

Contemporary Issues: Dance, Drama, PowerPoint, and Body Posture
And
Unified or Diverse Liturgies?

Let us pray.

Father, we pray that as we try to apply biblical principles and truth to the contemporary issues of our day, some of the specific ones that we have not looked at but will begin to in this lesson, help us to hold tightly to Your principles and somewhat loosely to the manner of applying them into some of these practical areas. These areas change much with developing technology and the introduction of new ideas. Help us to be wise. Give us the gift of discernment and understanding as we go. We look to You to do this. In Jesus' name, Amen.

In the areas of dance, drama, film, PowerPoint, and body posture, I want to look at some of the questions that come up as we look at these contemporary issues in worship, many of which are specific to our North American context. We talked a little bit about dance when we were in Exodus 15 and 2 Samuel 6. Psalms 149 and 150 also call upon the people of God to dance in His presence. To me, the question of whether or not dancing can be done to the glory of God can be answered simply. Yes, dancing can be done to the glory of God. We saw it with Miriam and the women of Israel, we saw it with David, and we see it in Psalms 149 and 150. Let me read those verses from the Psalms specifically. Psalm 139:1 sets the context: "Praise the LORD. Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the saints." Then 139:3 says, "Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with tambourine and harp. For the LORD takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with salvation." Thus it seems that this dancing could be happening when the people gather in assembly. That is the interesting thing. Dancing almost by definition, when it is done to the glory of God, seems to be done when God's people are assembled, gathered together. Now, whether it happens when God's people are gathered for corporate, public worship—that is the question we have to keep asking. Psalm 150 says:

Praise the LORD.

Praise God in his sanctuary;
 praise him in his mighty heavens.

Praise him for his acts of power;
 praise him for his surpassing greatness.

Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,
 praise him with the harp and lyre,
 praise him with tambourine and dancing,
 praise him with the strings and flute,
 praise him with the clash of cymbals,
 praise him with resounding cymbals.

Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.

Praise the LORD.

One of the strangest worship experiences I had was when I was in Pennsylvania. I would attend on occasion a great church where the people sang the psalms a cappella very well. The preaching was good; many of the people who attended went to Geneva College and were friends of mine. This church was part of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. I worked with the youth of this church and some others of the same denomination in the area. I also preached there about every second or third Sunday evening of the month in summertime over two summers in joint services with some of those

churches. But every Sunday while I was there the closing song after the benediction, which was sung with enthusiasm and vigor, as we went out, was Psalm 150, a cappella. So we were singing without any musical instruments, “Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals.” It was the strangest thing to be singing that a cappella. But it was in the Psalter and so they sang it. It is a going-out-with-praise sort of song, so it fit—it just seemed a little incomplete without instruments. However, people could make a similar comment about me because I sing this psalm with instruments but without dancing.

I think the question is just because dancing can be done to the glory of God, does that mean it should be done in corporate, public worship? This is a very helpful question to remember when we are trying to affirm the arts as Christian. The arts have been under-affirmed up until now in the United States from a lack of emphasis on common grace and the creational design of God that many things can be done to His glory that are not overtly spiritual. The creation sings God’s praise, longs for its restoration, and reflects His glory even now. Thus things like artwork, sculptures, and the like can beautifully reflect the glory of God in His creation and the creative abilities of the men and women He has made. Music that goes far beyond corporate, public worship can be glorifying to God. Drama, dance, film—the things we are talking about here—are not inherently evil. They are tools and instruments that can be used to the glory of God and the edification of His people. The question has to do with the context of corporate, public worship. Also, when it comes to dance, all the Scriptural references to it are in the Old Testament. Thus we come up against the question, what about going from the Old to the New Testament? Where is there continuity and where is there discontinuity? The Scripture does not say as much about dancing as I wish it did. Some people say we should therefore not dance in worship, and I understand that and feel the weight of that.

But I think my present, working conclusion (that I do not hold tightly) is that dance should not be a stand-alone element in worship, but I think it could be a manner of expression during other elements in worship. That is where I try to draw a line that is not hard and fast but is nonetheless distinguishable. In my mind, dance as a stand-alone element would be if the major thing that is happening in the service while there is dancing is the dancing itself. I have seen this in some churches. People who are trained, gifted, and practiced come out and give an interpretive dance to a worship song. Can this be done wonderfully and beautifully? Of course it can. But it seems to me that the problem is this: the main element in worship that is going on then is not the singing of the worship song, but it is the dancing. I compare that to what I have seen in other contexts such as Ghana, West Africa, where what is happening when they are dancing is that they are praising God in song, and the bodily expression of dance is secondary to the singing and praising. There, dancing is a manner of expressing joyful praise to God while singing. So there is a distinction. In one sense I am not completely comfortable closing the door on and eliminating any dancing where it would seem to be a major element of worship in itself. And on the other hand I am not completely comfortable opening the door to any type of dancing that would be expressive of another element of worship such as singing. I sort of put dance in the same category as other body postures for worship like standing, kneeling, lying flat on your face, or raising your hands. These are all body postures and expressions that in different times and places during the Gospel progression have been utilized as a manner of doing and accomplishing commanded elements of worship.

I have been in settings where people have been critical of others who are swaying and clapping their hands while singing. I would not call that dancing, though John Frame says, “The difference between tapping your toe and dancing in the aisle is just a matter of degree.” Well, it is a pretty big degree. But people have commented to me that they were distracted by others swaying and clapping their hands

while singing. I would like to see more swaying and clapping of hands because it makes for more holistic worship. We can worship in our hearts, but God also gave us hands to raise, knees to kneel on, and a face to fall on. I think our *de facto* place we go—at least in my experience of Presbyterian worship—is pretty didactic, informational, lecture hall. These are all well intended, all important, and all necessary. But there are weaknesses to this, such as viewing everything but the sermon in a service as preliminaries, downplaying singing as perhaps too emotional, or the thought that instrumental music without words cannot be a part of worship because it has no content attached to it. I think our resistance to bodily expressions in worship for some is an issue of Gnosticism, thinking of the body as evil and the spirit as good. However, I do not think that is the primary issue for the circles I have been in.

I think in our circles (the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)) the issue is more one of considering whether it is worth the potential distraction, and also it reminds us of what the Pentecostals and Charismatics do. We want to be about the serious business of understanding the Word of God—it is never less than that. But I think corporate, public worship is more than that. Does it have to include dancing? No. Does it have to include kneeling and lying flat on our faces? No. But I do not think it is inappropriate to include those things, where it fits the context. Considering the context is another big issue. In my life there is no place where I normally get together to dance. Dancing is not a normal part of my life. My wife, Beth, and I have not done that. I went to the old sock hops (1960s dances) at my high school. But I have always been overly self-conscious while dancing. Beth and I have tried attending swing dance lessons, but we do not do well that night and do not try it again until we come to lessons again. We think it looks like fun and we want to be able to dance well like our friends who have a great time and look beautiful. But I was so glad when at our daughter's wedding her dress was so big I could have my feet under her dress while we did the father-of-the-bride dance. We just moved around the dance floor and talked, and people thought we were dancing because they could not see my feet. That suited me just fine. And it does not help when my wife tells me that my imitation of the dancing I saw in Africa makes me look like I am doing some kind of a basketball move. But Beth would be the first to admit that she cannot dance any better.

I have finally gotten to the point where I feel freedom to raise my hands at times while worshiping even if no one else around me is. That is not an indication of greater spirituality in me or a reason why people should comment on my bold worship. But I am willing to say that I need to be stretched in the direction of more holistic worship that includes the expression of my body, particularly when I am worshiping with people who are more that way. Going back to an example I cited in an earlier lesson, if I had refused to go with the man who offered to bring me out to the circle of dancing in the Ghanaian church, that would have been very offensive. It would have been very offensive for me to resist that. So I had to go out and do the best I could. No one was laughing at me there; they were just thrilled that I was on my feet and joining in worship the way they were. The interesting thing in that church was that often the men would go out and dance, then come back and sit down while the women danced. So it was not even mixed gender dancing. There is a danger for dance in worship to become erotic, but I have seen pastors guard against that by going out and making a man sit down who was dancing too close to a woman or dancing in a way that was more worldly than worshipful. These pastors understand those dynamics and are sensitive to them. All the potential dangers of letting young men and women dance together during worship need not be actual ones because measures can be taken to guard against them. It was interesting to observe the manner in which the Ghanaian pastors did that. They had a section in their worship services called “Worship and Praises.” The “worship” songs were songs you did not dance to. The “praise” songs were songs you did dance to. Thus there would be a season of time in singing when there was no dancing. And then usually the older, saintly women would come out waving their hankies to begin the part of singing that included dancing.

Let us now go on to discuss drama. I do not know, but it seems that this issue is not as hotly debated as it once was, at least in the PCA. It seems to be waning a bit in some circles of discussion. But this has been a big issue in North American churches, particularly when Willow Creek Church in Chicago began doing “seeker-driven” services with drama and things like that. Then they began to produce helps for other churches to learn how to use drama in their services. Drama can be done very effectively, though it can also be done very poorly. Again the question is can Christian drama be done to the glory of God? Of course it can. I have seen it done very effectively, at conferences for instance. There is a couple, Ruth and Charlie Jones, who are with a group called “Peculiar People.” They do these wonderful sketches that are humorous, engaging, and really draw you in. You know how humor can be used to open you up so that you can be hit all the more with the reality and grace of the Gospel. Watching them, it is neat to be able to laugh at all my frantic attempts to control my life, juggling so many plates in the name of doing ministry to the glory of God. Their sketches help me see how I am doing that I am destroying myself, and all the ministries I am juggling will come crashing down anyway. Watching them illustrate this in a sketch helps me see that this could be my life. Thus I have seen some examples of how God can use drama.

The next question is should drama be used in corporate, public worship? Is it an element of worship commanded under the regulative principle? These questions would not apply to drama being used at a conference or as a part of a Sunday school class or a gathering for the purpose of watching a group like “Peculiar People” use drama to present different aspects of the Gospel. Of course those things can be done. The question is can drama be used in corporate, public worship? In answering this question people point out passages in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel in which the prophets did dramatic actions as a part of their prophetic ministry. For example, Ezekiel lies on first one side and then the other and plays little war games with the models he made. This all seems sort of strange, but it has prophetic words connected to it. How should we understand that? Does the fact that a prophet in the Old Testament does dramatic actions mean that we should use drama in worship the way they do at Willow Creek and other churches today? I am not sure that I would agree that the precedent of the prophets gives significant basis to say that God allows the use of drama in Scripture, by either direct principle or biblical example. Those who argue for the use of drama in worship say that the actions of the prophets constitute a biblical example from which we can draw a principle for worship. I am not sure that is the way to carry this forward into the New Testament.

In agreement with at least one other professor here at Covenant Theological Seminary, I would say that I am generally against drama in worship. But if you do it, make sure you do it not as a stand-alone element but as something that is attached to the element of the preaching of the Word. For example, drama could be used to act out an illustration from the sermon rather than just using a verbal illustration. I read a paper that was written in 1989 by a man who was the director of worship and arts in a PCA church plant in California. In this paper he was making a case for “selected use of drama connected to the element of preaching in Presbyterian worship that is consistent with the Westminster Confession of Faith’s teaching on the regulative principle of worship.” This is the only time I have ever seen something like that even attempted. That is a about a 25-page paper, which I still have a copy of. Here is his argument: “The summary of the position of those who advocate [drama’s] limited use connected to the sermon: sound preaching is part of the regulative principle of worship. Teaching can be logically deduced as an aspect of sound preaching where you are instructing, even exhorting the congregation. Teaching implies the application of Scripture to a particular society and culture. Teaching in a cultural context implies the use of means common to that culture. Therefore drama could be appropriate in a particular culture as a means of instruction as part of preaching.”

That is the way this argument goes. Let me reference again my experience in Ghana, West Africa. We came across a group of West African youth who go to various schools in their surrounding area to perform a combination of drama and dance as a means of instructing the kids on issues like sexual abstinence, AIDS, teen pregnancy, etc. They use drama as a teaching tool. This is also displayed in the example I cited earlier of the children dancing in the middle of the circle dance while they are singing a song of thanksgiving to God for being their God and asking Him to be their children's God as well. In most Presbyterian churches drama seems more like it is forced into the way we normally think of teaching, especially preaching. In other places this is not necessarily true. Thus I think there are some cultural dimensions to this. And our culture in the United States is changing. We have become much more of a visual arts kind of culture than when I was in seminary. Part of the change in our culture has resulted from what technology can do and bring. Is the use of drama and technology an ordinary part of instruction in North American culture now? In some parts it is. More people are using drama and film clips in teaching settings. Dr. Zink here at Covenant is an example of this, using music and film clips in his classes. This is a normal part of the teaching technique of at least a few professors even here. Does that mean we should use drama and technology in worship? Not necessarily. But I think there is room to at least ask some questions and wonder out loud. One student has brought up the issue of sermons presented in the first-person, as sort of one-man dramatic sketches, particularly for special occasions such as telling the Christmas or Easter stories. This is an interesting phenomenon because some of the people who are most opposed to the use of drama in worship services have done dramatic sermons like this. Here I think the attachment of the drama to the preaching is very important.

I see the use of film clips as being in the same category as drama. I have seen a situation where the pastor wanted to use a scene from the movie, *Perfect Storm*, a George Clooney movie that was based on a true story. There is a scene in this movie where a little fishing boat is being swamped by the waves. It provides a picture of the overcoming of impossible odds. The pastor wanted to use that as an illustration in his sermon. He thought about trying to describe the scene, but people who had seen it would just be thinking of the scene from the movie, not about the way he was describing it. So he thought, I'll just show that scene from the movie. It would be easy because of their setup, and it would only take about 60 seconds to show the clip at that point in the sermon. This was in a church that may never have used a film clip in a sermon before. Using film clips in a sermon is not all about the movie. It is not so that people can come to church to watch movies. But it can be used effectively as an illustration in teaching. I think that is at least worthy of consideration. We can have reservations about using film without completely saying it would be outside of the regulative principle. I think one of the primary problems that would make people want to think about having to use things like drama and film clips in worship is that we have removed much of the drama of worship from worship as God intended it: the sacraments as visible signs and seals of the covenant of grace, effective preaching, use of song, testimony of God's work in people's lives. I think that if we view worship as this unfolding Gospel storyline that is meant to change people's lives, all of a sudden worship becomes more dramatic and engaging. That sort of worship does not need film clips or little skits to make it dramatic and effective. Again, I am not saying that drama and film in worship are therefore horrible and awful and we should never consider using them. I am simply trying to evaluate the place of that in our culture and the potential place of that in our church, tied to the sermon as part of the instruction and teaching. That is how I try to walk through this issue. I think I am conclusive about some boundaries. I do not think I am conclusive about whether or not it should be used or if it is used how frequently it should be used—those sorts of issues.

It has been asked, why is it so important to connect drama and/or film with the sermon? Because I do not think a film clip or drama in a worship service is a stand-alone element, like dance. It is a manner of accomplishing another element, namely the preaching of the Word. That is at least where I stand on that right now. I do think film clips can be very effective when telling about a mission trip or something

similar. Showing some video or a slideshow of pictures from the trip while the team is reporting to the church can be very effective. Film could also be used as a way of doing announcements creatively. At a church here in Saint Louis at Easter-time rather than having one person give a testimony of the significance of the resurrection in his or her life, they ask many people and show the best of what they said in a short film. In this way they are able to include people of all ages, those who have been Christians a long time and recent converts, those who are married and those who are single, and so on. The way this film was put together and used it was probably even shorter than one live testimony would have been. But it had a cumulative effect, where you felt that you were surrounded by people of all kinds, ages, and life circumstances for whom the power and presence of the risen Christ has changed the shape of their lives and the way they view their lives. That was very powerfully and tastefully done. I think this was a valid manner of expressing testimony to the resurrection by people in the congregation. Thus I think there are appropriate and effective uses of film.

PowerPoint is another piece of technology that is being used more and more in teaching situations in North America. Used to display the words of songs that the congregation is singing, PowerPoint is basically a way of facilitating congregational participation and can be compared to a hymnal. It is simply a different manner of facilitating congregational participation. Is there something holier or more sacred about reading the words of a song from an open book you hold than looking at the words projected on a screen? For those who read music, this is probably an easier way to get all the notes on one page in a way that is more readable. The question about PowerPoint is more along the lines of whether it fits with our style and the aesthetics of our church worship space. We would love to put screens for PowerPoint projections in our chapel at Covenant. But the chapel was not designed aesthetically to have a good place to put screens. Therefore Dr. Chapell (our president) and others who teach in the chapel use a portable whiteboard instead.

The different body postures that are referenced in the Bible are bowing the head (referenced 4 times), standing (6 times), lifting the eyes (9 times), kneeling (12 times), hands lifted (14 times), and prostration (28 times). The typical posture in prayer that we teach our children here in North America, bowing the head with eyes closed and hands folded, is not referenced in Scripture. We are nowhere in Scripture told to close our eyes or fold our hands, though bowing the head is referenced. Now, it may be very practical and wise to have children to fold their hands and bow their heads to help them focus on talking with God. It may help them be less easily distracted visually or tactilely. The body postures referenced in Scripture are not ones we in North America normally think about in worship. Now, I am not saying that we should use the number of references to conclude that we should spend twice as much time in worship flat on our faces as we do lifting our hands. And you cannot do all of these at the same time, so they are not commanded postures for the entire service. Again, I see these body postures as different ways of expressing different aspects of Gospel-centered worship. The lifting of hands emotionally communicates something different than lying flat on your face.

There are a variety of valid expressions of different elements in worship, but where are the boundaries on those expressions? I think that is the question here. We agree that there are a variety of valid expressions of commanded elements of biblical worship taking Gospel shape. But where is the definition of a valid expression? I am partly saying this line is a little fuzzy. I think it is at least in part left to the leadership of a local church trying to be faithful to the Bible and to their context as best they can, based on commanded elements of worship and biblical content taking Gospel shape. I think we should give one another room on how different expressions are used, especially if they are tied to commanded elements of worship rather than added to commanded elements of worship. That is where I stand on all of that. If you are looking for a definitive answer on these issues, I have just told you I will not be giving that to you. That is the best I have right now in terms of guiding principles for what to do

when you are faced with these issues in a given situation. You may go to a place where none of these things are ever an issue. You may go to a place where the local church is in the midst of controversy over some of these things, and you may be expected to have all the answers. Or if you plant a church you may have the opportunity to shape what the initial worship patterns and services look like. People will ask you questions about why you are doing things the way you are. They also may be looking for an opportunity to implement something in the service that they were not able to do in their previous church, and they will try to influence you as the church planter to do things the way they want. These issues are out there. May God be with you as you strive to use biblical, Spirit-given discernment in working through these issues.

It has been asked, how would you summarize the basic principles you would bring to the table if one of these issues came up? I think I would go back to this fivefold outline: the commanded elements, etc. For example, I see the dramatic actions of the prophets and I see the examples of dancing in the Scriptures, but I am not sure I can derive a biblical principle from those examples. But this is sort of shaky ground. I have derived a principle for offerings (in a previous lesson), but I am not deriving it for dancing. The example from which I derive a principle for offerings is in the New Testament, and that seems more universal. Dancing was a natural expression to the Israelites at that time in their history, but it may not be a natural expression to North American Presbyterians in Saint Louis County. We have to sort through the biblical evidence with an openness to being shown otherwise. We should assume that our services should have biblical content taking Gospel shape and then evaluate these other things by that. For example, how would the use of a film clip connected to the element of preaching be used to further the explanation of biblical content? (Note that the film clip itself does not have to have biblical content in order to be used to illustrate biblical content.) Does the film clip help to further the Gospel progression of the service? Or would this group of people (considering your unique context) be distracted by the film clip because of the controversy surrounding its use? Then it may be better to tell the story rather than show the film clip because that might accomplish the purpose better with this group of people. We should remember that there are a variety of valid expressions for accomplishing the biblically commanded elements of worship. Thus there may be some things that Trip and his church would consider valid while Paul and his church consider the same things invalid. Then those churches would have to agree to disagree on the validity of those expressions, such as showing a film clip, while they are both trying to be faithful to the Bible and attentive to their unique contexts. The very nature of the phrase “variety of valid expressions” assumes that there is more than one valid way of expression that takes these things into consideration. I think working through these issues is a sort of careful walking. We should not utterly dismiss these expressions on the one hand, but we also should not say, “Any of that is fine.” You may end up saying, “I think this is a valid expression, but I think it would be imprudent or unwise to use it in our church.”

When I say “commanded elements” I am not including dance or drama because I do not think we can derive either of those as a commanded element of worship from Scripture. However, I think you can make a better case for dance as a commanded element than you can for drama. With dance there are some narrative passages, like Psalms 149 and 150, where it is exemplified or called for. Whereas with drama there are only the examples of the prophets who are giving prophetic messages attached to the dramatic actions, which seem to give them a different context.

There is a debate in the PCA concerning worship right now that comes down to this question: are we (the PCA) to have a unified, Reformed liturgy? This would mean essentially that everywhere PCA people would go to visit other PCA churches they would find the worship liturgy and expressions to be pretty much the same as every other PCA church. Let us assume for a moment that this is something we should have. Whose Reformed liturgy would be made the uniform one? Would it be that of First

Independent Presbyterian in Savannah, Georgia that is very conservative and traditional? Or would it be that of New City Fellowship in Chattanooga, Tennessee, where they include many African-American styles and expressions in worship? Would members of New City go to other PCA churches and come back and say, “Wow, I am not sure that church is PCA because they do not worship the way we do”? It is a matter of context and experience. The question is whether both New City in Chattanooga and First Presbyterian Church in Savannah are using commanded elements filled with biblical content taking Gospel shape while paying attention to their unique, local church context. This allows for different expressions, both of which are valid in those two places. That is my point: it is contextually relevant worship that is faithful to biblical, Reformed and Gospel-centered worship that transcends style, and there is more than one valid expression of that. One pastor in the PCA argues that we should all be using “conventional instruments,” by which he means the piano and the organ. Well, who named the piano and the organ conventional instruments? Go to Africa or anywhere else overseas and ask if the organ and piano are conventional instruments—they are not in most countries. I say contextually relevant worship that is faithful to the substance of the commanded elements and biblical content taking Gospel shape is what we should be striving for. In a paper I wrote on this I tried to summarize my argument as follows:

This means that Reformed worship includes a deep reverence for our all holy God that takes our sin seriously; overwhelming joy in the presence of our Father who loves, forgives, and adopts us by grace into His family and invites us to be seated as honored guests at His table; expository, Christ-centered preaching that fills the mind with truth and transforms hearts and minds to the glory of God by the power of the Holy Spirit; Word-saturated worship filling our prayers, songs, creeds, offerings, and sacraments; presentation of the Gospel for justification and sanctification in multiple ways throughout the corporate worship; musical expressions that carry biblically sound content in songs that are expressions of heartfelt worship consistent with the words being sung in the context of the worshipping congregation; worship that is dialogue between God and His people and worship that is amazed over and over again at the grace of God for undeserving sinners appropriated and applied to our lives by the Holy Spirit, beginning in the corporate worship experience itself.

These are things that make worship biblical, Reformed, and Gospel-centered. Those are the deeper, below-the-surface substance that should make up a worship service, which could be expressed like it is at New City Fellowship in Chattanooga or like it is at First Independent Presbyterian in Savannah, or wherever you may be. That is my passion, and hopefully you can see that my passion is not attached to any particular stylistic expression. Lawrence Roff in *Let Us Sing* says, “No one style ever has been or ever can be sufficient to serve effectively as the sole and permanent church style.” This is a man who loves organs more than anyone and plays the organ as well as almost anyone. He is also one of the editors of the Trinity Hymnal (the PCA hymnal). This man is making this statement. He has his preferences, but he also sees that Gospel-centered worship throughout the history of the church and around the world today has a variety of valid expressions.