Christians in Africa incorporating their dances, drumming, and singing into the expression of their faith for upcoming generations to see Christianity as their own.<sup>86</sup>

This professor makes the case that the various ways Africans express their faith through sentiments of joy, happiness, sorrow, hope, and love should be taken into strong consideration. If these various ways do not suggest immorality or impiety, then they can be ways that can enrich their liturgy and promote active participation of the local people.<sup>87</sup> The offertory dance is an example of serving as a liturgical function for their worship services as a physical expression of

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84. Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship*, 189.

85. Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship*, 59.

86. Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship*, 188-189.

87. Chisha, “Praise the Lord,” 30.

dancing their offerings of thanks up to the altar to God.<sup>88</sup> In African culture, “it would be very rare to find a celebration worthy of the name without a dance in one or another form.”<sup>89</sup>

In Native American cultures, “dancing is often deeply connected to spirituality,” and dance, the drum, and song are essential elements to their worship.<sup>90</sup> As a Native American who is part of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe of Arizona, I can attest that this is true. In our tribe, the mood is created with traditional instruments, employing the reed flute, percussion, rasps, rattles, and chanting to accompany the Deer Dancer in the Deer Dance.<sup>91</sup> Our tribal traditions have been merged with Catholicism, which is an example of syncretism. Although not an ideal approach compared to critical contextualization as Moon previously discussed, this approach does highlight an important element—dance—in our culture and the importance of engaging it. The Deer Dance remains a central feature of today’s Pascua Yaqui Tribe. “Pascua” is Spanish for “Easter,” and this Deer Dance is most prominent in ceremonies that depict Holy Week. Another tribe to consider is the Dakota tribe. Moon comments:

A contextual approach to indigenous dancing directs disciples to maintain a Christ-centered life, using culturally available genre. As Cloud-Chief Eagle, a Dakota traditional hoop dancer, described, “When I dance, I do it as unto the Lord. I never think of dancing as performing. It’s more like worship and celebrations to me.” As a result, she maintains her identity as both a Native American and a Christian. That is something to sing about!<sup>92</sup>

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88. Chisha, “Praise the Lord,” 31.

89. Chisha, “Praise the Lord,” 30.

90. Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship*, 186.

91. The Yaqui Deer Dance is a traditional dance where the Deer Dancer reenacts a dramatic deer hunt to honor the natural world and the white tail deer. The Yaqui people believe the deer will guide them as they leave this earth and journey to the heavens. This dance is an iconic symbol of Yaqui spirituality that mimics the connection which the Yaqui people have with nature. Bonding this traditional dance with Christianity (Catholicism predominately) preserves their ancestral beliefs and embraces Christian beliefs. You can visit the Pascua Yaqui’s official website here: <https://www.pascuayaqui-nsn.gov/>.

92. Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship*, 190.

From this testimony, cultural identity can be retained along with Christian identity and dance can be a way of deepening and fortifying this.<sup>93</sup>

In the culture of the Pacific Islands, “Dance permeates virtually all aspects of Pacific life. Dances occur at births, coming of age rituals, marriages, and even occasionally at funerals. However, the relationship between dance and the Church has been, at best, a cautious one, and at worst, a hostile one since the arrival of the missionaries in the nineteenth century.”<sup>94</sup> An example of this can be found in the following account with the *heliaki*<sup>95</sup> in Tonga:

The dancers were able to portray ancient biblical stories in a "Tongan way" due to their use of *heliaki*.... Early missionaries to Tonga lacked understanding of the cultural practice of *heliaki*. The Gospel was presented in a direct way. The wealth of Tongan metaphorical language was considered irrelevant to the task of [Christianizing] the Tongan people. Yet *heliaki* remained an important, underlying feature of Tongan dance. When Scripture is presented through Tongan dance, therefore, the Gospel message is heard in a completely new way by Tongans. When Jesus is alluded to in dance - through the process of *heliaki* - he is honoured in a uniquely Tongan way.<sup>96</sup>

Clearly, dance was an integral part of Tongan culture which these early missionaries lacked in understanding which led to not engaging it with critical contextualization—balancing scriptural faithfulness and cultural relevance. “Dance is an integral part of all Pacific cultures. Dance could therefore act as a unifying factor in an ecumenical, multicultural Pacific setting.”<sup>97</sup> “Dance in the Pacific has the power to evoke ecstatic joy and intense spiritual clarity in performers and

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93. Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship*, 204.

94. Kelly Johnson-Hill, “Dance and Worship in the Pacific Islands: A Comparative Study with Implications for an Emerging Ecumenical Consciousness,” *The Asia Journal of Theology* 18.2 (2004), 362.

95. Translated as "not going straight" or "to say one thing but mean another," *heliaki* is a subtle but recognizable feature of Tongan life. In the context of Tongan dance, *heliaki* is considered a Tongan aesthetic principle that is realized through metaphor and allusion. In sung poetry and accompanying dance, people, places and events are subtly alluded to but never mentioned directly. To do so would be considered embarrassing and insulting.

96. Johnson-Hill, “Dance and Worship in the Pacific Islands,” 367.

97. Johnson-Hill, “Dance and Worship in the Pacific Islands,” 368.

audience alike. These aspects, as well as the narrative function of Pacific dance, make it ideal for use in Christian worship.”<sup>98</sup>

In Hawaii, *hula* possesses a narrative function. A Kumu Hula (Hula instructor) talked about *hula* in this way: “For me there is no hula—there is no dance—without the words. The words are what will guide or inspire the creation of expression in this particular form.”<sup>99</sup> *Hula* is narrative in nature. Each narrative that is to be told will be different depending on the words and music. This challenges one to bring out the emotion and message of that narrative, and this determines what the movements will look like. It is one’s business to convey and communicate all of this clearly and sincerely.<sup>100</sup> If one’s business is to tell the story of God’s grace and goodness in Christ, would not *hula* be a great way of doing this in Hawaiian culture?

So, what can be learned after exploring dance among the cultures of Africans, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders? “God works through all cultures, but also transcends all cultures. Above all, the use of cultural dance in worship should reflect this.”<sup>101</sup> It can be very easy to overlook, underappreciate, and misunderstand the depth and meaning of dance in various cultures if one is not born into or a part of such cultures.<sup>102</sup> Those born into and a part of such cultures are able to “differentiate dances and the messages they communicate.... Like a heart language, these dances communicate deeply to both the local participants and observers.”<sup>103</sup>

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98. Johnson-Hill, “Dance and Worship in the Pacific Islands,” 371.

99. “Kumu Hula Share Insights During Merrie Monarch (Apr. 6, 2018),” YouTube.com, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j8zQNh8lxIk>.

100. “Hula Dance (documentary short),” YouTube.com (Oct. 29, 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vPueyJqOuA>.

101. Johnson-Hill, “Dance and Worship in the Pacific Islands,” 371.

102. Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship*, 187.

103. Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship*, 118–119.

Dance can be embraced by churches, but the challenge for churches is to seriously consider if the culture permits for its incorporation and how to utilize critical contextualization. Finding the balance between scriptural faithfulness and cultural relevance is a challenging—but not impossible—task that can be of great benefit to a culture and community a church serves not only in outreach and evangelism, but also in worship.

### **What does the Bible say about dance?**

What does the Bible say about *incorporating* dance into worship? To answer that question specifically, the Bible says nothing. The Bible is not clear on how or if dance should be incorporated into worship. Dance falls under *adiaphora* and is to be handled in Christian freedom, as discussed in part one. A universal “Christian movement vocabulary” does *not* exist that can be applied to all Christian cultures. In addition, no one can insist upon one way or style of carrying out dance in worship. Such a view only “demonstrates cultural nearsightedness and an underappreciation of the diversity of cultures that Christendom has reached.”<sup>104</sup> So, it is better to ask the question in another way: what does the Bible say about dance?

Dance is specifically referenced as a form of expressing praise to the Lord in: Exod 15:20; 2 Sam 6:14; Ps 30:11; 149:3; 150:4. In addition, nowhere in Scripture does God specifically prohibit dance. However, it is important to note that these references are *descriptive* passages about dance, not *prescriptive* passages that dance should be an essential component of worship. Dr. John Brug notes, “we have no evidence for dance being used in the temple service itself. It may have been used mainly in festival processions to the temple.”<sup>105</sup> We just do not

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104. Johnson-Hill, “Dance and Worship in the Pacific Islands,” 363.

105. John F. Brug, *A Commentary on Psalms 73–150* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2004), 514–515.



know specifically *how* Miriam, David, or the Israelites danced or if they incorporated it into temple worship. Even if it were revealed in Scripture or discovered, it would still be *descriptive* and not *prescriptive*.

A pastor makes the following critique based on his reaction to a 2013 Easter Vigil Liturgical Dance at Newman Hall Holy Spirit Parish in Berkley, California where the elements of the Lord's Supper were brought up and set up on the altar via dance: "Why is it that David's impromptu dance before the Lord has become the script for modern liturgical ideas when an unbroken history of reverence is quickly discarded in favor of a circus atmosphere?"<sup>106</sup> While perhaps a bit harsh, there is truth to what he says. We cannot use these references to dance as *prescriptive* to insist on the incorporation of dance or as an *excuse* to allow for a poor incorporation. However, dance is still something permissible to do—whether in general, profession, or worship. Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven," and later in verse four, "a time to mourn and a time to dance" (NIV84). There is a time and place for dance, which also means there is a time and place to refrain from dance. How is this determined? The Bible does not make this clear, but it gives Christians the freedom to wisely determine this, as mentioned in part one.

We recognize that dance is a very visual and physical art, but we also recognize that it can glorify God (Ps 149:3) or sin against God (Exod 32:19). It is important to remember that sin can take advantage of the body in sinful ways. The Bible calls for us to be watchful of this, to cast away such sinful desires and actions to do so, and distinguish ourselves as Christians.<sup>107</sup> However, it is just as important *not* to regard the body as "icky" or downplay its specialness.

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106. Pastor Peters, "I must admit I have never met a liturgical dance I liked..." PastoralMeanderings.com (Feb. 3, 2015), <http://pastoralmeanderings.blogspot.com/2015/02/i-must-admit-i-have-never-met.html>.

107. Matt 5:28; Gal 5:13–26; Col 3:5; 1 Pet 2:11; 1 Cor 6:18–20; 2 Cor 6:14–20.

After all, our bodies are wonderful creations of the Creator to be used in every way—mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually—to serve, honor, and glorify him!<sup>108</sup> Not as our own, but as his own! Churches need to be *careful* in how they regard dance, and not be instinctually condemning towards it. Luther in his sermon from his Church Postil of 1525 comments:

Is it a sin to pipe and dance at a wedding, since they say that much sin comes from dancing? Whether the Jews had dances, I do not know. But since it is the custom of the land, just as inviting guests, decorating the house, eating and drinking and being merry are customary—I do not know why I should condemn it unless people go out of bounds, and the dance becomes indecent or is carried too far. But the dance alone is not to blame for the fact that people commit sin while it is going on, for they commit such sins even at table and in church. In like manner, eating and drinking are not to blame for the fact that some folk turn into pigs. But where decency prevails, I let the wedding run its usual and rightful course and dance as much as I please...If you are decent and moderate, you cannot dance or sit away faith and love.<sup>109</sup>

Neither the dance nor the body are necessarily sinful in and of themselves, but it is the sinner that gives way for sin to lead astray or afflict consciences. As those who have been brought out of darkness into the wonderful light of Christ, this joy is to be proclaimed and expressed in such a way that follows God’s many and clear imperatives to praise him with everything that is within us and everything that God has created—whether through musical instruments, singing, dance, feasting, celebration, or all of the above!<sup>110</sup>

So, how do history, culture, and the Bible set the stage for the *function* of dance in worship? History offers perspective from churches in the past to inform churches in the present to determine what will be beneficial for the sacred space of worship. However, culture encourages churches to be scripturally faithful and culturally relevant to a community of people

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108. Ps 139:13–16; Rom 12:1; 1 Cor 6:19–20.

109. *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 76, *Church Postil II*, Edited by Benjamin T. G. Mayes and James L. Langebartels (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2013), 241-242.

110. Navarro, *The Complete Worship Service*, 44.

in order to ensure clear and meaningful communication of Christ and his gospel. Most importantly, the Bible articulates that the gifts God has given to us are to be treasured and utilized to his glory and for the building up of faith. Part one of this thesis established the focus dance must have in worship, which in turn, has given purpose for its function in worship: to capitalize on and utilize the gifts of God's people in their culture and community to glorify God, proclaim Christ, and build up the church. Part two offers three principles for the function of dance in worship: (1) respect the sacred space of worship, (2) be both culturally relevant and scripturally faithful to the people served, and (3) display the wonderful gifts of God with wisdom and without shame. Now, part three will explore what blessings can unfold and what challenges can arise if churches incorporate dance into worship.

## PART THREE: ADORATION THROUGH DANCE

Adoration through dance can be a unique element of worship in the right church. There are blessings to consider, but there are challenges to not overlook. Without being exhaustive, this section will highlight three major challenges and then three major blessings worth our attention.

### Challenges

The first major challenge to adoration through dance is negative connotations with dance. These can arise either from personal preferences, experience, or culture. “The word ‘dance’ is often accompanied by feelings of awkwardness, embarrassment, or discomfort” from a “poorly-conceived or poorly-executed dance.”<sup>111</sup> In the western culture of conservative Christianity, people are generally not “comfortable with the fact of embodiment.”<sup>112</sup> In addition, “issues of sensuality and sexuality are...immediately raised. For adults of all ages, enjoying the body’s possibilities usually implies sexuality. Because dance is the artform of the body, it is closely connected to sexuality and easily suggests it.”<sup>113</sup> This is one reason churches generally are wary of dance being carried out in the church. In addition, “views of performance in modern American culture have been heavily conditioned by a commercial theatre, as well as film and television industries operated for profit.”<sup>114</sup> Other challenges include elements in American culture: lust for leisure, instant pleasure, expressive individualism, sensationalism, and liberalism.<sup>115</sup> It is hard

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111. Deena Borchers, “Dance in Christian Worship,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 17.3 (1990), 207.

112. Maggie Kast, “Dancing in Sacred Space: Some Reflections on Liturgy and Performance,” *Religion and the Arts* 4.2 (2000), 218.

113. Rock and Mealy, *Performer*, 97.

114. Kast, “Dancing in Sacred Space,” 218.

115. Tiefel, “Liturgical Worship,” 8.

not to associate dance with secular society. It can be tempting to cultivate a worship experience that caters to such a culture to attract, be novel, and be relevant at the expense of ensuring Christ and his gospel predominate in worship. It then becomes a challenge for how the dance should look, what to wear, and how to go about distinguishing dance in the church versus dance in secular society. Eliminating negative connotations with dance in a congregation is a difficult task, but requires vital attention for a congregation to embrace dance as a worship practice.

The second major challenge is criticism against dance. This criticism is of a wide array; however, I will highlight three. The first: “I’m not even going to say that liturgical dance has no place in the church, although I believe we might call that place ‘the 1970s.’ There are better and worse examples of liturgical dance but the problem with the whole thing is that it is almost unbelievably difficult for it to match with what Lutheran worship is about.”<sup>116</sup> The second:

In brief, liturgical dance is, well, not liturgical. In liturgy God speaks to us with his word and we say back to God what he has said to us. God does not speak to us through dance. While dance is very expressive and can express the entire gamut of human emotions and desires, it is not the means through which God speaks to us sinful humans. He speaks to us through his Word. It is his word which draws us in. It is his word which keeps us engaged in the liturgy . . . His word alone kills us sinners and raises us to new life. And it is through the word alone that the Spirit does such work. The Spirit is not in the dance, but in the Word.<sup>117</sup>

Then, the third: “I suppose if the performers did their jigs, more appropriately, in a dance hall then it couldn’t technically be called liturgical dance, now could it? But that raises the question . . . if the only thing making the dance number spiritual is the location and not the performance itself[,] how exactly is the spectacle supposed to [be] religiously edifying?”<sup>118</sup>

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116. Mollie Hemingway, “Nothing Says ‘Lutheran’ like Liturgical Dance,” SteadfastLutherans.org (April 22, 2010), <https://steadfastlutherans.org/2010/04/nothing-says-lutheran-like-liturgical-dance/>.

117. “‘Liturgical Dance’ is not ‘Liturgical,’” LutheranLayman.com (June 6, 2015) <http://www.lutheranlayman.com/2015/06/liturgical-dance-is-not-liturgical.html>.

118. Katrina Fernandez, “There is Never a Good Reason for Liturgical Dance . . .,” Patheos.com (Aug. 8, 2013),

So, what should be concluded from these criticisms? Five things: (1) Dance must understand and follow the purpose of worship to enhance worship, (2) Dance without the Word being conveyed and communicated clearly to edify worshipers is not worthy of being in worship, (3) Dance located in the church does not give the dance instant spiritual credibility, (4) Dance should never distract from how the Spirit works through the Word (Rom 10:17; 1 Cor 12:3), or never forget that the Spirit dwells in us and we must reflect such with our bodies (Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 6:19–20); then, (5) Meaning must first be found in the message of Christ which is what Lutheran worship is about—focusing worshipers’ attention and response on what God has done for us in Christ, and not on what man has done or can do. While the criticisms are seemingly negative against dance, these conclusions demonstrate criticism can be helpful for improvement. It is important to recognize that ridicule, failure, and misunderstanding will always be a risk when presenting works of dance, but it is just as important to process and differentiate constructive and destructive criticism.<sup>119</sup>

Finally, the third challenge to consider is lack of ability and willingness. Ability not only encompasses the expertise required by the dancers, but also a church’s capability to give the dancers the necessary resources. These resources include space in the church, space for practice, attire, equipment, dance training and education, and a number of other necessities. To put it another way, if a church does not have a budget for a dance group or ministry that is a consistent part of a church’s worship and ministry, then dance will struggle to be an effective and edifying component of the church. The same goes if there is a weakness in leadership ability. It cannot be stressed enough that in order for dance to be something worthwhile in worship, willing and

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<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/thecrescat/2013/08/there-is-never-a-good-reason-for-liturgical-dance.html>. [Katrina Fernandez intentionally chose this title to accurately reflect her position against liturgical dance.]

119. Rock and Mealy, *Performer*, 59.

experienced choreographers and dance instructors with a grasp of Scripture’s truths and love for people are necessary. Coercing or manipulating people do not foster a group and ministry with a heart to serve God and his people. If nobody can be found, or nobody willing and experienced, the church needs to explore ways to ensure proper training and equipping of leadership. Otherwise, the church should wait or not follow through with dance as a practice and/or ministry.

### **Blessings**

The first major blessing to adoration through dance is that the Word is conveyed and communicated in a unique way. In an interview with Karen Marinin, she noted the following:

There is something in the physical element of dance that is hitting this emotional place in people that they do not know how to tap into. That is a blessing of dance that we do not even fully understand. Only God can know why that is happening or what is actually being ministered to in that person. But certainly, it reaches into someone in a way that just words in a song do not do.<sup>120</sup>

Meaning and words being communicated through movement can be impactful. Something visual paired with words and music can cement scriptural truths in a unique way. This “inward kinesthetic response by members of the congregation means that[,] even as they sit in pews as spectators,”<sup>121</sup> they can find themselves vicariously participating in the dance, processing its meaning for significance. Hellsten comments on dance’s unique ability to communicate:

[D]ance seems to have the capacity to grasp things that are important but not amenable to being pinned down. Many have concluded that the theological and philosophical importance of dance to theology mainly resides in its function as a “symbol”, or as a metaphor for something else. What I will argue however is that if one chooses one of these much-travelled roads in one’s telling of the story of dance and theology, or dance and philosophy, one will miss the significance of dance altogether.<sup>122</sup>

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120. Karen Marinin—Worship Arts Instructor and Director of Ministry Outreach at Acts 17:28 Dance Studio in a panel interview conducted on Nov. 4, 2020 along with two other Acts 17:28 instructors.

121. Taylor, *A Time to Dance*, 9.

122. Hellsten, “Dance in the Early Church,” 56.

There is formative power in dance in its communication, and it cannot be merely reduced to just a “symbol.” The key to it offering more and being formatively powerful is *who* are being served by this dance. If the people being served are God’s people, then God’s Word must be communicated. The dance must be Word-oriented and Word-driven.

The second major blessing is that dance presents an opportunity to teach and be thankful about God’s gift of the body. It is unfortunate that as Christians we can forget the blessing God gives us with our bodies. We are fearfully and wonderfully made (Ps 139:13–16) and temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19–20) who are to offer our bodies as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1) to the God who gave us such bodies! What a blessing and what an opportunity that dance offers for churches to be able to teach and reinforce this! Not necessarily in the worship service itself—though it would certainly be an indirect way—but it encourages pastors and teachers to teach about God’s gift of the body in Bible classes and Sunday schools. It is all too easy for churches to proclaim what *should not* be done with the body for God’s glory, rather than what *can* be done with the body for God’s glory (1 Cor 10:31).

The use of dance can assist and encourage Christians to appreciate their bodies not so much as instruments of enticement, but instruments of righteousness (Rom 6:13). I challenge churches with these questions: How are we teaching our children, youth, students, and members about God’s gift of the body and what can be done with it? How are we reinforcing scriptural truths about the blessings God has granted in the totality of our bodies? Scriptural teaching and understanding of the body are where we must begin with dance, rather than casting dance away as an outcast to the church. Professor Aaron Christie powerfully articulates this importance:

If Christians won’t engage with the arts, then don’t cluck when the arts are denigrated and become carnal, banal, saturated with sexuality and all those things. . . . [I]f the church won’t engage in some of those things, or God’s people’s vocations don’t engage the arts



in their daily lives, then the Church doesn't get to complain about Hollywood because we have given up that fight and handed the arts over to them.<sup>123</sup>

We must reclaim this fine art gifted to us by God. We must reclaim this fine art that sin and the world have tainted. We must reclaim dance as the gift God intended to be used to his glory.

Glorielle Niedfeldt wisely stated, "Dancers are the keepers of the sights of God."<sup>124</sup> If music in the church can be distinct from music in secular society, why not dance? The church can improve in how it safeguards and magnifies God's physical blessings of the body.

Finally, the third major blessing is that dance presents opportunities for involving the gifts of God's people. Churches should cherish their members who are skilled in various areas of worship and foster their gifts like parents would their own children. They should identify the different gifts they have received and encourage them to fully use their gifts in service to the God who not only has graciously given them, but also works through them (1 Cor 12:4–7). "Many people just need a little support and direction to bring their talents to a higher level."<sup>125</sup> Luther speaks on this matter: "Nor am I of the opinion that the gospel should destroy and blight all the arts...used in the service of Him who gave and made them. I therefore pray that every pious Christian would be pleased with this and lend his help if God has given him like or greater gifts."<sup>126</sup> Incorporating dance into the church can be meaningful for members with the gifts by actively involving them in their church and for God to edify a church through them.<sup>127</sup>

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123. Aaron Christie—Professor of Worship and Homiletics at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary—in an interview conducted on October 28, 2020.

124. Glorielle Niedfeldt—Dance instructor at Acts 17:28 Dance Studio—in a panel interview conducted on Nov. 4, 2020 along with two other Acts 17:28 instructors.

125. Scheer, *Essential Worship*, 257.

126. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, 316.

127. Taylor, *A Time to Dance*, 7.

Weyman and Deiss cite a situation of the impact dance had on church involvement:

[P]reparing a dance group in a parish can be a tool for developing a good community spirit. One pastor said that liturgical dance had fostered community spirit among his people when other methods for strengthening community had failed. The girls of the parish did the dancing; the boys provided the singing and the playing of musical instruments to enrich the accompaniment. The mothers, aunts, and grandmothers selected fabric, cut out the patterns, and sewed the costumes. The fathers were involved by driving the participants to and from rehearsals. By the time the day arrived for the dance to be presented, a true community was formed in the parish and everyone looked forward to the celebration in which they would better honor the Lord through dance.<sup>128</sup>

This situation demonstrates how multi-faceted dance could be in a church, fostering member fellowship and involvement in the church. However, it should be mentioned, that dance should never be limited to *just* female participation. It is unfortunate that the nineteenth and twentieth-century Christian church—even today still—has viewed dance often as a feminine art. Dance could well afford to have male participation as well<sup>129</sup> to display the blessing of God’s crown of creation in man and woman proclaiming Christ and ascribing worth to Christ (Rev 5:12).

Adoration through dance certainly presents challenges; however, it also presents wonderful blessings. Leadership must seriously weigh the value dance may offer to the congregation. If there is value, leadership must properly inform and prepare the congregation of the possibilities dance may offer. “People [may not always be] receptive to change, but education can foster reception.”<sup>130</sup> Heather Keckeisen comments further on this:

The congregation needs to know [dance is] welcomed into the environment. [They] need to know from leadership...that this is accepted already. [They cannot think,] “We’re going to accept it once we see what you do.” [But rather think] “We have accepted that this is something we want incorporated into what we’re doing.” I think this is a move that leadership has to make because artists can’t speak that part for themselves.<sup>131</sup>

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128. Weyman and Deiss, “Movement and Dance,” 73.

129. Rock and Mealy, *Performer*, 48.

130. Michelle Brown—Director of the dance ministry, Verity, at St. John’s Lutheran Church in Antigua—in an interview conducted on October 26, 2020.

131. Heather Keckeisen—Ballet instructor and the Director of Student Development at Acts 17:28 Dance

Dancers should cooperate with their church leadership to educate the congregation about the opportunities dance may offer to the church. Part three of this thesis directs them to examine *together* what blessings may unfold and what challenges may arise if dance is incorporated into worship.

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Studio—in a panel interview conducted on Nov. 4, 2020 along with two other Acts 17:28 instructors.

## CONCLUSION

To dance or not to dance? Perhaps answering the question with a “yes” has now become a “no,” or perhaps the reverse. Perhaps there are more questions after reading this thesis. No matter the case, there is a need for churches, WELS, to take a closer and more respectable look at dance. There is a need for us to reclaim this fine art of God to be used in worship, or perhaps other avenues of ministry. Professor Christie comments, “In the ministry, I just think it’s just a wide-open opportunity for churches to take the fine arts seriously. It’s a gift of God as long as we’re human creatures.”<sup>132</sup> There is opportunity for dance to belong in the church once it has been claimed by the church to be utilized for the glory of God and the building up of the church.

Now, am I proposing that dance take over current worship traditions in Christianity, in WELS, and *must* be incorporated into worship? By no means. Am I proposing that dance should *never* be incorporated into worship? By no means. My thesis has proposed in three parts that we consider how dance can relate to the focus of biblical worship, how it can function as an element of worship, and what blessings can unfold and what challenges can arise. All of this helps us to determine our ability for the best incorporation of dance into worship. The focus must rest in Christ and the gospel. We have the freedom to wisely incorporate dance in a way that glorifies God and builds the church up in faith. We must expand our cultural considerations for dance to effectively function in communicating Christ and the gospel and serve a community of people more meaningfully. Our leadership and members gifted in dance must work *together* to consider the value dance may or may not offer. We must understand the blessings and challenges dance presents in order to better educate our congregations. Dance must be a welcome and wanted worship practice for it to be beneficial and constructive to our congregations.

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132. Aaron Christie—Professor of Worship and Homiletics at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary—in an interview conducted on October 28, 2020.

Dance is *God's* art, not man's. It is to be treated as such. If this art presents value to a congregation, then an important conversation must be had. To avoid or reject this conversation is unwise, is a disservice to the people served, and disregards the opportunities God offers with this art. Churches, WELS, can greatly improve upon this area. Pastor Jason Richardson comments:

We in the WELS can be more open-minded without giving up our Lutheran tradition and heritage.... The gospel reveals we have freedom to incorporate things into worship. God didn't prescribe anything specific but left it to the church. This is why worship looks differently around the world. All nations are not all the same because all cultures are not all the same... To think our gifts are the only ones acceptable to God and our ways the right way of worship and not another's... is a bit condescending. At the end of the day, it is the Holy Spirit who blesses your ministry. We must have a healthy respect for one another's worship practices.<sup>133</sup>

We worship the Savior of all nations—all peoples of all cultures. Worship will reflect this diversity. The *way* worshipers worship will *differ* throughout the world. However, the *who* whom worshipers worship remains the *same* throughout the world. We respect one another as we revere the God who has given us this beautiful blessing of diversity. My work *begins* to raise awareness of a God-given gift—dance—that we may not be making use of as wisely and faithfully as we could in some communities we serve. However, since my work is only the *beginning* to a larger conversation about dance in worship, there are some shortcomings.

There are perhaps four major shortcomings to my work. First, I have a personal passion for dance, as well as experience. This could have hindered further elaboration on negative outlooks and criticisms against dance as a worship practice. Secondly, I briefly addressed the vast subject of the culture of dance in Christianity. This left out the opportunity to further explore the culture of dance in America and how that relates to American churches. Thirdly, I briefly addressed dance's young and fairly unknown history in Christianity which makes it difficult for

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133. Pastor Jason Richardson—Pastor at St. John's Lutheran Church in Antigua—in an interview conducted on October 19, 2020.

readers to grasp the reception and rejection of dance in the history of Christian worship. Lastly, I could have included for readers a literature review to further expand on why I pursued this thesis, how my sources support my research, and the value of my sources.

Despite the shortcomings of my work, they do reveal many areas for future research. One could be exploring *how* dance can be formally incorporated into the worship service—investigating from biblical, cultural, ecclesiastical, and professional perspectives. Related to this, it would be worthwhile to explore what an effective and impactful dance ministry looks like in a church. Or perhaps a bit more ambitious, how could WELS establish a formal dance program, institution, or mission field to the dance communities in California or New York? Or even in Hawaii? What steps would need to be taken? What would a core group look like? Certainly an intriguing area of research. Another area could be investigating the scientific, psychological, and educational implications of dance that are valuable for a church. Or another area, investigating how church architecture impacts dance and which layout is most ideal for incorporating dance into worship. Finally, it would be intriguing to compare and contrast dance in different cultures and their implications for ministry. These are some examples of how dance can bring us into a vast world of research. However, dance brings us into so much more than that.

Dance does not just bring us into a world of art, movement, and culture. Dance brings us into a world of people, and is this not what ministry is about? Ministry is about people. Ministry is about relationships. Ministry is about being all things to all people for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor 9:22–23). Ministry is about connecting people with their Savior through the gospel. If dance presents an opportunity for churches to engage a world of people with the gospel, then may churches take advantage of dance to the best of their ability, for the building up of the church, and always to the glory of God.

## APPENDIX—INTERVIEW QUESTION GUIDE

Describe your experience with...

- Dance
- Worship in the church
- Dance and worship
- Dance and performance

How long has dance been incorporated in your church? How was it introduced? How does its initial reception compare to its current reception?

What comes to mind when you hear “liturgical dance?” What is your opinion on the term “liturgical dance?” Is this sufficient or is there a better term? If so, what and explain.

How much do/should the culture of a church and community impact the way worship is done?

What is your process when it comes to formulating the message of the dance, musical selection of the dance, and the movements of the dance?

What is the importance of harmony between music, dance, and message?

*React: What we sing should manifest what we believe. So also, what we do through dance should manifest what we believe.*

How much of a role does church architecture have on worship? The usage and incorporation of dance in worship?

What blessings do you encounter when incorporating dance into worship? What about the challenges?

What risks/temptations could you see when a church is considering to incorporate dance into worship? What about churches who already have dance as a part of their worship services?

What misconceptions and misappropriations of dance in worship should people be aware of?

How do you get people unfamiliar with dance as a worship practice to understand its beauty, language, and purpose in a worship setting?

React: *Dance can't be there as just an ambiance or pleasantry. It must do better than that. It can't just be something nice to look at, something cute, and then be okay with its mediocrity. Flowers don't stay seeds forever. They mature and bloom. Dance can't stay cute and nice forever. It must mature and bloom. Dance must have substance and depth, uniformity and purpose that showcase excellent harmony of music, dance, and message. All for the edification of worship and hearts, and the centrality of Christ and his gospel. Let your worship reflect who your God is. Do you have a God of mediocrity? Or do you have a God of majesty?*

How do you incorporate dance into worship without seeming weird, awkward, banal, or irreverent? How do you NOT dance an empty dance?

What's the fine line between performance and worship, and how is dance a part of this question?

How do the teachings of adiaphora and Christian freedom influence how Christian churches treat each other and conduct themselves when it comes to worship practices and traditions?

What advice and considerations would you share with Christian leaders and churches when it comes to sustaining or incorporating worship practices?



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