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Worship: Radical Ritual

by C. Raymond Holmes

Listen again to this compelling story from Scripture:

Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." And He said, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.

Then on the third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place afar off. And Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you." So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and the two of them went together.

But Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" And Abraham said, "My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering." And the two of them went together.

Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." And He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me."
Then Abraham lifted his eyes and looked, and there behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son. And Abraham called the name of the place, The-Lord-Will-Provide: as it is said to this day, "In the Mount of The Lord it shall be provided."

Genesis 22:1-14, NKJV.

This is a story full of what one author calls "ruthless grace." It is one of the most dramatic and disturbing stories in the Bible. While descriptive of authentic theocentric worship, it is also descriptive of the true and radical nature of the redeemed response to God.

This story boggles the modern mind. It creates all sorts of problems--with our thinking about God and religion, with our emotions and feelings. Whoever heard of a God--called "Father" in the Hebrew/Christian tradition--making such an impossible, cruel, soul-crushing demand!

Human beings wantonly killing other human beings is certainly not new to us. Not after the trench massacres of WW1, the holocaust of WW2, bomb explosions over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, street violence in modern cities, innocent-looking plastique blowing infants out of airliners. Violence is not new to us. We know all about it. It is one of the prime sources of entertainment. The bloodier the better. Rambo is the idol! Violence is daily diet in the news. So that's not the problem. People are used to it and crave it. They turn the dial till they find it, then sit mesmerized as landscape and bodies explode before their eager eyes. That an old man, Abraham, should make ready to kill a young man, Isaac, is minor and mild in comparison.

Why are we bothered, then? Perhaps it is because Abraham was not a violent man. His behavior appears out of character. He was not a terrorist whose business was blowing away innocent people. What made a potential premeditating murderer out of a kind and loving father? Why was so much going so wrong? And in the name of religion! Were some of the ancient pagans right when they called Christianity a blood-thirsty religion? Perhaps the story of Abraham and Isaac troubles some folks because they see in it just another proof that God is a liar, someone not to be trusted the next minute. Fickle and unreliable.

Seventeen long years had passed since God spoke directly to Abraham. Seventeen years of silence--not too good for a relationship. Isaac was not a boy any more, he was a man now. We all know what happens to kids somewhere between 16 and 20, at least today. In light of so much of our contemporary parental experience, Isaac was a strange lad. Maybe that bothers us, too. Would that our children exhibited such radical obedience! It's one of those dreams that haunt modern parents and won't go away, disturbing our nights and mocking our days.

But Isaac was the child of hope and of promise. Remember, God had told Abraham and Sarah that their offspring would be as many as the sands of the sea. Their progeny would be many nations. Isaac was a miracle child. When he was born, his mother was long past childbearing age. The promise of God had sounded so ridiculous, both parents could not restrain laughter even in God's face.

Now God had given Abraham an incomprehensible command. Was the father's hope in Isaac to be dashed to bits? The promise--what of that? Had God changed His mind? His character? Had He only been teasing Abraham and Sarah when He lifted their eyes beyond the horizons of impotent childlessness? Nevertheless, on this terrible morning, Abraham organized the caravan. He loaded the pack animal with what would be needed, wood for the burnt offering, and the sharpest knife, for the deed must be done quickly. Was Abraham's faith so serene that his father-heart felt no pain, no anguish? I can't believe it. Was his trust in God so perfect that he knew no struggle to obey? I can't believe that, either. Human life bears witness to a mixed reality, a turmoil of trust. It's not easy sometimes to be true to the Lord! The Garden of Gethsemane puts the lie to the idea that faith in God is without struggle. It puts the lie to the idea that victory can be won without battle.
The terrible word God spoke to Abraham destroys forever such religious mythology. Abraham had invested everything in Isaac, and God said "Kill it!" Destroy it. Do away with it.

We are surrounded by all the symbols of American achievement, success, and economic power. We have it all. How would we respond if the Lord said to us, "Kill it"? Sacrifice it?

For so many of us religion is an easy-going "liberal persuasion." We are good at talking religion, proud of our moderation, especially when it comes to religion. Often preferring to criticize than affirm. Happier with questions than with answers, because answers require commitment. Willing to go along with almost anything in the name of humanity, whether God has spoken or not. Scorn a conservative biblicism, yet profess shock to find the faithless in our midst.

We dismiss people who take the Bible as it reads as "too simplistic." We choose our charities. We confess only the minimal "Adventist sins." We condemn those who "come on too strong," and we never do anything religious in excess, especially when it comes to worship. People with strong convictions are branded fanatic, radical. No wonder we don't understand this story. No wonder Abraham and Isaac's behavior is beyond our comprehension. Our biggest complaint is that they took God too seriously! In our secret hearts we classify them as fools.

Perhaps we understand the story too well. Most of us would sacrifice almost anything for the sake of personal advantage. How many have mortgaged a home for a spin of the roulette wheel? We will do almost anything for ourselves. The thing that is so incomprehensible is that there was no personal advantage for Abraham, and certainly none for Isaac. Abraham would get nothing out of it except a corpse. Isaac would give up all. This is the mystery to the modern materialistic and secular mind. We may give lip service to our traditional Adventist values, but when it comes down to it we often act on the basis of what we think is good "for me."

C. S. Lewis was right in his opinion that mere knowledge of right and wrong is powerless against our appetites. He sounds like Paul in Romans 7. It's not that Abraham would do it, but that he would do it for nothing. No promise, no reward, was attached to this deed.

The amazing thing was that he climbed the mountain. Muttering, yes, but climb he did. The old man actually did it. He built the altar. He laid the fire. He bound his son and with his own arms placed him on the altar. Isaac probably helped, as Abraham was too old to have put him there if he had resisted. Every detail of the story bears witness that father and son would have finished it--the radical ritual. Abraham would do the will of God if it meant destroying his only hope. So would Isaac. All that mattered was that God had spoken. They didn't wonder if God said what He meant or meant what He said. Though the Word of God cut across every natural human consideration, it was to be obeyed.

Here is the true sacrifice. Here is what is to be destroyed if revealed religion is to have any validity and meaning at all. Our will to do our own thing is what is to be slain. The witness of the Garden again! Moriah and Gethsemane are not so far apart. Abraham's obedience and Isaac's willingness based on a motive other than selfishness is a mystery for the modern mind. Christian life is not what we thought it was. It is not the comfort of a psychiatrist's couch, of motor homes and IRAs. We are stuck with Moriah, with Gethsemane, with Calvary.

The two patriarchs submitted to what they believed was the will of God. That is the essence of worship. Without that kind of faith all the ritual, all the music, all the talk in the world cannot make worship happen. No matter what we do, no conference or convention, no program or process, can make an empty sack stand.

The radical ritual of Abraham and Isaac is the epitome of authentic Adventist worship. Look beneath the act to the spirit from which it arose and find a lofty expression of worship that is
remarkable and rare, almost foreign to contemporary worship that is so man-centered. Here God is the unseen yet central figure, not man. Here is a vivid example of the true nature of worship. God is praised not by word but by act. The radical ritual symbolized faith’s reality expressed in worship as obedience.

God responds, too, to our faith and obedience. It is no surprise then that, as Abraham said, "God himself will provide." Abraham looked up and he saw a ram caught in a thicket. It is only the person who is in submission that will recognize the gift when it is given, who will recognize grace when it is offered.
Gospel Gimmicks: The Foolishness of Preaching Vs. the Preaching of Foolishness

by Samuel Koranteng-Pipim

How shall we communicate God's message? Does the medium matter?

"My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water. . . . Now why go to Egypt to drink water from the Shihor? And why go to Assyria to drink water from the River?" (Jer 2:13, 18, NIV).

Throughout Bible times, and ever since, the clear and persuasive proclamation of God's Word has been the most effective medium to communicate God's truth. The apostle Paul refers to the method as the foolishness of preaching (1 Cor 1:21).

Today, however, we seem to be moving away from simple Bible-based preaching to some rather ridiculous and sometimes bizarre gimmicks from the secular world. We may convince ourselves that there is nothing wrong with these gimmicks. But perceptive unbelievers, observing the way we are blindly mimicking worldly methods, may justifiably dismiss our message as the preaching of foolishness. Let me explain.

Gospel Magician?

Recently I received an urgent e-mail from a Seventh-day Adventist graduate student at a public university in the United States. He urged me to share my views with him on "a troubling issue" that had arisen in one of the local churches of his conference. The issue relates to the plan by that local church to invite a "gospel magician" to be guest speaker for a week of prayer. The student expressed his concerns this way:

"I fear that in engaging in practices of magical tricks (that are also done by many secular magicians) we are blurring the line between what is good and what is not. Even though I do not necessarily believe that those engaged in sleight of hand are using any supernatural
powers, I fear that the use of illusion to pass across some gospel truth is missing the point and only putting temptation before our children.

"The brethren in the church I referred to do not believe that this is a matter of black and white. They believe that those of us who are opposing this practice in the church (for children's story) and in the church school (for both entertainment and now week of prayer) are 'ultra conservatives' and that we are looking for evil where there is none. I do not know if there is a very clear distinction between black and white in this case. For now (I am still hoping to do further study on this matter), I see it as 'black' because of the potential for evil and because it blurs the line between the good and the bad (these brethren even argue that the Bible is really not opposed to 'magic'). I feel that if the line we are dealing with is gray then we, as a church, need to keep away from it. We should shun all 'appearance' of evil.

"I do not know therefore whether the church has a position on this. I have been challenged to show from the Spirit of prophecy or Bible where this practice is condemned. I have been reminded that the local conference has sponsored some of the church members to seminars and conferences for gospel magicians. I have also been reminded that there were Adventist gospel magicians (or gospel illusionists) performing during the Toronto GC Session. I am groping in the large sea of information and arguments out there to even get some principles I can apply in this matter. I have asked that this particular local church appoint brethren to study the matter and to get a forum to discuss it. I tried the same in the school board, but the overwhelming number of members of this school board 'did not see' anything wrong with the practice. I am preparing to face the church board but cannot go with simple arguments without a biblical reason. Any ideas?"

Few would have thought that a Seventh-day Adventist congregation would one day even consider employing a so-called "gospel magician" to communicate spiritual truth at a church meeting. Yet this is one more evidence of a growing trend to introduce into the church some biblically-questionable styles of worship and evangelism. The surprising thing about this development is that an overwhelming number of members don't see anything wrong with it.

We have had gospel rock and praise dancing in worship services, gospel puppets, gospel clowns, gospel cafés/discos and gospel theatrics/dramas for our outreach to youth, young adults, and the "unchurched." Now, it seems, we must have gospel magicians for our church services and weeks of prayer. By resorting to these "gospel gimmicks," are we in danger of turning away from the foolishness of preaching to the preaching of foolishness?

In this article I will argue that in so far as gospel gimmicks accommodate the biblical religion to the tastes of unrenewed hearts, such contemporary methods evidence our welcoming of worldliness into the church. Even more, a reliance upon such worldly methods of communicating the gospel is misguided and contrary to the biblical teachings of the Seventh-day Adventist church.

**Worldliness in the Church**

The former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev reportedly told the following story to teach the need for vigilance.

At a time when there was a wave of petty theft in the USSR, the story goes, the Soviet authorities put guards at many of the state-owned factories. At one of the timber works in Leningrad the guard knew the workers well. The first evening, Pyotr Petrovich came out with a wheelbarrow and, on the wheelbarrow, a great bulky sack with a suspicious-looking object inside.

**Guard:** "Come on, Petrovich. What have you got there?"

**Petrovich:** "Just sawdust and shavings."

**Guard:** "Come on, I wasn't born yesterday. Tip it out."
When we fundamentally change our method of proclaiming spiritual truth, we change the message itself.

Petrovich did, and out came nothing but sawdust and shavings. So he was allowed to put it all back again and go home. The same thing happened every night all week, and the guard was getting extremely frustrated. Finally his curiosity overcame his frustration.

Guard: "Petrovich, I know you. Tell me what you're smuggling out of here, and I'll let you go."

Petrovich: "Wheelbarrows."

While we may laugh at this story, we may also need to remember that in the arena of contemporary worship and outreach methods the laugh is on us as Bible-believing Adventist Christians. We have set up patrols to check for worldliness around us by developing our own schools, seminaries, radio and TV stations, publishing houses, book centers, etc. But the devil has wheeled worldliness and paganism right past our eyes into some of these institutions of our church. And many don't see it, let alone see anything wrong with it.

What is more, we are actually importing and actively promoting these questionable methods of worship and evangelism from both the secular world and from other religions and churches. In some instances Adventists have gone outside to study these methods at non-Adventist theological seminaries or have attended the training seminars on worship, soul-winning and leadership at Willow Creek and other inter-denominational, ecumenical, and charismatic organizations and churches. Yet we fail to recognize that when we fundamentally change our method of proclaiming spiritual truth, we change the message itself. And when we change the message of God, we change the God of the message.

Because these gimmicks compromise the credibility of our message, Adventists have been counseled against copying methods found in other churches.

Our Temptation.

Throughout our history, there has always been a temptation for our ministers to pattern our practices after other churches. Ellen G. White warned against this in her day: "A new order of things has come into the ministry. There is a desire to pattern after other churches" (Signs of the Times, Dec. 27, 1899). She expressed her concerns about the influence of other churches on our ministers: "Some ministers are adopting the customs of other churches, copying their habits and manner of labor" (ibid., May 25, 1882).

Warning of the dangers inherent in responding to other churches' invitations to learn from them and employ their methods of labor, Mrs. White wrote: "They may desire us to unite with them and accept their plans, and may make propositions in regard to our course of action which may give the enemy an advantage over us" (General Conference Bulletin, April 13, 1891).

In embracing Mrs. White's counsel, Seventh-day Adventists are not suggesting that they alone have the truth. The Word of God is clear that every human being in God's world has at least a little light (Jn 1:9; Jas 4:17) and that God has revealed Himself in nature, history, human experience, and in many other ways (Ps 19; Rom 1 & 2; Heb 1:1, 2). Consequently, Adventists hold that some divine truth can be found in the secular world (whether atheistic or materialistic), in pagan and non-Christian religions, as well as in all Christian denominations--Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and Pentecostal. God is truth and the ultimate source of all truth. Wherever truth is found, we must embrace it.

Present Truth.
Adventists, however, insist that whatever light can be found in other churches, they have also and much more besides. Believing that God has raised up their church as His end-time repository of truth, Adventists hold that they have the present truth, the everlasting gospel for these last days.

The issue, then, is not whether other faiths or churches have some truth. Instead, the question is whether our ministers ought to look to other churches for new light. Given our self-understanding as God’s end-time depository of truth, is it necessary for us to go to churches that are still living in spiritual darkness to discover new light or additional truth from them? If those churches represent "Babylon," and if it is true that "Babylon is fallen," how can we call upon our brothers and sisters in "Babylon" to "Come out of her, My people" (Rev 18:4), when we ourselves are now returning to "Babylon" to receive instruction from her?

**Broken Cisterns.**

Centuries ago, the prophet Jeremiah spoke out against this tendency on the part of God’s people to mimic the gimmicks found in other faiths: "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water. . . . Now why go to Egypt to drink water from the Shihor? And why go to Assyria to drink water from the River?" (Jer 2:13, 18 NIV).

Ellen White explained why we must not drink from the broken cisterns: "We are in danger of making blunders in our missionary effort, in danger of failing to realize how essential is the work of the Holy Spirit upon the heart. A new order of things has come into the ministry. There is a desire to pattern after other churches, and simplicity and humility are almost unknown. Young ministers who desire to be original introduce new ideas and new plans for labor. They open revival meetings and call large numbers into the church. But when the excitement is over, where are the converted ones? Repentance for sin is not felt. The sinner is entreated to believe in Christ and accept Him, without any regard for his past life of sin and rebellion, and the heart is not broken. There is no contrition of soul. The professedly converted ones have not fallen upon the Rock Christ Jesus" (Signs of the Times, Dec. 27, 1889).

Earlier in our history, following the disappointment, Mrs. White warned our members not to seek "new light" even from denominations that had their roots in the Advent movement but had not accepted advancing truth: "The different parties of professed Advent believers have each a little truth, but God has given all these truths to His children who are being prepared for the day of God. He has also given them truths that none of these parties know, neither will they understand. Things which are sealed up to them, the Lord has opened to those who will see and are ready to understand. If God has any new light to communicate, He will let His chosen and beloved understand it, without their going to have their minds enlightened by hearing those who are in darkness and error" (Early Writings, p. 124, emphasis mine).

She continued: "I was shown the necessity of those who believe that we are having the last message of mercy, being separate from those who are daily imbibing new errors. I saw that neither young nor old should attend their meetings; for it is wrong to thus encourage them while they teach error that is a deadly poison to the soul and teach for doctrines the commandments of men. The influence of such gatherings is not good. If God has delivered us from such darkness and error, we should stand fast in the liberty wherewith He has set us free and rejoice in the truth. God is displeased with us when we go to listen to error, without being obliged to go" (ibid., pp. 124, 125, my emphasis).

In spite of these warnings, a growing number of our members and leaders "don't see anything wrong" with today's gospel gimmicks. We are adopting and actively promoting these worldly entertainment methods for our own worship and evangelistic services. Regrettably, those who raise concerns are mislabeled "ultra-conservatives." Why is this so?
Why We "Don't See Anything Wrong"

Granted, many within our ranks who are resorting to the various types of gospel gimmicks--gospel rock, gospel clowns, gospel cafés, gospel magicians, etc.--sincerely desire to see spiritual renewal in the church and want to attract new souls to Christ. Many who advocate such things are persuaded that God will use these modified forms of entertainment from other churches to win and retain young people in our own church. Without judging their motives and sincerity, I'd like to suggest a few other reasons why some of us don't see anything wrong with these contemporary innovations.

1. Desperation

There are those of us whose witness and example as parents and teachers have been unconvincing to our young people. The youth have observed that while we rightly affirm "the Bible and the Bible only," many of us do not have a living experience with the Bible's divine Author. Baptism seems more a graduation ceremony than the start of a new life in Christ. Our identity as God's "remnant" church makes us complacent instead of inspiring us to fulfill our divine mission to the world. We assert repeatedly that "we have the truth," but very often the truth does not have us. Our preaching, teaching and evangelism may cram the mind with information without bringing about the deep soul searching and humility of heart that results in transforming the character. Our ethical positions on social issues reflect pragmatic concerns rather than fidelity to Scripture. And instead of our worship being reverently vibrant, it tends to be either dull and sterile or emotional and superficial.

Having observed the above inconsistencies and hypocrisies, many of our young people are restless to sever all links with what they perceive as hypocritical faith. Their parents and teachers, in sheer desperation to hold them in the fold, encourage every worldly fad, even if it means importing "gospel rock," "gospel clowns," or "gospel magicians" into the church. Although some of us who fit this description may sense that these new forms of worship and outreach are incompatible with biblical Christianity, we find ourselves unable to oppose the methods because, in fact, we share the same worldly values and do practically nothing for the Lord. On the other hand, our children and students want to be active in the church. But the only way they know how is through different forms of worldly idolatry.

2. Weak Church Leaders.

Unfortunately, some of us pastors and church leaders are sometimes to blame for the introduction of gospel gimmicks into church. We appear to put popularity, job security, position, and the illusion of outward success above our duty to the Chief Shepherd. We seem to fear that if we were to take a stand against these forms of worldliness in our churches, we would create enemies and threaten our support among our constituencies.

In some instances, we have done less than we might have to lead our congregations in the direction of revival and meaningful evangelism. We seldom preach Bible-based messages. With hazy preaching and teachings paralyzed by uncertainty, our churches are dying. Consequently, when something wrong comes along in the name of evangelism and worship innovation, we have already forfeited our moral right to challenge it. We find it easier to jump on the bandwagon of what is new instead of courageously holding on to what is true.

3. Denial of Faith.

Another reason why we may not see anything wrong with gospel gimmicks is that some of us have embraced liberal higher criticism. Consequently we do not really believe in the efficacy of God's Word to draw souls to Christ and keep them in the faith. We also do not believe that ours is the end-time church of Bible prophecy to which other faiths should come for truth. To those of us with this view, our church is not the remnant, but only "part of the remnant."
Although we may accept some aspects of our faith, such as the Sabbath and our health principles, in the honesty of our hearts we do not see the uniqueness of our message, the distinctiveness of our identity, the end-time dimension of our hope, and the urgency of our mission.

Ethical integrity suggests that if we have lost the faith and certainties of our pioneers and cannot regain them, we should resign from our denominational employment. But not all of us have the courage to do so. (Some announce their views only after retirement.) So, in our desire to shed the "cult" and "sectarian" labels that have often been used to characterize Seventh-day Adventists, we actively import gospel gimmicks from both the secular world and other religions and churches.

4. Lack of Conversion.

There is another reason why some of us who advocate gospel gimmicks don't see anything wrong with them. Perhaps, unknown even to ourselves, we have never been fully converted. Our tastes and affections are still in the world. We are honest when we say that we see nothing wrong with these biblically-questionable innovations. This is because spiritual things are spiritually discerned.

Thus when the sanctuaries which were dedicated to the worship of a holy God are transformed into auditoriums to worship the god of entertainment, we do not see anything wrong. We may congratulate ourselves for finally coming up with "a contemporary church program that meets the needs of our generation." We don't realize that the god of this world has blinded us (see 2 Cor 4:4). Without a true conversion, there is no hope of changing our minds against the use of worldly methods in worship or evangelism.

Part 2
If it is true that rock music is the most effective medium to reach young people today, why is it that math teachers and chemistry professors don't set their classes to heavy-beat and hip-swinging music? Why don't politicians employ clowns and illusionists to present their political messages?

Common sense tells us that these entertainment media are not the most credible methods to communicate serious messages. A doctor, meeting an apprehensive patient, does not dress like a clown in order to tell his patient that she has cancer. If a doctor who wants to be taken seriously does not resort to this kind of frivolity, isn't it folly to announce God's message of warning and judgment to a dying world by resorting to entertainment?
Jesus did not use the gimmicks of entertainment to proclaim his Sermon on the Mount. On the day of Pentecost, Peter did not set up a drum set or ask Mary to lead out in praise dancing to announce the resurrection of Jesus and His enthronement in heaven. And Paul did not persuade people on Mars Hill using gospel magicians.

We are self-deceived if we believe that drums, disco lights, costumes, illusions, and loud noises are capable of representing the infinite holiness and mercy of God to a lost generation. Those of us who resort to these worldly gimmicks can only do so because we serve a different god from the One the apostles worshiped.

The apostle Paul makes it clear that the pre-eminent method of proclaiming spiritual truth is by the spoken word. "It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. . . . Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Cor 1:21, 25).

2. Contrary to Scripture

It is a mistake for us to think that the world will embrace our message when we use worldly methods. The New Testament tells us that when Christ came to the world, "the world knew him not" (Jn 1:10), for He was "not of this world" (Jn 8:23). What makes us believe that we can succeed where Christ failed?

Jesus Himself mentioned that Christians "are not of the world, even as I am not of it" (Jn 17:16; cf. vv. 9, 14). He stated emphatically that the works of this world are evil (Jn 7:7). He said that true believers are not of the world and prayed that they should be kept from its evil ways (Jn 17:14, 15). Because the Spirit of God stands against the spirit of the world (1 Cor 2:12), the gospel should not be presented in such a way as to be coupled with the standards of the world. "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed . . . that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Rom 12:2).

The apostles also taught that "friendship with the world is hatred toward God" (Jas 4:4) and that the world "pollutes" the believer (cf. 1:27). Therefore, Christians are urged: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world" (1 Jn 2:15-16).

We depart from biblical teaching when we think that today's so-called gospel rock, gospel clowns, gospel magicians, and other forms of gospel entertainment can legitimately be employed to communicate spiritual truth. The Scriptures teach that the world is on its own, "without hope and without God" (Eph 2:12). Therefore, instead of borrowing worldly methods to reach the world, Christians are sent forth like the apostle Paul, "to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God" (Acts 26:18).

**Bait-and-Hook Evangelism?**

It is often suggested that because most people--especially young people--don't want to listen to the gospel, we have to "bait" them with gospel entertainment and gimmicks. Once we attract them by these contemporary methods, then we can "hook" them with the true message. The proof text to justify the use of worldly methods to reach people is Paul's statement:

"And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews. . . . To them that are without law, as without law . . . that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor 9:20-22). Thus, some argue, we must employ whatever people
like to hear in order to get a hearing for the gospel.

But the context of the passage reveals that Paul was talking about preaching (see v. 16ff.), not the use of worldly methods of evangelism. The apostle stated that in his preaching and witnessing he always tailored his message to suit the level of understanding of his hearers. In other words, he always spoke appropriately. Therefore 1 Corinthians 9 does not teach that Paul employed or encouraged the "bait and hook" method for evangelism. On the contrary, he persuaded the people from the Word of God using preaching as his method.

Moreover, God's end-time church has been divinely entrusted with the everlasting gospel. This stewardship is a great privilege. But it is also a solemn responsibility. For "it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful" (1 Cor 4:2). The faithfulness to which the church has been called compels us to preserve the integrity of the message by preserving the method we employ to communicate it.

The apostle Paul therefore urges us not to try to "catch" people with the entertainment "bait" so we can "hook" them with the gospel. He writes: "For our exhortation was not of deceit, nor of uncleanness, nor in guile. But as we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts. For neither at any time used we flattering words, as ye know, nor a cloak of covetousness; God is witness" (1 Thess 2:3-5).

Note the following two facts from this passage. First, the Greek word translated "deceit" (plané) means error. The ultimate issue on any subject should always be truth. "The Gospel is either true or it is not. Paul stakes his entire life on the truth of the Gospel. There's a tendency in our day to judge values by the wrong standard. 'Does it work?' is often asked more than 'Is it true?' The test of the validity of the Gospel is truth. The danger in preaching to attract an audience is obvious. It is too readily disguised to provide solutions that work rather than truth that is to be confronted. The acid test for every sermon or Bible class must be: Is it true? If Christ is presented [merely] as a means by which we can be successful, happy, or whatever, we are betraying the Gospel of God. We are guilty of deceit and error even though we may be successful in drawing followers."¹

Second, the Greek word dolos, translated "guile" in 1 Thessalonians 2:3, means "trick" or "bait" (or "craft," "subtlety," or "decoy"). There is no place for trickery or manipulation in evangelism. Thus the NIV translates the passage as: "For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you" (my emphasis).

We must not employ "deceit" in the proclamation of the gospel. Our message must determine the method. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 1 that when the Jews wanted to see miracles and the Greeks wanted to hear worldly wisdom, he refused to bow to their tastes and desires because God had commanded him to preach the gospel. Effective preaching is always the preferred biblical method to proclaim the gospel.

### Encouraging Youth Involvement

We sometimes hear that the use of these contemporary methods of entertainment is the only way to involve young people in church life. Advocates argue that because young people have many wonderful talents and abilities, the church must give them "a piece of the pie"—just as was done for our youthful Adventist pioneers. They further claim that failing to allow them to employ their unique gifts in the worship and outreach activities of the church makes young people lose interest in the church.

This argument is not entirely accurate, nor is it biblical. It is true that many of our Adventist pioneers were young people. For example, James White began preaching at 23 and Ellen White was telling her visions publicly at 17. J. N. Andrews held evangelistic meetings at age 21, and by age 24 he had published 35 articles. Uriah Smith became editor of the Review at age 23, having already written a 35,000-word poem called "The Warning Voice of Time and Prophecy" that the Review published in installments the year before. What set these youthful
pioneers apart from many of today's youth is that they were converted and studious Bible students. As such, they would not bring themselves to using worldly entertainment methods in the Lord's service.

Many of today's young people have special gifts and abilities. But giftedness in performing certain functions does not necessarily mean those abilities should be employed in spiritual worship or outreach. The fact that a person can play a set of drums, or dance, or even perform magical illusions and acrobatics does not mean we need gospel rock, gospel dancing, gospel magicians or gospel acrobats in church. If this were the case, we would have to insist that gospel footballers and gospel baseball pitchers should use their special gifts during worship services. Rather, we must seek to encourage young people who are truly converted to use their gifts in ways appropriate to the worship service of the Holy God, while not putting them in positions that expose them too early to the dangers of spiritual pride and arrogance (see 1 Tim 3:6).

The Foolishness of Preaching, Not the Preaching of Foolishness

The clear proclamation of God's Word has always been the most effective method of communicating God's truth. Because this method went contrary to the gospel gimmicks of his day, the apostle Paul referred to it as "the foolishness of preaching." Adventist evangelist Carlyle B. Haynes has aptly illustrated the difference between preaching centered on the Word of God and preaching using the worldly method.

Gospel Gimmicks

Speaking to young ministers several decades ago, Haynes wrote:

"I once attended a meeting conducted by a well-known Adventist evangelist who had achieved an outstanding reputation, and whom many younger ministers were consulting for suggestions to improve their work. Some were diligently copying this man's manner of presentation. I had been out of the country for five years in mission work. Reports came to me regarding this man, who was looked upon as a successful winner of souls. His methods, which were certainly innovations among us, were the subject of much discussion.

"I was eager to get a firsthand look at this man and his techniques. My appointments brought me to the city where he was conducting an evangelistic campaign, and I made plans to hear and observe him in action. Mingling with the large number of people streaming in to the meetings, I sat in the middle of the audience, where I could see and hear without difficulty.

"The tabernacle was well lighted and decorated. . . . On the rafters above the platform were hung many lights, and on each side of the platform two spotlights centered on the preacher.

"There was music, much music--instrumental, vocal, choral, solos, duets, quartets, and two little tots who sang an amusing ditty which brought a round of laughter and a handclap or two. Then came an impressive theme song, which many seemed to know and I had never heard. At its close the preacher entered in a sort of hush.

"He attracted everyone's attention, including mine. I was not quite prepared for this. He could not fail to catch attention. Everything had apparently been done with that in mind. He was dressed in spotless white, with white tie, white socks, white shoes. Even the Bible he carried was bound in white. A woman at my back exclaimed breathlessly to her companion, 'Isn't he a honey?' and I had to agree. He was indeed. From that first moment he was the focus of attraction. No one could hear, see, or think of anything else but that 'honey' of a preacher. His words were little noticed, yet no one moved his eyes from the speaker, and all heads
swung around with him as he stood or moved about in the glare of the spotlights. . . .

"I didn't listen, but I certainly looked. I couldn't help looking. It was an impressive performance. What he said, I don't know; but I can remember yet what he did as he skillfully moved about the platform. . . .

"Returning to my hotel room, I tried to recall what he may have read from the Bible. I could not remember his opening that beautiful white Bible at all. While I am sure he must have done so, I did not notice it. The last thing I remember passing through my mind before I sank into slumber was, 'He certainly is a "honey."

"Traveling about the country for some months after that, I ran into a considerable number of white suits and spotlights. They broke out like an epidemic everywhere. The imitation ran its course, as epidemics do, and then subsided--I hope.

"I mention the incident only because I desire to contrast it with another experience that occurred while I was a pastor in New York City. For a number of years I had heard reports about the ministry of a great British expositor, George Campbell Morgan, pastor of London's Westminster Chapel. He had been making annual trips to America for Bible conferences, but I had not heard him. I had, however, read all his books. . . ."

**Biblical Preaching**

Haynes continued his advice to ministers:

"Learning that Morgan was coming to New York City to conduct a two-week series of studies in the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, I was delighted at the prospect of hearing this great preacher and arranged my schedule so that I could attend these nightly meetings without interruption. They were to start on a Monday night which I thought to be a poor night to begin.

"I arrived at the church a half hour before the meeting was to begin. Knowing the church accommodated 2,500 easily, I had no worry about finding a seat. But I was wrong: the seats were all taken. The ushers directed me into the gallery, and fortunately one seat was left there. With a sigh of relief I sat down, astonished beyond measure that 2,500 people would turn out like this on a Monday night.

"The pastor and Dr. Morgan came onto the rostrum quietly and sat down. The congregation sang an old hymn, and during the singing I looked closely at the famous preacher. Never had I seen a more unprepossessing man in the pulpit. He was tall, lanky, awkward, and I thought I might hear his bones rattle if there were not so much rustling by the audience. His clothing was plain, and there was nothing conspicuous about him.

"After the pastor's prayer and simple introduction, Dr. Morgan walked to the pulpit, opened the Bible--not a white one--and in a pleasing voice, but entirely without dramatic effect, read the Scripture passage and immediately began to explain it. I am glad that I examined him before he began speaking, for I never noticed him again during the whole hour. Instead, I was utterly absorbed and entranced at the meanings he was bringing out of the treasure-house of the Word of God. It was one of the most thrilling hours of my life. I had never experienced anything like it before. And it was repeated nightly for two weeks.

"Dr. Morgan had no graces of gesture, no spectacular delivery, and no eloquence in the usual sense. He used no charts, blackboard, pictures, screen, or gadgets of any kind. Nothing in his talk, movements, dress, or manner attracted attention to himself or diverted attention from the Bible. His tremendous power was in what he did with and by the Word of God.

"I was in another world in five minutes, not because of any elocution or oratorical ability. He talked quite casually and in a conversational tone, reading with deep reverence and impressive feeling the passage he was to explore. I forgot the people about me, forgot the
church, forgot the speaker, forgot everything but the wonders of the world into which I had been led . . . .

"I went home dazed with wonder at the effectiveness of the Bible alone as the source of great preaching . . . .

"I want to impress upon you that such preaching is wholly within the reach of every one of you, the most powerful that any man can ever use. Throw away your accessories, discard your gadgets and pictures, discontinue your shows and playlets, stop relying on entertainment and theatrical displays, and get back again to the simple, plain, powerful exposition of the Word.

"When I returned home the night after Dr. Morgan's first study, the prayer that burst from my deeply moved heart was, 'O God, make me a preacher of Thy divine Word, and help me never to rely on anything else.'"^{2}

May this be our prayer, too.

**Notes**


Shall We Dance?

by Samuele Bacchiocchi

Does the Bible support dancing as part of the worship service?

Should Seventh-day Adventists today accept dancing as a legitimate form of social entertainment and/or as a component of divine worship? Historically, the answer has been "No!" The reason has been the belief that the Bible does not sanction the modern type of dancing done by couples, nor does it ever mention dancing in the context of the worship service. In recent years, however, the question has been reexamined, especially by some Adventist youth leaders who claim to have found biblical support for dancing.

New Trend

A good example of this new trend is the symposium Shall We Dance? Rediscovering Christ-Centered Standards. This research was produced by twenty contributors and is based on the findings of the "Valuegenesis Study." This study is the most ambitious project ever undertaken by the Adventist church to determine how well the church transmits its values to the new generation.

The back cover of Shall We Dance? indicates that the book is "jointly sponsored by the Department of Education of the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, the John Hancock Center for Youth Ministry, La Sierra University, and La Sierra University Press." This combined sponsorship suggests that the content of the book is endorsed by major Adventist institutions.

Even so, the opening statement of the introduction plainly says: "The book is not an official statement of the Seventh-day Adventist Church regarding standards and values. Rather it is an invitation to open discussion regarding lifestyle issues. Hopefully even better biblical principles will become the bedrock for our distinctive lifestyle as we move from the peripheral, but ever-present issues to the weightier matters of living the Christian life."

The clarification that the "book is not an official statement of the Seventh-day Adventist..."
Church" is reassuring, because, in my view, some of the conclusions hardly encourage the development of "even better biblical principles." A case in point is the four chapters devoted to dance and written by four different authors. These chapters present a superficial analysis of the biblical references to dance and differ from the historic Adventist position on dancing.

The superficiality of the study is reflected, for example, in the chapter entitled "Dancing with a User-Friendly Concordance," which consists primarily of a listing of twenty-seven Bible references to dancing, without any discussion whatsoever. The author assumes that the texts are self-explanatory and supportive of dancing during the worship service. This is indicated by the fact that he closes the chapter by asking: "How could we dance before the LORD today? What type of dance would it be? Why do people dance nowadays?" Surprisingly, the author ignores the fact that no dancing was ever allowed in the religious services of the Temple, synagogue, or early church.

Is Dance a Component of Divine Worship?

The symposium Shall We Dance? derives five principles from an examination of the biblical view of dancing. The first one is, "Dance is a component of divine worship. When we study Scripture we find that what it says about dance and dancing is not only not condemnatory, but in some cases positively prescriptive: 'Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with timbrel and dance; praise him with strings and pipe' (Ps 150:3, 4)."

The author continues: "A half hour with a good concordance leaves the lingering impression that there is more to a truly Biblical perspective on dance than has previously met our Adventist eyes. Of some 27 references to dance (dance, danced, dances, dancing) in the Scriptures, only four occur in a clearly negative context, and even these references nowhere describe dancing as the object of God's displeasure."

The chapter presents this surprising challenge to the Adventist church: "As challenging as it is to our notion of respectability and decorum, it seems evident that Adventists should give new thought and study to the inclusion of dance as part of the worship of God, at least in selected communities and on special occasions."

Though the author does not draw it himself, the implication of this interpretation is self-evident. If dancing is a component of divine worship in the Bible, then why should it not also be accepted as a legitimate form of social entertainment? After all, what is done in the church serves as a model for the Christian life in general.

Four Major Flaws

After spending not "a half hour" but several days examining the biblical data regarding dance, I find this conclusion unsubstantiated and its challenge unnecessary. For the sake of clarity, I wish to respond to the position that in the Bible "dance is a component of divine worship" and consequently an acceptable form of social entertainment outside the church, by submitting four major lines of evidence which discredit this position.

1. Scripture and history indicate that dancing was never part of divine worship in the Temple, synagogue, and early church;
2. Of the twenty-eight references to dance or dancing in the Old Testament, only four can be considered to refer to religious dancing (Ps 149:3; 150:4; 2 Sam 6:14-16), but none of these relate to worship in God's house, and two of them may not actually refer to dancing at all;
3. Social dancing in Bible times was done mostly in conjunction with the celebration of religious events, especially the annual festivals. The dance was performed outside the Temple by women, children, or men, as separate groups, and not as male-female couples.
4. The women, who did most of the dancing, were excluded from the music ministry of the Temple, synagogue, and early church apparently because their style of music was associated with dancing and entertainment.
No Dance in the Worship Service

In the Bible there is no trace of dancing by men or women in the worship services of the Temple, the synagogue, or the early church. This absence can hardly be attributed to negligence, because the Bible gives clear instructions regarding the ministry of music in the Temple. The Levitical choir was to be accompanied only by stringed instruments, the harp and the lyre (2 Chron 5:13; 1 Chron 16:42). Percussion instruments like drums and tambourines, which were commonly used for making dance music, were clearly omitted. What was true for the Temple was later also true for the synagogue and the early church. No dancing or entertainment music was ever allowed in God's house.

After his extensive analysis of "Dance in the Bible," Garen Wolf reached this conclusion: "First, dancing as part of the Temple worship is nowhere traceable in either the first or the second Temple. Second, of the 107 times these words [Hebrew words translated as "dance"] are used in the Bible, only four times could they be considered to refer to religious dance. Third, none of these references to religious dance were in conjunction with the regular established public worship of the Hebrews."4

It is important to note that David, who is regarded by many as the primary example of religious dancing in the Bible, never instructed the Levites regarding when and how to dance in the Temple. Had David believed that dancing should be a component of divine worship, no doubt he would have given instructions regarding it to the Levite musicians he chose for the ministry of music at the Temple.

After all, David is the founder of the music ministry at the Temple. He gave clear instruction to the 4,000 Levite musicians regarding when to sing and what instruments to use to accompany their choir (1 Chron 23:25-31). His omission of dancing in the divine worship can hardly be an oversight. Rather, it tells us that David distinguished between the sacred music performed in God's house and the secular music played outside the Temple for entertainment.

An important distinction must be made between religious music played for entertainment in a social setting and the sacred music performed for worship in the Temple. We must not forget that the whole life of the Israelites was religiously oriented. Entertainment was provided, not by concerts or plays at a theater or circus, but by the celebration of religious events or festivals, often through folk dancing by women, children, or men, each of them performing as a separate group.

"Dance" or "Dancing" in the Old Testament

"Praise Him with Dance."

There are four explicit references in the Bible to so-called "religious dancing" (Ps 149:3; 150:4; 2 Sam 6:14-16). Two of them consist of an invitation to praise the Lord "with dancing" (Ps 149:3; 150:4) and two describe David's dance before the ark (2 Sam 6:14-16). For many people these texts provide an all-sufficient biblical support for religious dancing in the church and social dancing outside the church. In view of the importance attached to these texts, we take a closer look at them by examining first the invitation to praise the Lord "with dancing" (Ps 149:3; 150:4) and then the episode of David's dancing before the ark.

It is important to note first of all that the invitation to praise the Lord with "dancing" is based on a disputed translation of the Hebrew term machowl, rendered as "dancing" in Psalm 149:3 and as "dance" in Psalm 150:4. Some scholars believe that machowl is derived from chowl, which means "to make an opening"--a possible allusion to a "pipe" instrument. In fact this is the marginal reading given by the King James Version. Psalm 149:3 states: "Let them praise his name in the dance" [or "with the pipe," KJV margin]. Similarly Psalm 150:4 reads: "Praise him with the timbrel and dance" [or "pipe," KJV margin].
The marginal reading of the KJV is supported by the context of both Psalm 149:3 and 150:4, where the term "machowl" occurs in the context of a list of instruments to be used for praising the Lord. Besides "machowl," in Psalm 150 the list includes eight instruments: trumpet, psaltery, harp, timbrel, stringed instruments, organs, cymbals, clashing cymbals (KJV). Since the Psalmist is listing all the possible instruments to be used to praise the Lord, it is reasonable to assume that "machowl" also is a musical instrument, whatever its nature might be.

Another important consideration is the figurative language of these two psalms, which hardly allows for a literal interpretation of dancing in God's house. Psalm 149:5 (RSV) encourages people to praise the Lord on the "couches." In verse 6, the praising is to be done with "two-edged swords in their hands." In verses 7 and 8, the Lord is to be praised for punishing the heathen with the sword, binding kings in chains, and putting nobles in fetters. It is evident that the language is figurative because it is hard to believe that God would expect people to praise Him by standing or jumping on couches or while swinging two-edged swords.

Similarly, Psalm 150 speaks in a highly figurative way of praising God. The psalmist calls upon God's people to praise the Lord "for his mighty deeds" (v. 2) in every possible place and with every available musical instrument. Included in the psalm are some specific places to praise the Lord, namely, "his sanctuary" (where His people can go) and "his mighty firmament" (where they cannot go); the reason to praise the Lord, namely, "for his mighty deeds . . . according to his exceeding greatness" (v. 2); and a selection of instruments to be used to praise the Lord, namely, the eight (or nine) listed above.

This psalm makes sense only if we take the language to be highly figurative. For example, though God's people can praise Him in His sanctuary, there is no way for them personally to praise the Lord "in his mighty firmament," because they live on earth and not in heaven. The purpose of the psalm, then, is not to specify precisely and literally the location and the instruments to be used to praise God musically in the church. Nor is it intended to give a license to dance for the Lord in church. Rather, its purpose is to invite everything that breathes or makes sound to praise the Lord everywhere. To interpret the psalm as a license to dance or to play drums in church misreads the intent of the Psalm and contradicts the very regulations which David himself gave regarding the use of instruments in God's house. We will consider those regulations shortly.

David's Dancing Before the Lord

The most important example of religious dancing in the Bible is undoubtedly the story of David's dancing "before the Lord with all his might" (2 Sam 6:14) while leading the procession that brought the ark to Jerusalem. Many view the example of David as the most compelling biblical sanction of religious dancing in the context of a divine service.

Shall We Dance? has a chapter "Dancing to the Lord," written by a Seventh-day Adventist youth leader. He asserts, "We can dance to the Lord like David, reflecting an outburst of excitement for the glory of God; or we can introspectively turn that excitement inward, reflecting on ourselves and our selfish desires." The implication of this statement seems to be that if we do not dance unto the Lord like David, we repress our excitement and reveal our self-centeredness. Is this what the story of David's dance teaches us?

Ellen G. White's position on the matter is helpful in clarifying the real issues. First, her view of David's dancing is distinctly more sedate than that of our author, for she describes David's dancing in this way: "in his gladness keeping time to the measure of the song." Such a description is reminiscent of the kind of festal marching, called a "dance," which I witnessed in Ethiopia, and of which I will say more later.

Second, Mrs. White contrasted David's activity with modern dancing. She wrote that "David's dancing in reverent joy before God has been cited by pleasure lovers in justification of the fashionable modern dance, but there is no ground for such an argument." She noted the moral effects of modern social dancing, which lead away from God, prayer, and devotion. "This test should be decisive," she wrote. "The music and dancing in joyful praise to God at
the removal of the ark had *not the faintest resemblance* to the dissipation of modern dancing. The one tended to the remembrance of God and exalted His holy name. The other is a device of Satan to cause men to forget God and to dishonor Him" (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 707, emphasis mine).

Can proponents of dance in worship today claim that its movements, which are often sensuous in themselves, have "not the faintest resemblance" to secular modern dance? On what basis can they claim that the effect of their proposed innovation would tend to the remembrance of God and exalt His holy name? Would it not rather introduce a carnal element into the worship of God?

Further, despite its religious associations, David's dance was not a part of the worship service, nor was it done in the precincts of the place devoted to the worship of God. The example of David provides no basis for bringing into our worship services the kind of dancing we are being urged to embrace. This is bringing "strange fire" before the Lord in His house.

Regardless of what David's activity may have specifically entailed, it is important to distinguish between the descriptive and prescriptive elements of Bible stories. Not all that worthy Bible characters did should be imitated. For example, we are told that when "David perceived that the Lord had established him king over Israel, and that he had exalted his kingdom for the sake of his people Israel" (2 Sam 5:12), he "took more concubines and wives from Jerusalem" (2 Sam 5:13). We find no explicit judgment of his actions in the story itself, though in Deut. 17:17 kings are forbidden to multiply wives. But since we are not kings, shall we feel free to follow David's example by taking more "concubines and wives" when we perceive that the Lord has blessed our endeavors? Obviously not. We simply recognize that even great people like David sometimes acted in ways that God would not be pleased for us to follow.

**No Dancing Music or Instruments in the Divine Service**

In assessing the story of David's dancing during the procession that brought the ark to Jerusalem, we must take into account the context of music ministry in the Temple, which David himself established. If David had believed that dancing should be a component of divine worship, he would have instructed the Levitical choir on how and when to dance during the Temple service. After all, it was David who instituted the times, place, and words for the performance of the Levitical choir. He also "made" the musical instruments to be used for their ministry (1 Chron 23:5; 2 Chron 7:6); these were called "the instruments of David" (2 Chron 29:26-27).

Note that David never instructed the Levites to accompany the Temple's choir with the percussion instruments associated with dancing, instruments such as the timbrel, tambourines, or drums. Instead, he established that the Levitical choir was to be accompanied by lyres and harps. These were called "the instruments of song" (2 Chron 5:13) or "the instruments of God's song" (1 Chron 16:42). As their descriptive name indicates, their function was to accompany the songs of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord (1 Chron 23:5; 2 Chron 5:13). The musicians who played the harps and the lyres would themselves sing the song to their own accompaniment (1 Chron 9:33; 15:16, 19, 27; 2 Chron 5:12-13; 20:21).

In his book *The Music of the Bible in Christian Perspective*, Garen Wolf observes that "String instruments were used extensively to accompany singing since they would not cover up the voice or the 'Word of Jehovah' which was being sung." Great care was taken to ensure that the vocal praise of the Levitical choir would not be overshadowed by the sound of the instruments.

Percussion instruments were never allowed in the religious services of the Temple, not because their sound was evil *per se*, but because such instruments were commonly used to produce entertainment music which was inappropriate for worship in God's house. By prohibiting instruments associated with the dancing type of music, the Lord taught His people to distinguish between the sacred music played in the Temple and the secular, entertainment
music used in social life.

The restriction on the use of instruments was meant to be a binding rule for future generations. When King Hezekiah revived Temple worship in 715 B.C., he meticulously followed David's instructions. We read that the king "stationed the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, harps, and lyres, according to the commandment of David . . . for the commandment was from the Lord through his prophets" (2 Chron 29:25). The cymbals were used to mark the transition between stanzas, and not to accompany the singing.

Two and a half centuries later, when the Temple was rebuilt under Ezra and Nehemiah, the same restriction applied again. No percussion instruments were allowed to accompany the Levitical choir or to play in an orchestra at the Temple (Ezra 3:10; Neh 12:27, 36). This confirms that the rule was clear and binding over many centuries. The singing and the instrumental music of the Temple were to differ from that used in the social life of the people.

**Dancing in Pagan Worship**

Other references to religious dancing in the Bible need not detain us, because they have to do with the apostasy of God's people. For example, there is the dancing of the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai around the golden calf (Ex 32:19). The Bible alludes to the dancing of the Israelites at Shittim when "the people began to play harlot with the daughters of Moab" (Num 25:1). The strategy of the Moabite women was to invite Israelite men "to the sacrifice of their gods" (Num 25:2), which normally entailed dancing.

Apparently the strategy came from the apostate prophet, Balaam, to Balak, king of Moab. Ellen White commented: "At Balaam's suggestion, a grand festival in honor of their gods was appointed by the king of Moab, and it was secretly arranged that Balaam should induce the Israelites to attend. . . . Beguiled with music and dancing, and allured by the beauty of heathen vestals, they cast off their fealty to Jehovah. As they united in mirth and feasting, indulgence in wine beclouded their senses and broke down the barriers of self-control" (Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 454, emphasis mine).

There was shouting and dancing on Mount Carmel by the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:26). The worship of Baal and other idols commonly took place on a hill with dancing. Thus, the Lord appealed to Israel through the prophet Jeremiah: "Return, faithless people; I will cure you of backsliding. . . . Surely the idolatrous commotion on the hills and mountains is a deception" (Jer 3:22, 23 NIV).

Part 2

Additional links on this topic:

**Shall We Dance? - 2**
Social Dancing

Another important consideration which discredits the attempt to use the Bible to justify dancing as a component of divine worship and as a form of social entertainment is the nature of dancing in the Bible itself. A survey of the Bible's twenty-eight references to dance indicates that dance was essentially a social celebration of special events, such as a military victory, a religious festival, or a family reunion. The dances were either processional, encircling, or ecstatic. They were done mostly by women and children.

The Bible never depicts men and women dancing together romantically as couples. As H. Wolf observed, "While the mode of dancing is not known in detail, it is clear that men and women did not generally dance together, and there is no real evidence that they ever did." 8

The dances mentioned in the Bible were social events with religious overtones, because they often took place within the context of religious events, such as the celebration of annual festivals. They could be compared to the annual carnival celebrations that take place today in many Catholic countries, with colorful dancing. No Catholic would consider such dances to be part of the worship services.

Men and women danced in Bible times, not romantically as couples but separately in processional or encircling dances. In view of the religious orientation of the Jewish society, such folk-type dances are often characterized as religious dances. But there is no indication in the Bible that any form of dance was ever associated with the worship service in God's house.

Those who appeal to the biblical references to dance in order to justify modern romantic dancing inside or outside the church ignore the fundamental difference between the two.
There is no indication in the Bible that any form of dance was ever associated with the worship service in God's house.

Few people today would want to participate in the folk dance mentioned in the Bible, simply because there was no physical contact between men and women. Each group of men, women, and children did its own "show," which in most cases was a kind of march with a rhythmic cadence.

In Ethiopia, where numerous Jewish customs still survive, including Sabbath keeping, I witnessed "The Dance Around the Ark" by Coptic priests. Frankly, I could not understand why they called it "dance," since it was merely a procession by the priests who marched in a circular fashion around the ark with a certain rhythmic cadence. To equate the biblical notion of dance with modern dance is misleading to say the least, because there is a world of difference between them. Moreover, the Bible gives no indication that any form of dance was ever associated with the worship service in God's house. In fact, we shall now see that women appear to have been excluded from the music ministry of the Temple, synagogue, and early church, apparently because their music was associated with dancing and entertainment.

**Women and Music in the Bible**

Numerous Bible passages refer to women singing and playing instruments in the social life of ancient Israel (Ex 15:20, 21; 1 Sam 18:6, 7; Judg 11:34; Ezra 2:64, 65; Neh 7:66, 67), but no references in the Bible mention women participating in the worship music of God's house. Curt Sachs has noted that "Almost all musical episodes up to the time of the Temple describe choral singing with group dancing and drum beating . . . And this kind of singing was to a great extent women's music." Why were women excluded first from the music ministry of the Temple, and later from that of the synagogue and early church? This is surprising because, after all, women were the main music makers in the Jewish society.

Scholars who have examined this question suggest two major reasons. One reason is musical in nature and the other sociological. From a musical perspective, the style of music produced by women had a rhythmic beat which was better suited for entertainment than for worship in God's house.

Robert Lachmann, an authority on Jewish cantillation, is quoted as saying: "The production of the women's songs is dependent on a small store of typical melodic turns; the various songs reproduce these turns--or some of them--time and again. . . .The women's songs belong to a species, the forms of which are essentially dependent not on the connection with the text, but on processes of movements. Thus we find here, in place of the rhythm of cantillation and its very intricate line of melody, a periodical up and down movement." Why were women excluded from participating in the music ministry of the Temple? This is surprising because, after all, women were the main music makers in the Jewish society.

Women's music was largely based on a rhythmic beat produced by tapping with the hand the tabret, toph, or timbrel. The tabret or timbrel was played largely by women in conjunction with their dancing (Ex 15:20; Judg 11:34; 1 Sam 18:6; 2 Sam 6:5, 14; 1 Chron 13:8; Ps 68:25; Jer 31:4). The timbrel is also mentioned in connection with strong drink (Is 5:11, 12; 24:8, 9).

**Secular Nature of Women's Music**

From a sociological perspective, women did not participate in the ministry of music of the Temple because of the social stigma attached to their entertainment type of music. "Women
in the Bible were often reported as singing a non-sophisticated kind of music. Usually at its best it was for dancing or funeral mourning, and at its worst to aid in the sensuous appeal of harlots on the street. In his satire about Tyre, Isaiah asks: 'Shall Tyre sing as an harlot?' (Is 23:15, KJV; or as rendered in the margin, 'It shall be unto Tyre as the song of an harlot').

Significantly, female musicians were used extensively in pagan religious services. Thus, the reason for their exclusion from the music ministry of the Temple, synagogue, and early Christian churches was not cultural, but theological--the theological conviction that the music commonly produced by women was not suitable for the worship service, because of its association with secular and, sometimes, sensual entertainment.

Numerous scholars have recognized this theological reason. In his dissertation on *Musical Aspects of the New Testament*, William Smith wrote: "A reaction to the extensive employment of female musicians in the religious and secular life of pagan nations was doubtless a very large factor in determining Jewish [and early Christian] opposition to the employment of women in the musical service of the sanctuary."[13]

The lesson from Scripture and history is not that women should be excluded from the music service of the church today. The Bible never forbids women to sing or play instruments in the services of worship. Praising the Lord with music is not a male prerogative, but the privilege of every child of God. It is unfortunate that the music produced by women in Bible times was mostly for entertainment and, consequently, not suitable for the divine worship.

**Conclusion**

There are no indications in the Bible or history that dance was ever a component of divine worship in the Temple, synagogue, or early church. Furthermore, the Bible offers no support for the kind of romantic or sensual dancing popular today. Nothing in the Bible indicates that men and women ever danced together as couples. Dancing was essentially a social celebration of special events, such as a military victory, a religious festival, or a family reunion. Most of the dancing was done by women who were excluded from the music ministry of God's house, apparently because their entertainment type of music was deemed unsuitable for the worship service.

The lesson that the church today needs to learn from Scripture and history is that secular music associated with entertainment is out of place in God's house. Those who are actively involved in pushing for the adoption of such music in the church need to understand the biblical distinction between secular music used for entertainment and sacred music suitable for the worship of God. People in Bible times understood and respected this distinction, and we must respect it today if the church is to remain a sacred sanctuary for the worship of God rather than becoming a secular place for social entertainment.

At a time when the distinction between sacred and secular music is blurred and many are promoting modified versions of secular dancing music for church use, we need to remember that the Bible calls us to "worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness" (1 Chron 16:29; cf. Ps 29:2; 96:9).

**Notes**


3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., p. 75.


12. Ibid.

13. For discussion and illustrations from pagan antiquity regarding the employment of female musicians in the social and religious life, see Johannes Quasten, "The Liturgical Singing of Women in Christian Antiquity," *Catholic Historical Review* (1941), pp. 149-151.


Dance of Death

by Wellesley Muir

A pastor grapples with an invitation. What would you have done?

Music began to play in a restaurant where my friends were enjoying a Saturday night treat. Their-five-year-old boy climbed off his stool, stepped out onto the floor and began to dance. The father gazed at him. "Where did you learn that?" he asked. "I didn't learn it, Daddy. The music makes me do it." Webster describes dance as "a series of rhythmic and patterned bodily movements usually performed to music."

Wedding Reception Dilemma

The bride grew up in Bangkok, Thailand where my wife and I served as missionaries. Preparing to marry a Canadian, Sue, a Thai and not a church member, asked me to conduct the wedding ceremony. The groom invited me to pray for God's blessing on the food at the reception after the wedding.

My wife and I arrived early at Bangkok's Marriott Riverside Hotel. Not accustomed to this kind of luxury, we felt out of place when we were seated at a table near the stage. One look at the menu revealed real trouble. Shark fin soup, suckling pig, roast duck, chicken--the only vegetarian food listed was the dessert.

When the bride discovered our dilemma, she and the groom left their table with relatives and joined us. "You'll have to wait about 20 minutes," she said. "I've ordered vegetarian food." All the other tables were served a whole young pig. The bride and groom stayed and ate vegetarian food with us.

Dance With Me?

Half way through the ten-course meal, the bridal couple left our table and started dancing. Suddenly the bride was back standing by my side. "Pastor," she asked, "will you dance with me?"
Now what am I going to do? I questioned myself. There's not a single text in the Bible saying, "You shall not dance." After reading our church wedding policy, these people had taken off all their jewelry and adornment for the wedding ceremony. The groom had commented, "We don't want to offend your church members."

Now I'm on their turf, I thought. I don't want to offend them, but I also want to honor Jesus. I smiled at the bride, "Thank you very much. I hope you understand, but I don't dance. Because of my religious convictions, I've never danced in my life." The groom looked puzzled when my wife, too, explained that she doesn't dance.

Christ is the Bridegroom and the church is the bride. We want to rejoice with Jesus soon, but why don't we dance? To begin our study, let's look at our Church Manual.

"We are called to be a godly people who think, feel, and act in harmony with the principles of heaven. . . . This means that our . . . entertainment should meet the highest standards of Christian taste and beauty. . . . 'Many of the amusements popular in the world today, even with those who claim to be Christians, tend to the same end as did those of the heathen. . . . Satan employs [the dance] to break down the barriers of principle and open the door to sensual indulgence.'--Patriarchs and Prophets, pp. 459, 460. . . .

"Another form of amusement that has an evil influence is social dancing. 'The amusement of dancing, as conducted at the present day, is a school of depravity, a fearful curse to society.'--Messages to Young People, p. 399. . . . In the Christian life there is complete separation from worldly practices, such as . . . dancing, et cetera, which tend to deaden and destroy the spiritual life."2

Dancing in the Bible

You've read how Moses came down the mountain carrying God's ten commandments of love on two tablets of stone. Scripture records," . . . as he came near the camp, . . . he saw . . . dancing. So Moses' anger became hot, and he cast the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain" (Ex 32:19; NKJV used throughout except as noted).

Why did Moses get angry? The golden calf--sure! But more. Dancing! Moses had lived with his mother for 12 years. At about age 13 [12, according to The Spirit of Prophecy, vol. 1, p. 164--Ed.], he had gone to live in Pharaoh's palace. Historians trace the history of dancing back to ancient Egypt. Even as a teenager, Moses must have been invited to dance many times. With God guiding his life, he could say, "No thank you. I don't dance."

Paul reminds us that young Moses chose rather to suffer "with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin" (Heb 11:25). Moses had resisted the pressure to take part in worldly pleasure. Now it troubled him that God's people were so quick to allow the Devil to lead them back to the dancing and idolatry of Egypt while claiming to worship the Lord.

Moses faced his brother, whom he had left in charge of the camp. "What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?" (Ex 32:21). Aaron understood the wickedness of dancing and idolatry. He responded, "You know the people, that they are set on evil" (v. 22).

How did God feel about this sin at Sinai? He declared, "Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book" (v. 33). The "Lord plagued the people because of what they did" (v. 35). For some 3,000 who died after dancing at the foot of Mount Sinai, it was a dance of death.

Some today are suggesting that Psalm 149:3 teaches us to worship God with dance. The verse says, "Let them praise his name in the dance" (KJV). The marginal reference in my Oxford University Press edition of the King James Version gives an alternate translation of the original. For with the dance it says, "or, with the pipe." Psalm 150:3-5 lists eight musical instruments which can be used to praise the Lord; the list includes the pipe if you take the
There is a lot of difference between praising God with dance and praising Him with a flute or shepherd's pipe.

And what is a pipe? Check any Bible Dictionary including the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary, Volume 8 of the Commentary series, and you will find that the pipe was probably a flute or a reed instrument. There is a lot of difference between praising God with dance and praising Him with a flute or shepherd's pipe.

One thing is sure. God did not ask the Israelites to stop dancing at Sinai and then inspire David to write that we should worship Him with dance. The Douay version of the Bible, which is translated from the Latin Vulgate, uses the word choir instead of dance in both Psalm 149:3 and Psalm 150:4. Translators may not agree on the exact word to use in these texts, but dance is not a correct translation. God does not contradict Himself.

Those who want the church to change its attitude toward dancing need to ask, "What God am I worshiping?" At Sinai, the God of heaven told Moses to get off the mountain. He said, "For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves" (Ex 32:7). Dancing corrupts, worshiping another god corrupts. Are we going to corrupt ourselves by bringing dancing into our worship services? Will those who dance in church on Sabbath morning find it easier to dance with the world on Saturday night?

Ellen White writes, "How often, in our own day, is the love of pleasure disguised by a `form of godliness'? A religion that permits men, while observing the rites of worship, to devote themselves to selfish or sensual gratification, is as pleasing to the multitudes now as in the days of Israel. And there are still pliant Aarons, who, while holding positions of authority in the church, will yield to the desires of the unconsecrated, and thus encourage them in sin" (Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 317).

Dancing at Jordan

At Jordan, Israel prepared to enter the promised land. For 40 years the world had marveled at miracles performed by God to protect His people. Many in heathen nations feared for their lives. For a promise of wealth Balaam tried to curse God's people. Failing to accomplish his evil mission, he connived with the king of Moab to seduce Israel to sin. "Invite them to a great festival," he suggested. Secretly working for the Moabites, Balaam urged the Israelites to attend (ibid., p. 454).

"Beguiled by music and dancing" and beautiful women, God's people drank wine, committed adultery and bowed to idols (ibid.). A plague followed. And talk about a dance of death, Numbers 25:9 says, "Those who died in the plague were twenty-four thousand." Many others repented, and Moses led the people in battle with the Moabites. Balaam, who had promoted the whole wicked scheme, got caught in the battle and died (Num 31:8).

Dancing Babylonians

Referring to Belshazzar's Babylonian banquet in Daniel 5, Ellen White reminds us: "On this occasion there was music and dancing and wine-drinking . . . Decorated women with their enchantments were among the revelers" (The Youth's Instructor, May 19, 1898). Daniel tells the rest of the story: "That very night Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain" (Dan 5:30). For dancing Babylonians, it was another dance of death.

Folk Dancing

My grandparents came from Scotland where people do the highland fling and dance the jig. Bagpipe music and drums set the mood for a very lively dance. Before he died, my oldest
Just because something is part of the culture does not make it right.

My uncle told me that dancing was one of his greatest temptations as a teenager. It kept him out of the church for years.

My wife, Evelyn, and I lived for seven years by the shores of Lake Titicaca high in the Andes of Peru. Fiestas with dancing are part of the culture. If you watch, your first reaction might be, "It's only harmless folk dancing." The reality is that this colorful dancing is often followed by drunkenness and sex orgies.

Pioneer missionaries like Elder F. A. Stahl recognized the danger and taught the people to separate from worldly pleasure and refrain from dancing. God's work in this difficult part of the world has grown in a marvelous manner to where now one in every 16 people living around Lake Titicaca is a Seventh-day Adventist.

While we enjoyed our vegetarian meal at the Marriott wedding reception, the emcee introduced a Thai dancer. The girl, dressed in a revealing outfit and decked with jewelry, moved gracefully around the banquet hall while hypnotic music poured from the sound system. Viewing this typical Thai ramwong dance, I asked myself questions.

Is this what Jesus wants me to watch? Should Adventist girls dance like this? Is this entertainment beneficial for Christians? Words of Job flashed in my mind. "I have made a covenant with my eyes; why then should I look upon a young woman?" (Job 31:1). David clinches it when he exclaims, "I will set nothing wicked before my eyes" (Ps 101:3). Christian gentlemen will not find joy watching scantily clad women perform. Jesus clearly warns against looking and lusting (see Mt 5:28).

Cabarets in Bangkok featuring music, dancing, drinking, and prostitution are not holy places. The roots of this activity reach back to folk dancing in the villages. A feature article in the Bangkok Post states, "Cabarets were a direct descendant of the Thai ramwong dances found in almost every town and at every fair." The secular press sees dance as a factor in Thailand's prostitution problem.

Just because something is part of the culture does not make it right. God called His people out of Egypt. He calls us out of Babylon. Jesus calls us to leave the world and its pleasures and follow Him.

Look up dance in your encyclopedia. You can circle the globe--Boston, Bombay, Bangkok or some remote village in the Andes or Amazon--and when the music begins to play, people often start to dance. Whether it's disco dancing, folk dancing, or dozens of other dancing styles, Satan uses this pleasure to help people forget God.

Ellen White wrote: "To those who plead for these diversions, we answer, We cannot indulge in them in the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (Review and Herald, Feb. 28, 1882). She noted that not all dancing is equally bad, but cautioned, "Yet all are steps in the path of dissipation" (ibid.). After acknowledging that some consider dancing to be a quiet home amusement, she warned: "But a love for these exciting pleasures is thus cultivated, and that which was considered harmless at home will not long be regarded dangerous abroad" (ibid.).

**Birthday Dance**

Two thousand years ago a stunning young woman dressed in an enchanting manner performed for guests at a birthday party. She appeared with sparkling jewels, flashing bracelets, little covering and less modesty. Matthew writes, "But when Herod's birthday was celebrated, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod" (Mt 14:6).

He offered the charming dancer anything she wanted. You know the rest of the story. Salome walked away with the head of John the Baptist on a silver platter. One of the greatest prophets lost his life at a birthday dance of death. And many would have called it "harmless
folk dancing."

Back in Bangkok, my wife and I left the worldly wedding reception thanking God for the high standards of our church. Dancing in any form is a step in the wrong direction. The master deceiver uses rhythm in music and dancing to help people forget God. The Bible shows that when God's people start dancing, they soon get caught up in other sins, and the result is names being blotted out of Heaven's Book of Life.

"God requires of His people now as great a distinction from the world, in customs, habits, and principles, as He required of Israel anciently. . . . Christ speaks to us, 'Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.' 1 John 2:15" (Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 458).

"Who Is on the Lord's Side?"

Moses stopped the dancing at the foot of Mount Sinai. Then he asked the important question, "Who is on the Lord's side?" (see Ex 32:26). You and I must journey to the foot of the Cross. As we look to Jesus and understand His love for us, dancing of every kind will lose its attraction. We will determine to live to please Him and be ready for His coming.

Jumping for Joy

"David's dancing in reverent joy before God has been cited by pleasure lovers in justification of the fashionable modern dance, but there is no ground for such an argument. . . . The music and dancing in joyful praise to God at the removal of the ark had not the faintest resemblance to the dissipation of modern dancing. The one tended to the remembrance of God and exalted His holy name. The other is a device of Satan to cause men to forget God and dishonor Him" (The Adventist Home, p. 517).

Ellen White is right. I'm no Hebrew scholar, but I looked up texts dealing with David's dancing and then checked Strong's Concordance for the original meanings. One verse in the King James Version describes David as "leaping and dancing before the Lord" (2 Sam 6:16). The word dancing may also mean whirling. I checked my New King James Version and here is what it says: "leaping and whirling before the Lord."

Describing the same incident, the King James Version uses "dancing" in 1 Chronicles 15:29. Strong's gives other meanings such as "spring about wildly or for joy; jump, leap, skip." This verse in the New King James Version has David "whirling and playing music," not dancing. The original Hebrew uses totally different words to describe what David did and to portray Israel's dancing when going astray. No wonder another dictionary definition of dancing is simply "to move up and down or about in a quick or lively manner."

We were back in the U.S. when I went to the airport to pick up my daughter and granddaughters. Four-year-old Melissa saw me and started jumping (I could say dancing) up and down shouting, "Grandpa, Grandpa, Grandpa!"

Today, we wait for Christ to come. Won't it be wonderful to look up and exclaim, "Jesus, Jesus--Jesus, I love you!" He will take us to heaven for the greatest wedding reception in the history of the universe. "Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready" (Rev 19:7).

We can dance with the devil or rejoice with Jesus. It's our choice. I was giving Bible studies to a Baptist family and wondered how they would react to the subject of Christian standards. I'll never forget the words of the wife as we finished the study. She said, "I'd rather walk awkwardly into heaven than to dance gracefully into hell."

Notes


And Now, a Round of Applause

by Lee Roy Holmes

What, if anything, is wrong with hand clapping in worship services?

It was Friday evening and I sat under the large camp meeting tent, listening to the musical program preceding the evening speaker. After forty-plus years of attending Seventh-day Adventist camp meetings, this was a familiar and enjoyable experience. It was good to be in fellowship with God's people.

But I was to have a shock this time. As the first musicians finished their number and walked off the platform, the audience applauded! Again, following the next number, and the next. This was a first for me, and I began to feel quite uncomfortable. For a moment I even questioned my orientation. This is the Sabbath, isn't it? This is a sacred service, isn't it? Why the applause?

As I have attended other camp meetings and Adventist gatherings over the years since, I have tried rationally and biblically to analyze my discomfort in an effort to answer the question, What, if anything, is wrong with hand clapping in worship services?

A Secular Ambiance

Through long association, hand clapping acquired for many Christians a secular feel. Its historic venue was the theater, the sports arena, the social gathering. Its intrusion into sacred worship offends the spiritual sensibilities of those who were reared with that understanding. For them, applause during a sacred service shifts the focus from the vertical to the horizontal. It spotlights the human while pushing the divine backstage. It is a jarring anomaly, like a rock beat at a communion service. It secularizes the sacred.

Hand clapping is yet another indicator of our changing concept of the greatness of God. We have reinvented God in our own image. We inform Him regarding what He is or ought to be. His sovereignty, omnipotence, and holiness have been supplanted by more human (and...
humane) qualities. Our new God is not so particular about the details. We were mistaken; now we know. Or so we think.

The Israelite sanctuary service was designed to create respect for the holiness of God. Every rite, every utensil was infused with holiness. When two intoxicated young priests were incinerated at the door of the tabernacle, the Lord said to Moses, "By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; and before all the people I must be glorified" (Lev 10:3 NKJV).

We worship the same God. Our plush churches and electronic sound systems and musical instruments have not diminished the holiness of God in the least. We must magnify, not decrease, the difference between the holy and the unholy, the clean and the unclean (see Ezek 22:26).

Seventh-day Adventists understand that in the closing of the great controversy, worship is the issue. We have always known that the battle would rage around the day; now we know it will also include the way. Hand clapping, as innocuous as it appears to some, is letting the camel's nose of secular influence into the church. Shouting, whistling, and foot stomping have not yet arrived, but can they be far behind? Those who dare to touch the mountain will be tempted to touch the ark.

**The Entertainment Quotient**

At the college I attended as a student, an "applause meter" was used to select the prize winners in amateur-hour-type programs. We clapped with all our might in an effort to drive the indicator up for our favorite competitor. Congregations are now "voting" with applause for their favorites, and worship leaders urge them on, much like talent-show emcees.

I have observed that a breathy, "contemporary" song, sung with swaying body motions, eyes half closed, microphone held close to the lips, can "bring the house down," while a cathedral-quality violin or clarinet solo may receive but a light patter of applause. It is clear that most congregations can easily ignore the hard work and time invested in learning to play or sing well; they simply applaud that which makes them feel good. Applause measures entertainment value.

The message thus conveyed to musicians is both instructive and cruel: Give us that to which our carnal natures have been habituated or your performance will not be appreciated. Besides giving false testimony about the purpose of music in worship, if the practice of applauding continues to spread throughout our churches, this alone could very well discourage many young people from pursuing an interest in serious music.

Be that as it may, this is not the most important consideration regarding applause in our services. More fundamental is the question, What are we trying to accomplish by clapping? Is it to give praise and adulation to the performers? If so, we have defeated the purpose of worship, which is to give honor and praise to God.

We are accustomed to being entertained. Our homes have entertainment centers. Our automobiles are similarly equipped to make sure our minds are constantly distracted. It is not easy to find "a quiet place, far from the rapid pace, where God can soothe my troubled mind." It seems reasonable that the church should be that place, and not a kind of Sabbath theater.

**The Music Makes Them Do It**

As already noted, the creation of the applause dynamic is not only in the congregants'
I'm here to be entertained attitude but in the performer's choice of music. People applaud what they instinctively recognize as "gospel entertainment"--a term used without embarrassment by many in "music ministry" today.

I have yet to hear any group of worshipers applaud the singing of "The Lord's Prayer" or "Just as I Am," although I'm not ready to rule out the possibility. I'm glad the hand clappers, for the most part, seem to have a modicum of respect for things sacred. Few congregations, I think, would clap as wildly and profanely for a harpist's rendition of "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" as they might for a trumpet trio version of "Do, Lord."

It is apparent that the music itself either encourages or suppresses the inclination to applaud. If the music ends with a flourish and crescendo, the congregation's emotions rise with it, and applause is often the response. Such music begs for applause. The more subdued closure of sacred hymns tends to leave the worshiper more thoughtful about the message. In other words, the more closely the music reflects what the listeners are accustomed to hearing in the entertainment world, the more vigorous the applause; the more sacred the music, the more likely the applause is to be "polite" or absent.

**Shades of Pentecostalism?**

Hand clapping, as a religious exercise, is not a stand-alone phenomenon. At least, if it is, I believe it is unlikely to remain that way. Waiting in the wings are the raised arms, the swaying bodies, and the ecstatic utterances so characteristic of Pentecostalism.

And we've been there before. In early Adventism we find several instances of individuals who went beyond shouting and clapping; they were "prostrated" by the Spirit and "slain by the power of God" *(Spiritual Gifts, 2:27, 221)*. Ellen G. White even seems to have approved of these demonstrations at the time. So why are we so guarded against them today?

The Lord showed Ellen White where these things were headed and instructed her to apply the brakes. She wrote, "With some, religious exercises mean little more than a good time. When their feelings are aroused, they think they are greatly blessed. . . . The intoxication of excitement is the object they are seeking; and if they do not obtain this, they suppose they are all wrong, or that someone else is all wrong" *(Selected Messages, 2:21)*.

It will not do to rise up in anger and say that we should not let the devil steal away something from us that is good and right. It is too late for that. Pentecostalism has gained a universal image of unbridled emotionalism; Seventh-day Adventists historically have chosen the path of calm reason and quiet joy so that the world might see us as "an intelligent, thinking people, whose faith is based on a surer foundation than the bedlam of confusion" (ibid., p. 24).

Those who defend hand clapping claim there is a need for more freedom and spontaneity, more "spirit" and less structure, in our meetings. Ellen White considered such an approach to worship dangerous. "In our speaking, our singing, and in all our spiritual exercises, we are to reveal that calmness and dignity and godly fear that actuates every true child of God. There is constant danger of allowing something to come into our midst that we may regard as the workings of the Holy Spirit, but that in reality is the fruit of a spirit of fanaticism. . . . I am afraid of it; I am afraid of it" (ibid., p. 43). Instead, she always taught that God's people were "to move with system and order" *(Testimonies for the Church, 1:191)*.

**Dealing an Uneven Hand**

Even if applause were an acceptable way of showing appreciation in our churches, isn't it a show of partiality? If anyone should be singled out for a round of applause in most churches, it is the cradle-roll leader. Or the members of the kitchen committee. Or the church school teachers.

And if Heaven approves clapping at all, my guess is it would be for a struggling soul who has...
gained the victory over some besetting sin, or someone who has come through a great trial of suffering and loss with a triumphant spirit. In such cases, I can hear Jesus saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!" (Luke 15:6).

I think singling out the up-front people for recognition sends the wrong message to the people in the trenches.

**An Intoxicating Wine**

And it sends the wrong message to the performers themselves. In the several dozen uses of the word "applause" by Ellen White, I have found no instances where it is used in a positive sense. She speaks of people "panting" for applause, of those who "seek more earnestly the applause of those around them than the approbation of God," of some who "receive applause for virtues which they do not possess," and of some whom applause stimulates much as "the glass of wine does the inebriate" (*Testimonies for the Church*, 4:375; *Early Writings*, p. 107; *Testimonies for the Church*, 2:512; 3:185, 186).

If we had no other reason to withhold applause for performances during our worship services, we would need no other. We have innumerable warnings in the Bible and the writings of Mrs. White against engendering pride and self-adulation in our fellow men. Even a sip or two of that intoxicating wine can be addicting.

**Everybody Clap?**

But what about the Bible references? At first glance, the Bible might seem to be on the pro-applause side. It speaks of the "trees of the field" clapping their hands in joy at the deliverance of Israel (Isa 55:12), and the rivers clapping their hands in anticipation of the coming of the Lord to judge the earth (Ps 98:8, 9). Second Kings 11:12 says the people "clapped their hands" during the coronation ceremonies of King Joash.

The only reference to hand clapping in connection with worship is Psalm 47:1, 2: "Oh, clap your hands, all you peoples! Shout to God with the voice of triumph! For the Lord Most High is awesome; He is a great King over all the earth." First, we note that God alone is the recipient of this exuberant expression of joy. Secondly, there is no indication here or elsewhere in Scripture that hand clapping was a regular feature in worship. And in any case, we can say with certainty that hand clapping did not come into the Seventh-day Adventist church as the result of a prayerful search of the Bible and Mrs. White's writings. It came, rather, as so many things have, out of "a desire to pattern after other churches" (*Selected Messages*, 2:18).

**A Uniter or Divider?**

I have observed that in any group there are usually a number who do not applaud. Those who do and those who don't do not fit into age or class categories. I see white-haired people applauding as vigorously as GenXers, the educated as enthusiastically as the unschooled. And I see baby-boomers sitting with arms folded.

Hand clapping is one of several elements in worship that divide us. We need to come together and resolve the issue with prayer and study and much humility of spirit. Any lasting reform will have to include our children. We have been faithfully educating our children in our schools and Sabbath Schools to sing "active" songs that employ rhythmic clapping. Perhaps, in so doing, we have trained them to find the meter and rhythm of the great hymns of the church dispirited and boring.

Cultural preferences must be set aside. If the end-time issue is worship, we make a terrible
mistake in quibbling over cultural differences. The holiness of God is the measure of our worship.

"If all the proud and vainglorious, whose hearts are panting for the applause of men and for distinction above their fellows, could rightly estimate the value of the highest earthly glory in contrast with the value of the Son of God, rejected, despised, spit upon, by the very ones whom He came to redeem, how insignificant would appear all the honor that finite man can bestow" (Testimonies for the Church, 4:375).

Notes