

BODY, DANCE AND WORSHIP

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Authentic worship requires the whole person. Jesus calls us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and *strength* (Mk 12:30, Lk. 10:26). Our strength is in our bodies. Paul urges us to offer our bodies as “living sacrifices” (Rom. 12:1). We frequently spiritualize “bodies” in this verse so that it means “lives” or “selves”. Yet how can we have lives or be ourselves without being bodies in a real physical and tangible sense? For, as is also frequently said, we do not merely *have* a body—we *are* our body. To be human means to be embodied. Yet how often do we consciously include our bodies in our acts of worship?

Our fear of including our bodies in worship does not come from our faith. Some have suggested that Paul denigrated the flesh/body in his writings; however, a closer look reveals that Paul’s use of “flesh” in the negative referred not to the body but to the whole person in its fallen condition (e.g. Gal. 5:19-21, 24; Rom. 13:14).¹ By the same token “spirit” referred, not to some special spiritual aspect of humanity but to the whole person in its redeemed state.² The antagonism that we are familiar with between body and spirit is imported into Christianity from Greek culture by several early church leaders, including Augustine of

1. Romans 13:14 uses the phrase, “sinful nature” (TNIV). See I. Howard Marshall, “Living in the Flesh,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159.6 (2002), pp. 387-403, esp. pp. 402-403; and Timothy Kallistos Ware, “The Transformation of the Body”, in A.M. Allchin (ed.), *Sacrament and Image* (London: Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1967), p. 23; see, also, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference Publications Office, 1963), article 10.

2. Carolyn Deitering, *The Liturgy as Dance and the Liturgical Dancer* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), p. 13.

Hippo.³ We cannot explore our cultural discomfort toward the body without reflecting on our cultural approach to sexuality. While this is not the place to discuss the complex issues of human sexuality and Christian ideas of appropriateness, we cannot deny or ignore the fact that these issues and our understanding of them affects our comfort levels with how much attention is drawn to the human body. Although in recent decades we have made strides to embrace the wholeness of human beings, we are still uncomfortable with the role of the body, especially in public worship.

Our discomfort with these issues is often the main reason for rejecting dance or other forms of symbolic movement in worship.⁴ These activities make us aware of bodies. We become aware of our own bodies, especially if we are the ones moving, as well as becoming aware of other bodies. Our awareness is not purely sexual. Unfortunately, our culture allows us little practise in recognizing each other as physical beings without focusing on the sexual. For this reason, many people believe that the body is bad and will reject all activities that draw attention to the body.⁵ But the body is not bad. Both the Old and New Testaments enforce the idea that our bodies are good, as God intended (Gen. 1:27, 31; 1 Tim. 4:4, 5).

Before discussing ways that we can help congregations to become more comfortable with incorporating their bodies into worship, let us first look at some of the biblical background to dance and movement in worship.

The Hebrew Scriptures contain many references to dance as an art of worship. Some of the more familiar ones include Miriam dancing at the Exodus (Exod. 15:20-21), David dancing before the ark of the covenant (2 Sam. 6), the women who danced at the feast of Shiloh (Judg. 21:21-23), as well as several references in the Psalms (such as Ps. 30:11; 149:3; 150:4).

Dance was also a part of the less religious side of life. It occurred at a variety of festivals. To say that these are secular forms of dance

3. Anne Krabill Hershberger, *Sexuality: God's Gift* (Waterloo: Herald Press, 1999), p. 126.

4. Martin Blogg, *Dance and the Christian Faith-Dance: A Form of Knowing* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), p. 116.

5. Sports appears to be an exception to this. Most people will participate in and watch sports without being concerned about issues of sexuality, as long as they are not co-ed sports.

denies a central aspect of Hebrew and other ancient cultures. They did not create the same divisions between religious and secular actions as we do. All of life was religious.⁶

Miriam's dance does not come in a structured setting of worship. After the Israelites had safely passed through the Red Sea and Pharaoh's men and chariots had drowned, she led women in song and dance to celebrate and praise the Lord for delivering them. Her dance demonstrates an important aspect to dance in worship. As with other acts of worship, it is our response to God. She did not dance to find her salvation but as a testimony of what God had done.⁷

David's dance before the ark raises several issues. First, it is difficult to tell if David danced alone or if he was part of a group of dancers. Either way, the dance was in celebration of the return of the ark to the tabernacle of God. Some suggest that this dance may also have parallels with coronation rituals.⁸ Michal's disgust at the dance and his "uncovering himself" can also be understood in different ways. Many suggest that it is a reference to the leaping and twirling that David did while he was dancing, which would have caused his clothing to flip up in a potentially indecent manner. This need not be the case. The passage says that David danced with "all his might." He gave his all to this act of worship and thus "exposed" himself in a more figurative manner, making him vulnerable before the people.⁹ Vulnerability is always a threat to some. It is also a reason for rejecting a variety of forms of expression in worship.

While it is possible to learn much about the use of dance in Hebrew culture from actual stories about occasions that included dancing, some of what we know about the use and importance of dance comes from more critical study of the text. For example, in the Psalms the wording indicates that most dancing was done as a communal act. The reference is to "them" dancing, that is, written in the plural.¹⁰ Gruber notes that

6. Blogg, *Dance and the Christian Faith-Dance*, p. 5.

7. Edyth I. Potter, "Dance: A Movement Back to the Visual," *Reformed Liturgy and Music* 43.3 (1994), pp. 131-35 (133).

8. Doug Adams, *Congregational Dancing in Christian Worship* (Vallejo: The Enabling Company, 1971), p. 23.

9. Potter, "Dance," p. 131.

10. Doug Adams, "Communal Dance Forms and Consequences in Biblical Worship," in Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (eds.), *Dance as Religious Studies* (New York: Crossroads, 1990), pp. 35-47 (36).

there are a wide range of etymological connections with Hebrew words and dance type actions,¹¹ suggesting that dance was an integral part of the culture. Several authors note the connection between *hagag* and dance. The usual translation of *hagag* is “feast”, “festival” or “celebration,” however, Gruber also demonstrates how this root can be translated “dance in a circle”.¹² This root shows up in the names of a wide variety of cultic celebrations (such as the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of Pentecost), suggesting that they may also have been celebrated with dances. Other words Gruber identifies include those for “encircle”, “leap”, “jump”, “whirl, pirouette”, and “skip”.¹³

Some scholars have identified several passages where it is possible that what is described is a play or enactment. Song of Songs is considered a script for a Wedding Feast Cycle.¹⁴ Deitering notes that the *pesach*, or Passover, was a spring festival prior to the Exodus, celebrating the birth of new lambs at the time of the spring equinox. During the festival the shepherds danced a limping step imitating the new born sheep. Later these festivities were assumed into the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the dance step came to symbolize the “newborn” Hebrew slave.¹⁵ Taussig sees dance prevalent in almost every chapter of the Hebrew Scriptures.¹⁶ The text does not present history or theology as we have become accustomed to them but rather gives accounts of ongoing activities and events. For Taussig, the Bible is “more like a happening than a theory, more like a worship service than philosophy, more like a dance than a dissertation.”¹⁷ Texts that we teach and preach were (or were intended) to be enacted.

11. Mayer I. Gruber, “Ten Dance-Derived Expressions in the Hebrew Bible,” in Adams and Apostolos-Cappadona (eds.), *Dance as Religious Studies*, pp. 48-66 (49-59).

12. Gruber, “Ten Dance-Derived Expressions,” p. 49.

13. Gruber, “Ten Dance-Derived Expressions,” *passim*.

14. Certainly in the nineteenth century, various scholars interpreted “the Song as a cycle of ancient Hebrew weddings songs.” See Roland E. Murphy, OC, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or The Song of Songs* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 42; see also reference to Origen’s discussion of Song of Songs as drama (p. 18).

15. Deitering, *Liturgy as Dance*, p. 24.

16. Hal Taussig, “Dancing the Scriptures,” in Adams and Apostolos-Cappadona (eds.), *Dance as Religious Studies*, pp. 67-79 (68).

17. Taussig, “Dancing the Scriptures,” p. 68.

The New Testament writers are somewhat less direct in their references to dance. Unlike the Old Testament, there are no explicit calls for the people to dance as worship. There is no mention of them not continuing to dance either—it is not condemned.¹⁸ This is similar to references to singing and musical instruments. There are places that indicate that the people are continuing worship patterns that were inherited from the Jewish faith (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19-20; Acts 15:13-16).

Toward the end of the parable of the Lost Son, a festivity is thrown in which there is dancing (Lk. 15:25). While the situation is not explicitly one of worship, the parable draws parallels with our relationship with God and each other and includes a place for celebration that is marked by dancing.

While the New Testament may not make as much of dancing as the Old Testament, it makes more references to the importance of the body in worship. Its most significant contribution comes in the presentation of the Incarnation. Jesus was a body. The word became flesh. The words and actions of Jesus are inseparable from each other. Jesus did not die for the spiritual part of persons but for the whole person.¹⁹

In the New Testament, the body is also given the honour of becoming the new temple and home to the Holy Spirit. Paul says in 1 Cor. 6:19-20 that we are to honour God with our bodies because the Holy Spirit dwells within us. In 2 Cor. 6:16, Paul reminds the people to be pure and separate from unbelievers and idols because they are God's temple.

We have looked briefly at biblical and theological justifications for incorporating the body into worship through movement, but there are other equally important reasons, based more on human physiology and psychology. Because of the Incarnation these reasons are also valid. If we accept that Jesus was full human as well as fully divine, then all of our humanness is redeemable and involved in our worship.

18. See Adams, *Congregational Dancing*, where he discusses the group dance in the parable of the lost son, found in Lk. 15:25 (p. 26), and in the story of the children in the market, found in Lk. 7:31-34 (p. 27). See, also, William Lock, "Congregational Singing in England, Canada, and The United States since 1950," in Robert E. Webber (ed.), *The Complete Library of Christian Worship. IV. Music and the Arts in Christian Worship* (Nashville: Star Song, 1994), pp. 270-77 (721).

19. Deitering, *Liturgy as Dance*, p. 9.

The body holds knowledge. We learn and we remember through our bodies and the bodies of others. Posture and positioning sends messages as much as words, sometimes even more. If I tell you that I appreciate you, but then turn away from you every time you look my way, will you believe my words? I think not. A touch on the shoulder when we are crying conveys a level of understanding that words do not.

There is also something referred to as “muscle memory.” I was first introduced to this term in an acting class. We were warned not to memorize our lines always in the same position or while doing the same actions. If we did we would forget them if the actions were ever out of sequence. This is similar to when we get up from a chair to go do something but then forget what we were going to do. Often if we sit back down we will remember. Our bodies know things. They connect us to non-verbal language and expression.

Our culture is also very visually oriented. Dance helps us to “see” in a new way. The viewer will remember an image longer than they will a verbal description or explanation.²⁰ It has also been noted that we are moving toward a “post-literate” culture. In such an environment, we will need to learn to communicate in direct and immediate experiential ways.²¹ Dance provides such a method, especially when the person is taught to dance. Early forms of faith were not something spoken but something done.

It appears that many people do not find joy in our worship services. Adams suggests that this is because they sit; they are not involved.²² He notes that the choir and the minister are more likely to experience joy in a service, but these people are actively involved in the service. He notes that those persons who sit are more likely to be critical.²³ People who are not actively involved are more easily distracted. Those who are actively involved tend to be less fixated on detail and thus less critical. He also suggests that physical activity can shift the mind away from problems without filling the mind with new thoughts.²⁴ The benefits of this can be seen when there are interpersonal difficulties in a congregation. People are less fixated on the issues if they are active

20. Potter, “Dance,” p. 133.

21. Margaret Fisk Taylor, *A Time to Dance: Symbolic Movement in Worship* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1967), p. 13.

22. Adams, *Congregational Dancing*, p. 5.

23. Adams, *Congregational Dancing*, p. 12.

24. Adams, *Congregational Dancing*, p. 65.

together. While Adams notes that for some this may seem like avoiding the issues, he adds that it can allow a group or person to move forward and not dwell on the issues.²⁵

Symbolic movement provides the easiest entry point for all members of a congregation. Symbolic movement recognizes that there is spiritual power in movement.²⁶ It involves the whole person in meaningful action. It can include postures such as bowing or lifting our hands. It also includes activities such as walking on pilgrimage or in a Labyrinth.

In the 1990s, there was a study done on the way actions affect the way we perceive information. Byars refers to the results of this study in his article "Body Language."²⁷ It was a simple study involving people wearing headphones. The participants each listened to the same tape with both music and information on it. One group was to nod their heads while listening, another group was to shake their heads back and forth and the third group was given no actions. Following the exercise, the groups were asked a series of questions. Those who had nodded while listening tended to have positive comments on the information presented on the tape, those who shook their heads tended to disagree with the information, while the last group were somewhat neutral. Byars concludes that what we do affects how we perceive information.²⁸ Physical movements can enhance the way we understand and assimilate the ideas presented in worship. He suggests that something as simple as opening our hands, palms up, during the prayer of confession or assurance can increase our awareness of our need to receive from God or our awareness of receiving.²⁹

Introducing symbolic movement may require some explanation, depending on the comfort level of the congregation. It is often helpful to avoid referring to the motions as "actions," as this often has an affiliation with children's songs. Instead we can talk of "movement." It can also be helpful to begin by drawing attention to movements that the congregation is already doing, such as standing to sing or bowing their heads to pray. We need to talk about what these mean and why we do

25. Adams, *Congregational Dancing*, p. 65.

26. Taylor, *A Time to Dance*, p. 5.

27. Robert P. Byars, "Body Language," *Call to Worship: Liturgy, Music, Preaching and the Arts* 35.2 (2001), pp. 4-9.

28. Byars, "Body Language," p. 7.

29. Byars, "Body Language," p. 8.

them. Dance is essentially a neutral activity. The focus has to be supplied. We can perform the same movements but their meaning may be different. I used to attend a monthly sacred circle dance group. Occasionally the dance would be a bit too focused on ancient pagan religious ideas for my comfort. Sometimes I would mentally alter the meaning of the movements or make a small change to the movement in order to participate. One evening we were to “scoop” up the energy from the earth and offer it to the sky. A minor alteration of the hand movements allowed me to collect myself and my surroundings and offer them up to God.

Movement and dance enhance our perception of embodiment. It also extends our understanding of being a body together, the Body of Christ. I have often found that this is a term people struggle with. It is a metaphor, but as in any metaphor, there is a literal component. To be the Body of Christ requires us to have a communal awareness of one another, a sense of “being” together. Moving together, both through observing and doing provides a way of experiencing this “being” together.³⁰ My attention was drawn to the power of such activity when I was studying theatre. In an improvisation class, we were given a series of group exercises to help us become aware of each other and the “group consciousness.” These skills are important for ensemble work when one needs to be able to predict the movement on stage. In one exercise we formed a tight circle each facing in the same direction so we were looking at the back of the head of the person in front of us. We were not allowed to speak or otherwise signal to each other. Instead we were told to start walking when “the group decided,” speed up and eventually stop, all without talking or touching. Surprisingly enough it actually worked, but it worked because we had learned to “feel” the presence of each other. We had spent weeks together in dance classes and other movement classes. We knew each other as bodies as well as personalities. In our churches, our opportunities to get to know one another are increasingly limited. We seldom do anything physical together. In the past we may have been more likely to do physical work together, farm work, church repairs, cooking or cleaning. We may literally have walked together. Now it is possible not even to see one another outside the church building. We are losing some of our sense of

30. Carla De Sola, “...and the Word Became Dance: Theory and Practice of Liturgical Dance,” in Adams and Apostolos-Cappadona (eds.), *Dance as Religious Studies*, pp. 153-66 (153).

connectedness. Introducing symbolic movement or dance may help us to rebuild connections.

Most congregations will need some sort of educating about dance for it to be well integrated into the worship life. Potter suggests that the best way to introduce dance requires seeking out a selected group of people and then training them first as worship leaders.³¹ Dancers and congregations alike need to understand that all worship, including dance, starts with a focus on God. Dancers who are performing in front of a congregation need to be aware of including the congregation in what they do. Dance in worship services is not meant to be a private experience of the dancers. It is a communal event, designed to lead people into deeper worship by presenting ideas, stories and emotions. Choreography needs to fit the occasion.

Bauer also warns that congregations need to be taught what to watch for when they are observing dance. They need to be encouraged to look beyond the literal meaning of the movements, to watch for the overall mood, for patterns and for flow.³² Following a dance, it can be helpful to take time to interpret it together. Allow people a chance to say what meaning they found in the dance and what movements led to that idea. Include the dancers in the discussion. If you are teaching a dance or a series of movements to the congregation, explain what each movement symbolizes. It helps to provide options in order to leave some room for people to discovering the meaning. Meaning often unfolds in the doing but it helps to overcome some of the initial hesitancy when the person has some idea what is supposed to be going on. Also, it is important to be aware that when people first encounter symbolic action, they perceive it as a series of poses. But it is more than just poses. It is also the movements between the poses. There is a flow that is an integral part of the dance. Sometimes this motion needs to have attention drawn to it.

Having focused on movement, we should not forget stillness. Both movement and stillness are necessary elements of symbolic movement and dance. They are a natural part of the rhythm of life. Stillness allows time for ideas to settle, for an experience to be integrated, to receive from God. Deitering suggests that in our movements, we move toward

31. Potter, "Dance," p. 133.

32. Susan Bauer, "Dance as Performance Fine Art in Liturgy," in Adams and Apostolos-Cappadona (eds.), *Dance as Religious Studies*, pp. 167-83 (175).

God, but in our stillness, God moves toward us.³³ Both are important and necessary parts of worship.

I began with the statement that authentic worship requires the whole person. The whole person includes the physical body. We cannot exclude our bodies from worship—they are with us wherever we go—but we can and do ignore them. Consciously including our physical selves into our worship will enhance our understanding of self and of community. It will enhance our worship as we will be more able to come to God as a whole person, holding nothing back. And we will experience and respond to God with all that we are.

33. Deitering, *Liturgy as Dance*, p. 59.