

Beyond the News

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The Dance

By Peter Eng



I know I cannot dance. Talking about dance is a different thing. Those who can, do. Those who can't can always comment. By that rule, I am eminently qualified to comment.

Some Christians are a little ambivalent about dancing; some even hostile. When I became a Christian in my teens, hence before I had a chance to learn to dance, I decided that my faith was good reason for my ineptitude. Of course, it helps that dance had degenerated from the more elegant forms to wild gyrations and free flailing limbs. I have not really thought about dance since that time. It is just not my thing.

Of late, however, I begin to see dance differently. Dance reflects culture. Churches in America would organize line dances or square dances. In Scotland, my family and I enjoyed watching the Scots dance to their bagpipes. In 1994, the Riverdance, an Irish step dance, took the world by storm. My wife

tells me I need to learn to dance so when my daughters get married, I can dance with them. Pressure! Pressure! I tell her we will have a Chinese wedding instead.

Some Christian groups in western cultures dance in worship. Being the good Presbyterian that I am, dance is not going to be my thing. I like to think I am solid, when perhaps, stolid might be a better description.

I love the theology of the Shaker song: "[Simple Gifts](#)" and I shared some of the words with you not too long ago. I like to revisit this song as a [segue](#) to talking about dance. First the words of Simple Gifts (you can get the tune from YouTube):

Tis a gift to be simple, tis a gift to be free;
Tis a gift to come down where you ought to be;
And when we find ourselves in the place just right;
Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gained,
To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed;
To turn, turn, will be our delight
Till by turning, turning we come round right.

The Shakers were an 18th century Christian group that broke off from the Quakers, and are sometimes called "Shaking Quakers." They lived in celibate gender segregated communities and engaged in a worship that

earned them their name. They had animated singing, swaying, dancing and speaking in tongues. Today, they are known mainly for their lovely song "Simple Gifts" and their theology-driven design, surviving largely in Shaker architecture and furniture.

Their creed is "Beauty rests on utility." From this, they design extremely functional furniture with clean lines and quintessential economy. For instance, the chairs they used



for worship were designed to be hung on wall pegs alongside the hall, and so create space in the middle. To this day, furniture manufacturers continue to reproduce Shaker designs, attesting to their superior form and function.

Shaker dance is also driven by their theology. "Simple Gifts" is an enduring Shaker song composed for dance. And their theology of dance still speaks. In a communal dance, everyone has a place, so it's a gift "when we find ourselves in the place just right." Finding your spot in a dance is essential.

My family and I visited a church on Orkney Island, north of Scotland. There, we joined in a church dance, done in a circle. I made a wrong turn and crashed into the person beside me. I am not sure whether the embarrassment or pain was worse; both were unforgettable.

"Tis a gift to come down where you ought to be" has two meanings. The first is that simplicity is a gift that brings you down in lifestyle to a place where you ought to be, and when you are dancing, it is good to be where you ought to be. It is likely that as

the Shakers were turning as they sang, "To turn, turn, will be our delight; Till by turning, turning we come round right." The theology is that we need to turn (around), that is, repent, and keep turning around till we are where we ought to be.

Even though I am no dancer, I can see how their communal dance and theology reinforce each other. They seem to have a theology of the dance. It is a dance quite different from a dance that draws attention to the body where sensuality is emphasized – which is true for some dances, new and old.

Rejoicing in Dance

"Look behind you," grandpa said solemnly, as they reached the far end of the field. The snow had powdered the landscape with a fresh layer of pristine white. "Can you see my footsteps and yours?" he asked.

"Yes Pop-Pop," Tim replied, still dancing around grandpa.

"Can you see that my footsteps show that I walked a straight line?"

"Yes," again Tim replied.

"And can you see that you were dancing all over the field leaving all these messy prints?" The impeccable grey old man queried.

"Yes," Tim said hesitantly, not knowing what to expect.

"What does this teach you?" Grandpa asked, about to drive home his point.

Tim paused, looked puzzled, and then brightened up. "I know," he said. "When I grow old like you, I must never stop dancing on the snow!"

What would you rather be? One who dances through life or one who grows old and no longer knows the joy of dancing because you have become so task oriented that joy has

no place? Would you prefer marching towards a goal when you can dance towards it?

I have confessed to you I don't dance. But I want to dance through life. Sometimes, we imagine Jesus to be joyless. Worse, a kill-joy! Yet, John records for us how Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding ([John 2:1-11](#)). Would you perhaps like to reprimand Jesus for frivolity or for adding to merriment? Perhaps he should have turned the water into coffee or some counter-alcohol drink?

What should the Christian life look like? For some, it is an impassive grey filled with Christian lingo. It knows neither mourning nor dancing. Jesus once spoke of it.

He said, *"To what, then, can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to each other:*

*We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
We sang a dirge, and you did not cry.*

For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by all her children."

([Luke 7:31-35](#); [Matt 11:16-19](#))

Jesus does not seem to think following him makes our life bland or impassive. He poked fun at those who are emotionally unmoved and unmovable; at those who knew neither dancing nor crying.

The religiousniks of Jesus' day never lived life. They could not understand *"a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance"* ([Eccl 3:4](#)). They were religious without being holy. They never

allowed themselves to live the passion of sorrow and joy, or weeping and laughter, of mourning and dancing.

In the story of the Prodigal Son, we see the older brother coming in from the field. *"When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'" ([Luke 15:25-27](#))*

One would think when the lost brother has returned, the older brother would dance with joy. But the brother knew no such joy and would not join in the music or the dance.

Here, again, we see the dance as entirely appropriate for holy rejoicing. Conversely, not dancing is the problem.

Of course, if you are like me, and you cannot even dance to save your life, you know the actual dance is not the issue. It is the spirit of rejoicing that is represented by the dancing. So you dance, and let me rejoice with you, without my tripping over in dance.

Jesus has a theology of dance. Dance when someone has turned from sin to God. Celebrate life! Abundant life! Rejoicing is not done with solemn faces and somber intones. It is not talking about rejoicing. It is doing rejoicing. Dance is doing rejoicing. As rejoicing follows repentance, dancing follows mourning.

Corinth was a church of urban sophisticates. First, they celebrated their tolerance of a man living in incest with his step-mother. They were boasting, perhaps of their tolerance of different sexual relationships, or perhaps of their big umbrella that can shelter different strokes. They were rejoicing in the wrong thing. They were rejoicing in the lack of repentance. Paul roundly reprimanded them ([1 Cor 5:1-13](#)).

Next, these sophisticates acted as Paul taught them. This incestuous man was excommunicated, and this led to the realization that he had to forsake sin. He repented. Hallelujah! Right? This time around, the Corinthians continued to reject him. They would not receive him back into fellowship even after he had repented.

The Corinthians didn't know when to rejoice! They rejoiced when there was no repentance, and would not rejoice when there was repentance – strange.

Paul had to write them, *"The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him ... in order that Satan might not outwit us."* ([2 Cor 2:6-11](#))

Repentance without rejoicing gives occasion for Satan to do his devious work.

There is no benefit in perpetual sorrow. Sin must be repented, forgiven, forgotten, and followed by the rejoicing of redemption. Can you imagine a situation where the sin is endlessly recounted even after repentance? Where can the repentant sinner find joy? What meaning is there in the forgiveness of Christ when mourning for sin does not end with rejoicing over forgiveness?

When we insist a person remains in mourning for sin, we insist he cannot have the forgiveness and joy Christ came to give him.

When repentance does not lead to joy, the devil will have occasion to whisper, "See, you have lost your joy forever. God has abandoned you. I am your best friend now. Live your life without these cruel people."

David cried out to God after his repentance, *"Restore to me the joy of your salvation"* ([Ps 51:12](#)). The joy that was lost had to be

restored in the sin-mourning and repentance-forgiveness nexus.

Our lives are to be characterized by joy, though lost through sin, is recovered in repentance. Our lives are not meant to be the bland between no repentance and no forgiveness.

The Psalmist says, *"To you, O Lord, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy." And when God forgave him, he declared, "You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever."* ([Ps 30:8-11](#))

Dance is the celebration of forgiveness, of God's mercy. The dancing here may be metaphorical. But there is no need to [bifurcate](#) the literal and the metaphorical. Dance is entirely appropriate for holy joy. Wasn't David was leaping and dancing with joy when the ark was moved to Jerusalem? Michal, his dispassionate wife despised him, thinking it is too unseemly for a king to leap and dance with joy ([2 Sam 6:16](#); cf. [1 Chron 15:29](#)). Michal does not know spiritual joy and despised David for his dancing.

I am no dancer, but I don't want to fall into the sin of Michal either. I know I cannot dance like David, but I will dance metaphorically. I will sing. I will rejoice.

Dance is closely tied to rejoicing. We can take it as metaphorical. That is to say, we can rejoice without dancing. It is unlikely that God will be any less accepting of a different form of rejoicing than dancing. For instance, you may sing rather than dance. You may give and not dance. You may bear testimony to God's goodness rather than dance.

If we can express our joy in different ways, why are we talking about dance? We need to include dance as a viable expression of rejoicing. This is because dancing does

something to us. It is like singing. Can we praise God without singing? Yes. But singing does something to the singer. It sweetens his soul. Singing expresses our thoughts and feelings towards God. Singing increases our devotion because it aligns our soul and carries us to a higher plane. Singing takes our devotion and raises it higher still.

In today's world, we find people doing flash dance. Flash dance is a phenomenon birthed by social networking and YouTube, so we think. We are bested by Mariam, sister of Moses more than 3,000 years ago! When God led the people through the Red Sea, and the sea closed in on Pharaoh's soldiers who were in hot pursuit, "Mariam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing." ([Exod 15:20](#)). Ah! There is nothing new under the sun, not even the flash dance.

The prophet Jeremiah had to declare many words of judgment to the people. But he also tells them of the light that will end the night. He explains that one day, all the tribes of Israel, not just the tribe of Judah, would worship God ([Jer 31:1](#)). This will be cause for celebration. *"Again you will take up your tambourines and go out to dance with the joyful"* ([Jer 31:4](#)). God will turn their mourning into joy, and give them comfort in place of sadness. The *"maidens will dance and be glad, the young men and old together"* ([Jer 31:13](#)).

Improper dance is also recorded for us in the Bible. Perhaps the most notorious was the dance of Herodias' daughter who performed what appeared to be a sensual dance for Herod his uncle, or step-father. And for her reward, she asked for the head of John the Baptist ([Matt 14:6-11](#)).

I think my own aversion to dance is due in part to the dance we find in discos/clubs. At the same time, I have not been exposed to

dance as Christian rejoicing. What does it look like?

Some Christians view dance in the spectrum somewhere between neutral to bad. If we adopt such a view and see no place for dance in Christian rejoicing, we may be denying ourselves something God has given us. There is no dispute that a person can make music is his heart, but that is different from actual singing. We can rejoice and dance metaphorically, but that is different from actual dance. Dancing expresses and enhances joy.

We are what we do, not what we profess. I am not a runner when I say I am one, or when I watch running. I am a runner when I run. How do I rejoice? Honestly, I have not danced when I rejoice. Why not? I told you earlier, I can't dance! I only sing – and that, not too well! When I look at the expression of joy in dancing as being so much a part of the Judeo-Christian tradition, I feel I need to I rethink dancing beyond my own inclinations.

When I say dancing is a good expression of Christian joy, I am not suggesting dancing in the church worship service.

There are many things appropriate for a Christian life, but not appropriate in worship. It is appropriate to love our spouse and whisper lovely things, but that is not appropriate in worship. Disciplining a child is the duty of a Christian parent, but that does not mean it should be done as part of worship. Eating and enjoying our food is a blessing from God and Christians do it together. With the exception of the Holy Communion, we don't normally eat and drink during worship. The appropriateness of dance as an expression of Christian joy does not automatically make it part of the worship service.

While dancing for joy is encouraged in Scripture, we don't see this happening during worship.

The dancing we see in the Bible is usually in the context of celebration in a social situation rather than in worship. This is why there is confusion among those who turn worship into celebration.

Worship is God centered. Celebration is rejoicing over what God has done for us.

It is good and right to celebrate God's goodness, but celebration is not worship. The importation of dance into worship may be due to a blurring of distinction between worship and celebration.

On Resurrection Sunday 2011, The Second Baptist Church in Houston Texas danced a Resurrection celebration. (YouTube: "[Dance your shoes off.](#)") The resurrection of Christ is a wonderful thing, and there is no better reason to rejoice than in the resurrection of Christ. Two thousand people, young and old, decided to proclaim their joy to the community in dance.

Let's change our vocabulary. Let's say, "These people did an action-song proclaiming the resurrection of Christ to the world." Would that sit better with us? We do action songs – they are fun – if a little goofy at times. Action songs are basically dances.

This Houston church used a form of expression totally in-line with the Bible to enhance resurrection joy, and effectively communicate that joy to the community of today. The people saw the good news – the gospel. They saw the joy and celebration of the resurrection of Christ. I know if I were the audience, I would say, "I want what these people have."

We did a lot of dance to songs when we were young. And if this communicates effectively to our generation, perhaps it is a celebrative outreach worth considering. But if we are just not ready to do it, we should not despise those who do, as did Michal who despised David. If actual dance is too much for us,

then metaphorical dance must be earnestly expressed.

Let our joy be known. Let the good news go forth.

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