

Series: N/A

Sermon: Why Methodists Should Not Dance

Psalm 30:11

You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed
my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.

Psalm 149:3

Let them praise his name with dancing and make
music to him with tambourine and harp.

Psalm 150:4

Praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him
with the strings and flute.

Ecclesiastes 3:4<There is> a time to weep and a time to laugh, a
time to mourn and a time to dance.

Sermon

The Reverend MT Wire had just arrived in Oregon City one hundred years ago this week - and he already made the front page of the news. “With dances taking place almost nightly in Oregon City, with the ball given in honor of the ex-service men Saturday night at the Moos hall still fresh in the memories of the young folk of the Town, Rev. Melville T. Wire, who arrived here three weeks ago as minister of the First Methodist Church, took a fling at the devotees of the terpsichorean art Sunday night...”Just watch a dance,” he said, “and when the music suddenly stops, how foolish the people look holding on to each other...As pastor of this church, I shall do everything in my power to fight it.” One week later, the church burned down. I’m not saying these are connected...

He wasn’t the only pastor to question this artistic expression. From the New York Times, 1871: The Preacher’s Association met yesterday to discuss the following question: “What is our duty as ministers concerning fashionable pleasures and amusement?” Rev. Harris said they should avoid many of those amusements which today were considered allowable by many Christians. He was opposed to operatic and dramatic performances, to dancing, horse-racing, card-playing and drinking whiskey and all drinks that came under that cognomen. He considered dancing and going to the theatres detrimental to spiritual development. As people loved the dance and the theatre, they loved the church less. Those men should be disciplined or else asked to leave the church. <Later on in the article, the question was raised about the bane and affliction of croquet.>

Within American religious history, good Christian girls and good Christian boys did not dance or go to the balls. We did not drink. Not a swear word would come forth from our mouths. We certainly did not frequent gambling halls or the saloons. We did not play any form of cards. An old pastor would be spinning in his grave if he knew we had pitch parties within our congregation. These amusements, as they were called, were seen as a direct threat of spiritual growth and yeah, even salvation, 100 plus years ago and even into the earliest memories of our older members. We Christians did NOT go to dances.

What I wish to do this morning is to examine why dancing was frowned upon within our heritage and see if has anything to say to us in our 21st Century mind set. It’s easy for us to look back at them and almost snicker at them, how prudish, how quaint, how primitive. So I want to know, Why was the devil in the dancing?

I found some old sermons on dancing preached a century ago, and found some common themes among them. So here are some reasons, according to them, why dancing was going to cause the destruction of our society:

First: Parents were letting their children and youth go into dancing to become a part of “good” society. Organized dances were for the refined. The wealthy. The intelligent. One motive for people to dance was for the associations that came with the dancing. It was a part of high society. People were dancing for the wrong reason. It was for vanity’s sake, not for dancing’s sake. The dancing scene was another way of stratifying the populace into upper and lower class. We Methodists believe that we should not be vain individuals, that we should associate with people regardless of social standing, lest we put value into things that rust and moths destroy. And dancing was another form of vanity many years ago. Whose ball are you going to? What are you going to wear? Now we ask, “Who are you going to wear?”. How important will I be if I get to dance with so and so. The point of dancing was to feed the ego. Not for the dancing. What about today? Does dancing still have the same danger? I don’t believe so. Vanity is still a danger for all of us, but I don’t believe that it is as prevalent in dancing as it used to be. The people I know who do any type of dancing do it for the love of dancing - not for the glitz and glamour of being on the dance floor. If you go to a dance to feed your ego, then you should consider your motives. If you are going just to dance, I think you’re going to be alright.

A second reason I discovered in this research was that dancing, although not evil in and of itself, was part of a path that lead to debauchery and a host of other sins and regrets. Let’s take a little historical diversion down older customs and how boys and girls used to relate. Back in the 1800’s, you did not find many places where men and women worked together. Many churches had guy sections and girl sections. If you were married, you could sit together. If not, boys over here, girls over there. Even in school, boys and girls separated. There was no hanging out at the mall or other social events where we intermingle together today. Most of the day, you were segregated to your gender, except within your own family, and even then, you spent a lot of time separated due to the traditional household jobs of men and women. Guys didn’t have a lot of experience with girls. Girls didn’t have a lot of experience with guys. Now imagine, for a young man or young woman, who hasn’t had the opportunity, except for bits and pieces here and there to mingle with someone from the opposite sex - now gets to go to a dance. With the other gender. And you get to touch them. Either with hands or arms, or hands on hips. (Head Explode). Hormones that have been pent up for years finally find their purpose. And if alcohol was being served, watch out, who knows what’s going to happen. Lord knows I got my first real kiss between 8-9th grade at a dance. The Eagles’ Desperato was playing, the lights were low, I’m sorry... In many of the old sermons I read about dancing, their concern was about what the dancing led to. Love affairs, relationships that mom and dad didn’t want cultivated, babies, and so on and so on. To them, a dance was an open door to a host of other problems. What about today? Does dancing still have the same danger? Of course, dancing is another way for boys and girls to intermingle, but there are a thousand ways nowadays for girls to get to know guys and guys to get to know girls. They hang out together. If a guy and a girl went to the movies a generation ago, they were dating. Today, if a guy and a girl went to the movies, they went to the movies. Dancing is no longer the main avenue for people to meet. You don’t even have to go out on the dance floor with someone anymore! When did that change? A group of people could dance without having a specific person that they are dancing with! If I hopped out on the dance floor by myself back then, I’d be the only one by myself. They’d look at me as if I was a lonely little freak. Now, dancing is about dancing. Not necessarily about courtship and debauchery. The problem with dancing was not the dancing, but what it lead to. Today, I believe that we dance for the sake of dancing. If you want debauchery, good lord, you don’t need dancing to do that, just a good internet connection.

A third reason dancing was frowned upon was that it was trifle and a time-consuming endeavor. If you had time on your hands to dance, then you’re not doing something right. You must be taking time away from something else. In reading an Old Preacher book from 1892, I find this rule for Methodist ministers: “Never trifle away time. As often as possible to rise at four a.m. From four till five in the morning and from five to six in the

evening, meditate, pray and read scripture. From six in the morning till noon, let the time be spent in appropriate reading, study and private devotion.” That’s already eight hours of my day. Where would I fit in Law and Order? And I think that was their point. How do you spend your time. Dancing would certainly take away time from more nobler pursuits. What about today? Are those dangers still present? Yes, of course. But dancing isn’t the main culprit anymore. We throw away our time in other things. And of course, the number one time waster we have today is _____. But I’ll just tell this one story: A friend of mine, so busy, so busy, so busy, no time for anything, felt overwhelmed, over worked, not enough time in the day to do everything. His TV went out. For three week before he got a new one. And he said, “I was so bored. I didn’t know what to do with myself.” The guy who had a million things to do, when his TV shot out, discovered that not only did he have plenty of time, but time to spare and had to find other uses for his now spare hours. I think dancing is off the hook for this one.

The fourth reason that dancing was frowned upon, and this is the last one I’ll comment on today, was what one pastor called “For Conscience sake”. The main point of the argument was this: In those days, it was considered inappropriate for a minister of the Gospel to attend dances. If the minister showed up, it would be scandalous. That kind of attitude happens today. I’m surprised by how much adultery there is in the world. But if a pastor commits adultery, its in the news, on the web, in the paper. Death of his or her career - but a president can stay president and a golfer can keep golfing. People are picked up for drunk driving every single day, but if a pastor is caught, scandal and a big toodoo. If a pastor goes to the casino, eyebrows are raised. About twenty years ago, I was a pastor in Omaha and my inlaws were going to casino across the river over in Iowa and asked if we would join them. They love the slots. I have no love of giving my money away, each dollar is hard enough to come by, but we went with them because they had asked. Now I did not play the slots, but was just hanging out. And of course I ran into church folk. “Pastor, you’re not supposed to be here.” As one pastor in his sermon noted, “I reply that the minister is under no moral law that you are not. If it is innocent amusement, he may indulge in it as well as you, and it is no more wrong for him than you. And the very fact that you consider it not a fit place for a minister of Christ, proves that in your conscience you feel that it is inconsistent with the gospel, and therefore wrong.” That’s a good rule of thumb. If you feel that an activity is morally inappropriate for your pastor, then it’s probably inappropriate for everyone else. At that time, dancing was morally inappropriate for the pastor. What about today? Is the same danger present? I don’t think anyone has a problem if their pastor or priest goes out on the dance floor. The phrase “Hey Pastor Mike is dancing” is a whole lot different than “Hey, Pastor Mike is smoking weed”. Of course, if you’ve ever seen me dance, you might be tempted to say, “It is morally wrong for Pastor Mike to dance. No one should ever have to see that.” But that would be about the quality of dancing rather than the act of dancing itself.

So as we look back upon our historical roots upon dancing, we find that the dangers they posed are not the dangers we face today. The dancing wasn’t the issue. The issue were the ramifications that dancing had on folk. Dancing is not morally right or morally wrong. It’s the attitudes and motives and decisions we make while we dance that is subject to moral scrutiny. Is there dancing in the Bible? Yes, and a lot of it. Some is good and some is bad. The people danced before the Golden Calf which led into revelry and play. Bad dancing. Herod’s niece danced for her uncle in a way that got his attention - and she asked if he would cut the head off of John the Baptist. Bad dancing. But there is plenty of God pleasing dancing in the Bible. The first recorded dancing in the Bible is Exodus 15: 20 when the women in Israel dance and sang before the Lord with timbrels after the victory in the Red Sea. They had been in bondage for several hundred years – with Moses help God had delivered them. It was a dance of deliverance. In I Samuel the women of Israel sang and danced with tumbrels of joy and instruments of music after David had killed Goliath. Jeremiah promises that a time would come when the Lord would restore the dance to young and old alike. What better illustration of dancing in the New Testament than that of Luke 15: 22-27 where after the Prodigal son returns to his Father’s house and there is music and dancing. Dancing is an outlet of joy, of life, of love. When you dance, and I hope you dance sometime, adancing is a way to celebrate, to let off steam and stress, and put the feelings of your heart and soul

into movement. Don't dance for vanity sake, or for ill-advised sexual gratification or just to kill time. But dance if there is a song within that needs to express itself. Dance to remind yourself that you are connected to other people. Dance to release the pain and anguish you may have inside - to once again find that delight and happiness that you may have lost. Dance because the Lord has put joy into your heart. In the end, just Dance. And please don't burn down my church. And the family of God said, AMEN!