

# Dance Seen Through “Old” Reading Glasses

*Steve Griffing*

One of the problems Bible scholars have in their search for insights into New Testament worship is that they often superimpose modern western assumptions upon what is essentially an ancient Oriental custom. In order to see more clearly, they need to exchange their intellectual reading glasses for new “old” ones, which take into consideration the norms of first century culture, and the mandates of Old Testament doctrine.

Two false assumptions are most commonly superimposed: That Jesus Christ and His apostles were worship reformers, and that the performing arts were specialized. Neither assumption is accurate.

The assumption that Jesus was a worship reformer may be understandable, since the entirety of the sacrificial cultus of the Jews, including its associated ceremony, was set aside in the New Testament. But it must be understood that this was more a matter of prophetic fulfillment than of liturgical reform. This fact can be seen clearly in the fourth chapter of John’s gospel in which Jesus announced that the sacrificial atonement for the Samaritan woman’s sins could be accomplished neither at the Samaritan temple in Mount Gerizim, nor at the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Atonement worship could only be carried out “in spirit and in truth”, that is in a “temple” that is spiritual and eternal.

Jesus purpose, therefore, was not to reform worship in general, but specifically to fulfill the sacrificial requirements as the Lamb of God by offering His own blood. His primary mission was to fulfill, not to reform worship.

Furthermore, it is incorrect to assume that Christ’s sacrifice overturned the entirety of Old Testament worship for Christians. This is attested to by the fact that neither Christ, nor His apostles called for the abolishment of the expressive aspects of the devotional worship tradition. In fact, the Bible records numerous incidents in which they participated in these practices as part of their devotional life. (Luke 4:16, Matt. 26:30, Acts 3:1) Ephesians 5:19-20, and Colossians 3:16 both uphold the Old Testament tradition of “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” as indispensable features of New Testament worship. Thus, the apostles and their followers did not enter the Church age with a clean liturgical slate, but with the rich biblical tradition of the worshipping arts wholly in tact.

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The question of what that tradition looked and sounded like points to the second false assumption: that in the first century the performing arts were specialized into distinct disciplines. Generally, this specialization, however, does not appear to be the case. While the biblical record is fragmentary, the historical and archeological records are clear that the performance of vocal and instrumental music, as well as that of dance, was

considered a single discipline. Specialization was the exception rather than the norm until the Renaissance. In other words, singers, instrumentalists, and dancers were usually the same people. Thus, in reading the Bible, a reference to one is at once a reference to all three.

Ethnomusicologist, Alfred Sendrey, called this principle “the triplicity of music” in his 1969 book, *Music In Ancient Israel*. He wrote in this landmark piece of research, “These three musical streams spring from the same original source and tend toward the same common aim: the glorification of God.” (Not bad for a secular scholar, I might add.) Sendrey then summarized that “...dance played the same significant part in the life of Ancient Israel as music and singing”, and that, “voice, instrument, and body, the natural media for singing, playing, and dancing, have been united...into an indivisible entity. In them, collectively, music in the broader sense became a reality.” With this understanding, a passage such as Ephesians 5:19 is transformed from a scholastic exercise into an exuberant pageant – from static “cerebration” into dynamic celebration. On the other hand, superimposing the assumption of modern specialization filters out much of the artistic richness implied in the New Testament. New “old” reading glasses that are free from these false assumptions give us a clearer picture of God’s pattern for New Testament worship.

When we understand that there exists a universal language of Biblical worship that transcends testamental boundaries, unifying voice, instrument, and body into one glorious expression, our worship is infused with fresh vitality and spontaneity. Then our worship reflects more completely the unspeakable joy that we express in response to God’s redemptive grace.

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