

Is it scriptural to dance during congregational worship?

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines whether it is divinely permitted or approved for Christians to dance while the church is in a worship session. A congregation serves God through Christ the mediator of the New Covenant (NC) which comprises of the teachings of Jesus about the kingdom of heaven and the inspired teaching/practices of disciples under the apostles from the day of Pentecost. This study is not on whether it is sinful to dance at all, socially or in one's home. The question is: Is it scriptural to dance during congregational worship? To appreciate the query of this topic, definitions and a historical review in the Bible is appropriate.

Two Greek words explicitly translated "to dance" in the neutral sense are *choros* (source of chorus) and *orcheomai* (from where we get orchestra). Thayer defines **orcheomai** as 'to put in rapid motion' with reference to the human body or parts. According to Luow and Nida, it is used of 'patterned rhythmic movements of the whole and/or parts of the body, normally to the accompaniment of music.' Vine's dictionary defines the root word **orcheo** as 'probably originally signified to lift up, as of the feet; hence, to leap with regularity of motion.'

The Hebrew word **mehola** translated dancing is defined by Brown, Driver, and Briggs as 'whirling around in circular movements.' Strong defines **chiyl** (to dance) as to 'twist or whirl in circular or spiral manner'; **raqad** as to 'stamp or spring about for joy.'

Webster's English Dictionary defines **dance**: *Primarily, to leap or spring; hence, to leap or move with measured steps, regulated by a tune, sung or played on a musical instrument; to leap or step with graceful motions of the body, corresponding with the sound of the voice or an instrument.*

Chambers English Dictionary defines **dance**: *to make a usually repeated series of rhythmic steps of movements (usually in time to music), to move or to jump quickly up and down or from side to side, to bounce or waltz.*

Wikipedia: **dance** *is a performing art form consisting of purposefully selected sequences of human movement. This movement has aesthetic and symbolic value, and is acknowledged as dance by performers and observers within a particular culture.*

Dancing is the act of moving one's body (wholly or parts thereof) sequentially and periodically in response to the beats of real or imagined music. It may involve turning, twisting, leaping, skipping, tapping, jabbing, lifting, bending or shaking any part of the body with varying intensity and could be done while maintaining any posture such as standing, stooping, sitting, lying down or kneeling. Thus one may dance even without audible music though most people have a propensity to dance to instrumental music. Dancing is NOT a posture but involves a combination of desired postures which are transformed and alternated within chosen time frames. Dancing could serve various purposes under different conditions: it is one of the ways humans celebrate or express joy, it could serve as a means of bodily exercise, a way of communicating a message dramatically, etc. For example, in virtually all species of animals, including man, a dance could be a simulation of sexual moves for arousing erotic desire in another. There is indeed time for everything under heaven. Ecclesiastes 3:4 says "A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance."

DANCING AND OT WORSHIP

The first recorded dance in the Bible was when the Israelites successfully crossed the Red Sea and the Egyptian army perished. In celebration, the people rejoiced, they danced while singing

praises to God; the songs were led by a prophet and dancing was coordinated by a prophetess. *“Then sang Moses and the children of Israel ... And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances.”* –Exo 15:1a, 20

The second recorded instance was when the Israelites danced in false worship unto the Golden Calf. We are warned against such wantonness and idolatry since they serve as examples for us.

Exodus 32:18 *And he said, It is not the voice of them that shout for mastery, neither is it the voice of them that cry for being overcome: but the noise of them that **sing** do I hear.* 19 *And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf, and the **dancing**: and Moses' anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount.*

1 Corinthians 10:7 *Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.* 8 *Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand.*

Using instruments of music in solemn assembly was approved under the OT.

Leviticus 23:24 *Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, In the seventh month, in the first day of the month, shall ye have a sabbath, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, an holy convocation.* 25 *Ye shall do no servile work therein: but ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD.*

Numbers 10: 8 *And the sons of Aaron, the priests, shall blow with the trumpets; and they shall be to you for an ordinance for ever throughout your generations...* 10 *Also in the day of your gladness, and in your solemn days, and in the beginnings of your months, ye shall blow with the trumpets over your burnt offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; that they may be to you for a memorial before your God: I am the LORD your God.*

By the time of the Judges, dancing by Israelite maidens (virgins) was part of the ceremonies during an annual religious festival.

Judges 21:19 *Then they said, Behold, **there is a feast of the LORD in Shiloh yearly** in a place which is on the north side of Bethel, on the east side of the highway that goeth up from Bethel to Shechem, and on the south of Lebonah.* 20 *Therefore they commanded the children of Benjamin, saying, Go and lie in wait in the vineyards;* 21 *And see, and, behold, if the daughters of Shiloh **come out to dance in dances**, then come ye out of the vineyards, and catch you every man his wife of the daughters of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin.* 22 *And it shall be, when their fathers or their brethren come unto us to complain, that we will say unto them, Be favourable unto them for our sakes: because we reserved not to each man his wife in the war: for ye did not give unto them at this time, that ye should be guilty.* 23 *And the children of Benjamin did so, and took them wives, according to their number, **of them that danced**, whom they caught: and they went and returned unto their inheritance, and repaired the cities, and dwelt in them.*

The above passages shows the Levites were the instrumentalists in worship services and the women especially maidens the main dancers. A command may be spoken/obeyed even before it is written down in scripture e.g. that of the acceptable fire to be offered by Levites. David was a man after God's heart and a prophet; he gave clear precepts on singing, and praising God with instruments and dance.

Psalms 30:10 *Hear, O LORD, and have mercy upon me: LORD, be thou my helper.* 11 *Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing: thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness.*

This relates his personal experience wherein God turned his sadness into happiness and caused him to dance rather than be sorrowful and still.

Psalms 47:1 *O clap your hands, all ye people; shout unto God with the voice of triumph... 6 Sing praises to God, sing praises: sing praises unto our King, sing praises. 7 For God is the King of all the earth: sing ye praises with understanding.*

The people were instructed to CLAP and to sing with understanding unto the sovereign God.

Psalms 149:1 *Praise ye the LORD. Sing unto the LORD a new song, and his praise in the congregation of saints. 2 Let Israel rejoice in him that made him: let the children of Zion be joyful in their King. 3 Let them praise his name in the dance: let them sing praises unto him with the timbrel and harp. 4 For the LORD taketh pleasure in his people: he will beautify the meek with salvation.*

Psalms 150:1 *Praise ye the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary: praise him in the firmament of his power. 2 Praise him for his mighty acts: praise him according to his excellent greatness. 3 Praise him with the sound of the trumpet: praise him with the psaltery and harp. 4 Praise him with the timbrel and dance: praise him with stringed instruments and organs. 5 Praise him upon the loud cymbals: praise him upon the high sounding cymbals. 6 Let every thing that hath breath praise the LORD. Praise ye the LORD.*

This is a call upon living creation to praise the creator, with mankind enjoined to worship Him who dwells in the heavens with dance and instrumental music.

These are not mere poetic exclamations as some presume but also constitute inspired instructions unto the nation of Israel. God saw it fit to EXPRESSLY **command each item: singing praises, using instruments and dancing in worship** since one activity does not necessarily imply the others! David practiced what he preached.

1 Chronicles 15:16 *And David spake to the chief of the Levites to appoint their brethren to be the singers with instruments of musick, psalteries and harps and cymbals, sounding, by lifting up the voice with joy... 28 Thus all Israel brought up the ark of the covenant of the LORD with shouting, and with sound of the cornet, and with trumpets, and with cymbals, making a noise with psalteries and harps. 29 And it came to pass, as the ark of the covenant of the LORD came to the city of David, that Michal the daughter of Saul looking out at a window saw king David dancing and playing: and she despised him in her heart.*

Other righteous kings and scribes did not think of David's words in Psalms 149-150 to use instruments or dance as mere figurative poems but as commandments of God via a prophet.

2 Chronicles 29:20 *Then Hezekiah the king rose early, and gathered the rulers of the city, and went up to the house of the LORD... 25 And he set the Levites in the house of the LORD with cymbals, with psalteries, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, and of Gad the king's seer, and Nathan the prophet: for so was the commandment of the LORD by his prophets. 26 And the Levites stood with the instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets. 27 And Hezekiah commanded to offer the burnt offering upon the altar. And when the burnt offering began, the song of the LORD began also with the trumpets, and with the instruments ordained by David king of Israel. 28 And all the congregation worshipped, and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded: and all this continued until the burnt offering was finished... 36 And Hezekiah rejoiced, and all the people...*

DANCING AND NT WORSHIP

The New Covenant is better and not based on shadowy or carnal ordinances. Under Jesus, Christians worship 'in spirit and in truth.' Many religious groups today offer praise with instrumental music and/or dance. They admit the NC exhorts us to sing praises without any mention of instrumental music and dancing. Everyone acknowledges that the NT scriptures are

silent in both matters. The prime defense of those who use instruments of music and dance in worship today is that the NT *nowhere forbids it*. They say none should ‘argue from silence’ *against* these practices though they argue from silence *for* both practices! If one posits that silence permits whatever is not prohibited then such has inadvertently opened the gates for OT practices and new innovations foreign to the doctrine of Christ. Those who celebrate the feast of Harvest today aver it is not legislated against by the apostles. Denominations which celebrate Christmas as a religious festival aver that “*it is not prohibited; Jesus neither said ‘do ONLY the Lord’s Supper in remembrance of me’ nor ‘do nothing but the Lord’s Supper in my memorial.’*” Their approach is faulty since they are NOT content to do only those things that are commanded by the Lord in worship. May the church add or practice any act/doctrine so long such is not expressly prohibited? The abrogation of the OT per its guidelines for worship must be accepted. The specification of things to do under the NC outlines what suffices for us to please God. Please review my articles on **the Silence of the Scriptures**; [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).

Interestingly, no messianic Psalms alludes to Christ dance but rather refers to Him sing and praise God with the redeemed.

Acts 2:25 *For David speaketh concerning him, I foresaw the Lord always before my face, for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved.*

Hebrews 2:12 *Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee.*

In person, Jesus gave us examples of singing when rejoicing or solemn, offering praises alone and with His disciples (without using instruments of music or dancing).

Luke 10:21 *In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight.*

Matthew 26:30 *And when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the mount of Olives.*

When the Lord’s church started, **the Holy Spirit inspired the apostles and guided saints to worship with singing; omitting any reference to using instruments and dancing**. Note that singing, using instruments of music and dancing are THREE DISTINCT activities that could be done independently or in combinations by an individual or group; the non-replication of dancing and musical instruments usage by Christians in the NT indicates God left these out being shadows of the OT era. It was deliberate for inspiration to have mandated singing alone. The NC teaches that instruments such as pipe, harp, trumpet, etc. are without life and could give uncertain sounds (1 Cor 14:6-8) but we should ‘*sing with the understanding*’ –vs 15b

Ephesians 5:19 *Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord*

Colossians 3:16 *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. 17 And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.*

Hebrews 13:15 *By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.*

When national Israel worshipped in the OT, they were authorized to ‘sing, clap, play instruments and dance.’ Those things were assigned to different categories of the people in their assembly. In the NT we are only commanded to sing; *both individually and collectively in worship*. We are solely to use our vocal cords to produce an intelligible, edifying message *via the lips with melody in the mind (heart) not with gyration in the neck, arms, waist and legs!* It is

not a moment of *whistling, humming, playing, clapping and dancing* but rather a period of teaching and admonishing one another with the words of Christ via spiritual songs of praise. We worship uniformly in the assembly because each renders the same thing, the cost to acquire or the skill to play an instrument or dance is not an impediment today; everyone simply sings!

INFERENCES AGAINST DANCING IN WORSHIP

In approved items of worship such as Prayer, Giving, Lord's Supper, Exhortation and Singing, **every Christian is to participate** and all focus on the Lord, via the current item based on His word. Since it is asserted that dancing is *optional* and any may freely choose *whether to dance or not to dance in worship*, various situations could arise. Some may dance to express personal joy during teaching while some may choose to dance to glorify God during singing and some may choose to dance during prayer as bodily exercise to prevent dozing. Each would aver no scripture forbids such action. **If permissible under the NT** (because of the Silence of the Scripture) **then dancing vigorously with joy before the LORD as David did and exposing one's underwear and/or private parts cannot be considered excessive or indecent** (2 Sam 6:5, 14-23). After all, nobody should judge a brother or sister in a matter of opinion (Rm 14:10, 22) which dancing is posited to be! But the kingdom of God is not about partying or dancing but about righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. While the Davidic kingdom was carnal, the Messianic kingdom is spiritual. As we rejoice in the Lord our moderation should be known to all (Phil 4:4-5) hence it is proper to *sing songs of praise if any is happy* (Jms 5:13b). When the church come together to sing unto God, we should be focusing on the lyrics which must be spiritual -teaching via the fruit of our lips as we admonish one another. The one who choose to dance when the church is worshipping is not wholly 'looking unto Jesus' or His word but is focusing on the musical beats and the planning cum execution of his/her body movements to the rhythm. Such public dancer is *neither sober nor vigilant spiritually but is rather giving an occasion for the flesh to gratify itself*; is periodically examining the space around him to see where to move the legs, swing the arms or nod the head. All do not have to dance in church nor do so at the same time since it is said to be a matter of opinion and individual liberty. Many who should worship in spirit and in truth could thus be distracted; some appreciating or competing with a nearby dancer, others reviewing whether another's dance style is entertaining or worthy of emulation or erotically pleasuring. When it is averred that dancing is private and optional in worship it becomes obvious it should be practiced in the privacy of one's home, NOT during congregational service so as not to distract or offend some by apparently importing an OT worship item. To promote or introduce dancing in church is to go beyond what is written.

SOME OBJECTIONS ADDRESSED

Claim: Dancing is a means of rejoicing and comes naturally just as smiling or laughing.

Response: How are we to express our happiness and rejoicing in the Lord? When one is pleased or amused or finds something funny he would likely smile/laugh by nature though the degree of propensity to do so varies with each individual. These are psycho-physiological reactions; one does not learn to smile or laugh, it is innate or in-born. Smiling or laughing comes by itself in fairly constant format whereas dance is planned and executed rhythmically to real or imaginary musical beats. Your dancing movement varies as per your desire hence ***you choose your dance style at any occasion***. If using instruments to create beats and dancing were wholly natural response of emotion such as a smile both would NOT have been commanded in the OT.

Claim: Dancing is a gesture like raising hands during singing or praying and does not require scriptural authorization under the NT since they are mood dependent.

Response: To raise one's hands or exclaim or leap *in an instant* of joyful excitement is plausible but to keep doing it in a prolonged or repeated manner in a worship service would

violate the precept: *'let all things be done decently and in order.'* Such nuisance deserves caution in the assembly of the saints. The scriptures indicate one could lift/raise up the hands while speaking / singing / praying or worshipping generally. Such gesture was approved not only under the OT (Psalms 28:2; 63:4-5; 119:48; 134:2, Isaiah 1:15) but also in the NT (Acts 26:1, 1 Tim 2:8, Heb 12:12). Prayers and songs are laden with exhortation, praises and thanksgiving so kneeling or raising one's hands as a gesture of surrender/appeal unto God is reverent. However, dancing was authorized under the OT but is NOT in the NT.

Claim: Dancing is an expression of mood over which one has no control so none should be restricted from dancing in worship.

Response: Some may choose not to dance when happy and there are professional dancers who could dance irrespective of personal mood. It is not that humans are helpless and cannot resist dancing to a sound. It is unacceptable for anyone to claim he was overwhelmed with emotion and cannot resist dancing to a song; self-control is a virtue and the spirit/body of those who carry the word/testimony of prophecy is subject to their mind.

Claim: Dances are *involuntary movements*; it is spontaneous when one is engrossed in singing.

Response: One ought to call self to order on realizing if s/he dances subconsciously in worship, which is different from displaying rehearsed/contrived dance moves. Any dance in worship is coordinated and accomplished by a person to give rhythmical, periodic motion not arbitrary, uncontrollable movements. 'Involuntary movements' refers to body motions not subject to an individual's control; this is not mere heartbeats or bowel movements but refers to tremors, jerks, seizures, etc. due to triggers rooted in muscular/hormonal/mental disorders. The phrase should not be misused for it is actually a synonym for EPILEPSY, CHOREA, etc. Google it!

Claim: A Song Moderator usually moves and that constitutes dancing.

Response: What we need is a *song leader/tuner* not a *song moderator* for we are not performing to entertain anyone but rather to worship God. The one who leads a song MAY gesticulate *to indicate the next tempo for singers* and that is called CONDUCTING unlike DANCE wherein *listeners move to previous beat!* The use of a Music Conductor during worship is not absolutely necessary and could be jettisoned.

CONCLUSIONS

The epistles were written to guide disciples in the faith and for people to know how they ought to behave in the house of God. Most believers agree that God is neither requesting nor accepting dancing in worship in this dispensation, unlike in the OT. He says nothing about it in the NT. ***This implies that God does not want dancing in worship during this dispensation.*** Thus dancing is an occasion to gratify the flesh, please self and perhaps others. I envisage that if one persuades his congregation to start dancing in worship, it won't be long before they also start to play instruments of music! Choosing a posture to pray is comparable to choosing a posture to sing (stand, sit kneel or lie down). Dancing is not a posture; it is a response to a conceptual or audible musical beat systematically done by moving the body in certain ways. It is NOT involuntary or reflex motion as some assert but is deliberate since it is planned, repeated, systematic, rhythmical body movements; a display of some preferred named sequence out of several conceivable alternatives e.g. Shaku, Alanta, Soki, Tap, Stomp, Shuffle, etc. The postures of standing, sitting, lying prostrate, kneeling, etc. are in the NT and are expedients humans adopt for comfort, decency, humility, etc. while in God's presence. Neither use of mechanical instruments nor dancing can serve as an aid to obey the command to sing. Dancing in congregational worship today is unauthorized, unnecessary, distractive, inexpedient and purportedly optional hence is unscriptural.