



Joy and History of the Dance!

by Angie Kelley

1) Introduction

- As many of you, we were rooted in traditional protestant Christianity
 - i) I was Methodist and Tim was Church of Christ
 - ii) Both began attending Sabbath/Holy Day keeping congregations when we were 16
 - iii) Married in 1979 and attended the same Sabbath/Holy Day keeping congregation till 1995
- Church culture was to, in many ways, stifle the expression of emotion in worship . . . keep it in a “controlled box”
 - i) Even if you heard a very moving song, you would not:
 - (1) Raise your hands
 - (2) Clap your hands
 - ii) Yet our congregation was probably more “musical” permissive than what we had come out of before
 - (1) Church of Christ – No instruments (at least we had instrumental accompaniments)
 - (2) Methodist – Piano, but no band or other instruments
 - iii) Many of you can identify with this
 - (1) But is this what YHVH had intended? Did God intend for His people to have a very stoic type of worship and praise? If not, why is that become the norm – at least in many Christian denominations?

SPS – In this message, I want to briefly show what many of you have already come to understand – from the earliest days of God’s working with His people, they would praise Him in the dance. But something happened that caused church leaders to give it up for a more “restrained” form of worship. We’ll see what happened, then see that it’s prophesied for the dance to return.

2) Dance in Scripture

- Examples of Dance
 - i) Miriam danced in praise to the god who had saved them from Pharaoh
 - ii) David danced when bringing the Ark to Jerusalem
- Commandments to Dance
 - i) Chag
 - ii) “Praise Him with the timbrel and dance . . .” (Psalm 150:4); “. . . praise His name with dancing . . .” (Psalm 149:3)
 - (1) Could this be taken as a commandment?
 - iii) Yeshua considered the dance to be a way of life
 - (1) Speaking to his disciples about the His generation, he said “Matthew 11:17 “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance . . .”
 - (2) In the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:25)

Being that Hebrew is an action language, it’s easy to see how the follow author comes to her conclusion. In the book “The Whole Man at Worship: The Actions of Man Before God” by Helene de

Lenval ¹ she describes the intensity with which the Israelites expressed and celebrated with their WHOLE BEING. She says -

“Highly conscious of its election, Israel maintained a personal relationship with God, and even as one human being communicates with another thru the whole of himself, by thoughts, emotions, words, movements, tones of voice, so **the people of the Bible employ their whole selves in their communication with their God. Easily moved and passionate, exuberant and impulsive,** they express their feelings in a way which modern ‘civilized’ man may well find flamboyant. Struck down by misfortune, they weep, bewail themselves, **they tear out the hair of their beards,** rend their garments and roll on the ground; in times of joy, **they leap in the air, clap their hands, cry out, laugh and sing like children,** and both their lamentations and their shouts of happiness are addressed to God.”

So dance was definitely part of the “Biblical” culture.

But what happened? Why do most churches shun dancing? Why is this expression of Joy not allowed in praise and worship? Let’s examine the history of dance from the time of Yeshua up to about 100 years ago.

3) What Happened to the Dance?

- After the death of Yeshua, the believing Jews continued to worship alongside the non-believing Jews, but the early believers soon embarked on a transitional process that affected every aspect of their praise and worship. We’ll see how their worship in dance was soon corrupted.
- After 70 A.D. the believing Jews and the non-believing Jews began to separate and this affected the dance.
 - i) Because they were meeting in homes, there was a natural lack of space.
 - ii) They began to exchange the “action” aspect of Hebrew worship for a more “Greek” way - spiritualizing the concrete Hebrew thoughts into abstract thought.
 - (1) Exchanged the weekly breaking of bread as a part of a group fellowship meal that included dancing and study, for the Catholic “eucharist” – a part of the “mass” that focused attention on an individual instead of the entire group.
- Dance continued as part of the worship of the early believers on into the second century.
 - i) In his book “Liturgies of the Western World”, Brad Thompson states that both Justin Martyr (A.D. 150) and Hippolytus (A.D. 200) describe joyful circle dances, but the focus was beginning to change. The people continued to stray from their “Hebrew” culture toward a more “catholic” culture, and instead of the people simply dancing as a group, they began to emphasize a leader or a central figure in the dance.
 - ii) This point is illustrated in a quote from the Apocryphal Acts of John where you can find the words of “The Hymn of Jesus”, a song depicting some of the events of the “Last Supper”. The words go like this –

“Now before He was taken by The lawless Jews. He gathered us together and said,
“Before I am delivered up unto them let us sing a hymn....And we going around in a ring,
answered him: Amen. I would be saved... Grace danceth...dance you all, ... The whole

¹ Dance in Christian Worship by Ronald Gagne, page 29

on high hath part in our dancing ... A door am I to you that knocks ... answer you unto my dancing”

The steps to this “dance” have been lost but the focus remained in that the circle had as its central point a center person - in this case “Jesus” - whose power was suppose to radiate to those standing in the circle.

- Going on to the third century we see evidence that the dance was continuing to degenerate. There again, instead of the people dancing together as a group in praise to God, individuals would associate dance with prayer and with initiation into the church. Dancing became a part of baptism. The individual would “dance his way” to the baptismal basin.

Clement in his “Stromata” mentions the prevalent custom of bodily movement in prayer –

“Therefore we raise our heads and our hands to heaven in prayer, and move our feet just at the end of the prayer . . . we seek by words of prayer to raise our body above the earth and uplift the winged soul by it’s desire for better things.”

- While dance was changing in “the Church” it was also changing in Imperial Rome. Dance in the church was becoming more of an individual worship, while in the Roman society; it was becoming theatrical and decadent.
 - i) Since the church was becoming an institution of the Roman government, it began to play a major role as the arbitrator of morality, education , and social structure. The conflicts between the “proper” use of the dance in “the church” and it’s degenerate use in Roman society led to conflict over the use of the dance in worship.
 - ii) The church began to control dance in worship. If you wanted to dance it had to be done under the strict guidance of “the church”. In the book “Dance in Christian Worship, the author shows that by the fourth century, dance was falling more and more under the authority of the church. After quoting St. Ambrose, one of the most influential ecclesiastical figures of the fourth century, he wrote –

“Ambrose felt that those who view church dance must view the actions “under the aspect of holy religion.” Then the dance will become truly reverential . . .”

Thus dance fell more and more under the auspices of “the church”.

- Skipping down to the ninth century, the church became more authoritarian in its activities and the idea of the church as a judicial institution began to outweigh the concept of the church as a community. As a result, the church gained more and more control over the dance. Instead of it being the spontaneous expression of joy, it became more and more a part of the regular liturgical service and procession.
 - i) During this period, there were over 18 different “councils” relating to dance. As a result:
 - (1) Council of Lessinas (743 AD) – Forbid laymen to dance in “choir” dances
 - (2) Council of Rome (826 AD) – forbid women to sing or perform in “choir” dances
 - ii) Because of the requirement for the church service to be done in Latin, there evolved a distinction between the church leaders – the clergy – and the laymen (who could not read Latin).
 - (1) The clergy performed the mass – thus all the dance was performed by the clergy
 - (2) Choirs sung the mass

- (3) The lay-member simply became a spectator.
- By the Medieval Period (1100 – 1400 AD) it became evident that excluding the “laity” from participation in the church service meant a decrease in interest and attendance at mass. Thus they attempted to rectify the situation by reversing previous edicts and actually encouraging the people to dance.
 - i) Christian authorities made an effort to arouse the congregations by including more choral songs, picturesque processions and even ceremonial dances performed in the choir area.
 - ii) Pope Urban IV instituted the “Corpus Cristi Procession” to celebrate the “presence of Christ in the Eucharist” where all the people in town were expect to dance and sing in this procession.
 - iii) This struggle to make church “more enjoyable and appealing” to the laypeople caused the dance to continue its shift from being devotional to becoming theatrical and dramatic.
 - (1) This caused a problem for church leaders who had previously reigned in the dance because it had become theatrical and dramatic.
 - One of darkest periods for the dance was during the 14th and 15th centuries. During this period, the “Dance of Death” came on the scene. Sparked by great preoccupation with death during this era, and probably heightened by the onslaught of the Black Plague, this dance became prominent and was even considered a “religious dance”. This dance often lead to bizarre outbreaks of dancing known as “Danseomania” where “whole communities of people were stricken with a kind of madness that sent them dancing and gyrating through the streets, from village to village, for days at a time, until they died in agonizing exhaustion. This type of dancing reached an intensity that the church leaders were unable to control, thus
 - i) The church attempted to put an end to all sacred – liturgical dances in services.
 - By the Renaissance Period, the god-honoring expression of worship which started as Hebrew dance had now shifted to liturgical, functional movements. Dance had for all practical purposes, moved out of the church altogether. This is how it happened.
 - i) The advent of the printing press allowed the “laity” to be able to read a Bible in their own language. As the laity became more knowledgeable in matters pertaining to the Bible, they began to rebel against the Catholic church.
 - ii) Thus the Protestant Reformation, led by Martin Luther, caused many “Protestant” churches to be formed.
 - (1) Protestants opposed the services of the Catholic mass, even looking at the movements of the Catholic priests as “dance”, thus
 - (2) In opposition to the Catholic church, the Protestant leaders declared all forms of dance “sinful and not biblical”; and forbid all forms of dance.

What movements did the protestant leaders dislike? In his book “The Mass in Slow Motion”, Ronald Knox explains –

“The twisting and turning, and bobbing and bowing, and lifting and parting and rejoining his hands, which the priest goes through in the course of the Mass, really add up to a kind of dance, meant to express a religious idea to you, the spectators.”

- (3) Ironically, the Protestant leaders adopted many of these same movements themselves, ones they had previously condemned in the Catholic church

- From this time forward, various prohibitions, edicts, and mandates were enacted to completely snuff out the dance. Never-the-less, there were periods where localized dance in worship flourished.

4) **Revival of the Dance**

- During the 18th century – there were a group of people who came to America from England. They had a reputation of dancing beautiful before God. Their dancing appeared to be pure and in harmony with scripture. But, since the Shakers were following an early ruling of their religious group that they should not marry (because they expected the 2nd coming of the Messiah – as the 1st century believers had expected). AS a result of this belief, their lack of growth was understandable. By the end of 19th century, most of the Shakers had died and so the dance of the people in worship ended as well – at least on a broad public level. The Shakers were a group of 6000 plus who had settled in New York.
- Hasidic Judasim found its roots during the mid 18th century when Jewish people were experiencing persecution in Poland.
 - (1) Sylvia Barack Fishman, a professor of contemporary Jewish life at Brandeis University says, “the idea of joyous prayer, singing, dancing and spiritual feelings became an alternate route to Jewish excellence”. The Hasidic worship continues to involve music and dance in a celebratory and joyous mood. (place hasidim men dancing – lots of imagaes avbl)
- In 1860, the Hebrew Christian Alliance was formed in Britain to bring together Jewish Christians from various denominations. Jewish believers within the historic Protestant churches were seeking to reclaim their Jewish identity.
- In 1915, the MJAA (an acronym for Messianic Jewish Alliance Association) was founded. In order to express their Jewish identity in worship and to maintain their links with their families and the Jewish community, they adopted the title, Messianic Jews. They believe dance plays an important role in uniting Jewish and Gentile believers. Well known artists, like Paul Wilbur, Jonathan Settler, Joel Chernoff and Marty Goetz perform at their many events.
- With 1948 paving the way for the Jews to return back to their home land in Israel, a large number of Jews returned to the land with their faith in the Messiah.
- With the reunification of Jerusalem through the Six Day War of 1967, the Hebrew Christians understood this to be a fulfillment of Luke 21:24 where Yeshua said, “Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled”. There was a renewed sense of entering a new phase in these “Last days” with Jerusalem under Israeli control.
 - i) The Messianic Jewish Movement identified strongly with the prophetic biblical promises to Israel whose culture is steeped in the dance.
 - (1) Murray Silberling wrote a book in 1995 titled Dancing for Joy. On page 23, he says “A major component of the Messianic revival involves the restoration of sacred dance . Sometimes called Messianic or Davidic worship, the Messianic movement has led the way in the choreography, teaching and development of various forms of dance. They incorporated many elements of traditional Hasidic dance, as well as Israeli and Yemenite folk dance. The acceptance of dance based on its biblical and Jewish roots has led to the restoration of ancient forms of praise and worship within the whole body of believers”.

- Israeli dance is a mixture of the many cultures and peoples who settled in Israel. Those who returned to the land brought with them dance steps they had done for centuries. Some of those included:
 - i) Mayims - of Hebrew origin – streams of living water
 - ii) Debkas – of Arabic origin – bouncy, heel steps
 - iii) Yemenites – from Yemen – quick movement – as on hot sand
 - iv) Tcherkessia – from Russia – forward/back steps with open arms – to welcome all people from all directions to return home
 - v) The Hora – from Rumania – this became the national dance of Reborn Israel.

5) So, what have we seen?

- Dance was a definite part of the Hebrew culture in their praise to God.
- That dance thru history degenerated 1st in the type of dancing and 2nd in that the clergy took over all forms of dance in worship by putting it into a neat little box.
- An emergence of dance as a form of worship again. Hopefully we can acknowledge this and understand that God did give this beautiful form of worship to His people.

Shalom