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Movement and Worship: An Experiential Engagement of Embodiment in Ministry

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Cassandra Vander Well

Calvin Symposium on Worship

B11: Movement and Worship: An Experiential Engagement of Embodiment in Ministry

CHRISTIANITY AND DANCE

Ellen R. Van't Hof

I. THE BIBLE (NIV):

Old Testament

Exodus 15:20 Celebration dance of the parting of the Red Sea
Then Miriam. . . took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing.

Exodus 32:19 Dancing in worship to the golden calf
When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned...

Judges 11:34 Jephthah's daughter greets him with dancing and tambourines
who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines!

Judges 21:21, 23 Shiloh dancers in the yearly Feast of the Lord, chosen and taken to be wives of the Benjamites

I Samuel 18:6, 7, 21:11 Dancers greeting King Saul, praising David's conquests
As they danced, they sang: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands."

II Samuel 6:14 David dancing as the Ark was brought into Jerusalem
David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the Lord with all his might. . .

I Kings 18:26 Prophets of Baal dancing around the altar
And they danced around the altar they had made.

I Chronicles 15:29 David dancing before the Ark (II Samuel story above)
And when she [Michal] saw King David dancing and celebrating, she despised him in her heart.

Job 21:11 Job questions the apparent happiness of the wicked
They send forth their children as a flock; their little ones dance about.

Psalms 30:11 David's song of praise
You turned my wailing into dancing

Psalms 149:3 Dance in praise
Let them praise his name with dancing

Psalms 150:4 Dance in praise
praise him with tambourine and dancing

Ecclesiastes 3:4 A time for everything
a time to mourn and a time to dance

Jeremiah 31:4, 13 Israel rejoicing when God rebuilds her
*Again you will take up your tambourines and go out to dance with the joyful. . .
Then maidens will dance and be glad, young men and old as well.*

Lamentations 5:15 Prayer for mercy
Joy is gone from our hearts; our dancing has turned to mourning

New Testament

Matthew 11:16, 17 Jesus reproving the Jews for not following John the Baptist
*"To what can I compare this generation? They are like children. . . calling out to others:
'We played the flute for you and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'"*
-also in **Luke 7:31, 32**

Matthew 14:6-8 John the Baptist beheaded at request of dancer
On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for them and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist."

Luke 15:25 Dancing in celebration of the return of the Prodigal Son
Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.

II. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

A. Early Church

The early church often used dance in worship. Worshipers celebrated Christ's humanity as well as his divinity by using their bodies in worship. The image of Christ in the flesh was very powerful in the early church. Many hymns were danced while being sung. Descriptions of dances in the early church indicate that most dances were performed in a circle. A circle is a strong symbol throughout the history of liturgical dance. It represents the unity of believers, the image of Christ as the center focus, equality and equal access of all believers, and the unending life with Christ.

B. The Middle Ages

The Middle Ages brought opportunities for liturgical dance to serve as an instructional tool but also for abuse. Dance, along with music and drama, often played an important role in mystery and miracle plays that told stories of the Bible to the illiterate laity. Many worship services of the Middle Ages used formal choreography for movements of clergy and choir processions. Dance was a principle occupation of the angels portrayed in Medieval art. Gradually, however, dance became a controversy in the church. Pagan dances that connected dance with death began to resurface during the years of plague that swept western Europe. The church condemned the "*dance of death*", "*toten tanz*", or "*dans macabre*". Asceticism, a belief in the degradation of the physical in order to achieve spiritual superiority, became popular in many Christian enclaves. Christians generally began to look with suspicion upon any physical expression outside worship. Formal movements of clergy or choir within worship continued.

C. The Reformation

The Reformation brought a rejection of the trappings of the old church. In most cases, dance was eliminated completely. John Calvin, particularly, saw nothing redeemable in dance. Martin Luther, however, not only valued dance as an innocent expression of praise, but even choreographed simple movements for some of the songs he composed. Luther was the exception. Dance was rarely seen in a Protestant church.

D. Today

During the decades of the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries we have seen a surge of interest in all of the arts in worship. Dance is becoming more common in worship services in Catholic and Protestant churches.

III. BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW

A. Structure

1. CREATION

B. Direction

2. FALL: Directing dance away from God

3. REDEMPTION: Directing dance toward God