Oppong, M 2026, 'Moving with Meaning: a Biblical-Theological Study of Dance in Churches of Christ Worship', *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 7, no. 3 pp. 173-201

Moving with Meaning: a Biblical-Theological Study of Dance in Churches of Christ Worship

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Abstract

This paper addresses the biblical, theological, and practical aspects of dance in Christian worship. It explores the reasons why conservative traditions, especially Churches of Christ, in Ghana, have long disallowed dancing in corporate worship, and claims that dance is not sinful in nature, nor is it prohibited in scripture. Based on biblical exegesis, African liturgical studies, and research in embodied spirituality, five theological principles are worked out to help the faithful use dance in various ecclesial and cultural contexts. Through this analysis, embodied prophecy, liturgical inculturation, and African Christian worship practice are addressed, which provides a framework that gives due respect to the scriptures and the values of the culture. Special attention is given to the African context, where dance is a constitutive dimension of cultural and spiritual identity and where the inherited prohibition of dance in many conservative traditions raises urgent questions about the relationship between biblical faithfulness and cultural authenticity. It concludes that the problem of dancing is one of wisdom, discernment, and love and does not pertain to the sphere of categorical prohibition or licence.

Introduction

The question of dance in Christian worship lies at the intersection of biblical interpretation, cultural identity, and pastoral practice, and is particularly urgent in the African context. The relationship between physical movement and religious devotion has been a site of longstanding theological debate

across multiple centuries and traditions worldwide. At the regional level, African Christianity has developed rich traditions of liturgical embodiment in which dance is not an adjunct to worship but a primary language of communal encounter with God. At the national level in Ghana, this tension between indigenous cultural expression and inherited theological frameworks is especially visible: churches spanning the mainline, Pentecostal, Charismatic, and conservative restoration traditions navigate it with varying degrees of success (Ayettey 2022:41; Brewu et al. 2024:1; Peprah 2024:352).

Where Western conservative traditions have historically refused dance in corporate worship, many African and Pentecostal communities have embraced it as a constitutive expression of indigenous spirituality and communal life. This divergence is not merely aesthetic; it reflects deep disagreements about biblical authority, hermeneutical method, and the proper boundaries of faithful worship. Charismatic and African Initiated Churches have cultivated rich liturgical movement traditions that incorporate local performance aesthetics into Christian devotion in ways many practitioners describe as deepening rather than eroding theological integrity. The Methodist Church Ghana represents an instructive middle path: it has incorporated traditional musical and dance forms through a process of careful theological assessment, preserving doctrinal consistency without excluding cultural expression (Brewu et al. 2024:1). Conservative Western-origin traditions, by contrast, have generally restricted or forbidden dance in worship on hermeneutical and pastoral grounds (Ademiluka 2023). The argument proceeds in four stages. The article first reconstructs the historical and theological rationale behind the avoidance of dance in conservative Christian traditions, taking the Churches of Christ as a primary case study. It then conducts a systematic biblical investigation of whether dance is inherently sinful, attending to both affirming and cautionary texts across both testaments. On that exegetical basis, it proposes five theological principles for the discerning use of dance in worship. A comprehensive biblical reference table is appended as a resource for further study.

Problem Statement

The central problem this article addresses is the apparent conflict between the inherited prohibition of dance in Churches of Christ and the broader biblical

and African theological evidence suggesting that dance can constitute a legitimate form of Christian worship. This conflict is not simply academic. For African congregations within the Churches of Christ tradition, it raises an urgent pastoral question: is the prohibition of dance in corporate worship a faithful and necessary application of scriptural teaching, or does it reflect the cultural assumptions of nineteenth-century American Protestantism that were transmitted to Africa through missionary activity and that may carry no binding biblical authority in the African context?

This question carries specific pastoral gravity for this researcher. As Youth President of the Church of Christ, Dansoman, and Zone 4 Churches of Christ Youth President in Ghana, my years of engagement with young people in these communities have made the question inescapable, both as a theological issue and as a pastoral one. Teaching 'Research in Ministry' at the Heritage Bible Institute deepened the conviction that these questions demand rigorous scholarly engagement, not the solace of inherited answers.

Research Aim and Methodology

The aim of this article is threefold: to examine the historical and theological rationale behind the Churches of Christ tradition's avoidance of dance in worship, to conduct a systematic biblical investigation of whether dance is inherently sinful, and to propose theological principles for the discerning use of dance in worship across diverse ecclesial and cultural settings, with particular attention to the African context.

The article employs a biblical-theological method, which operates by engaging the canonical text of scripture systematically across both Testaments as the primary norm for theological reflection, whilst bringing that textual engagement into dialogue with historical, contextual, and systematic theological considerations. This method is appropriate to the research question because the central dispute concerns the interpretation and application of scripture; it is therefore to scripture that the argument must primarily return. Secondary sources in African liturgical studies, inculturation theology, and embodied spirituality research are engaged throughout to provide contextual grounding and to broaden the conversation beyond the immediate biblical-exegetical question.

Definition of Key Concepts

Three key concepts require definition before the argument proceeds.

Dance is understood in this article as coordinated, intentional bodily movement performed in a communal or individual context. For the purposes of this study, dance in worship refers to rhythmic or expressive physical movement that is performed as part of or in direct response to corporate or personal religious devotion, whether spontaneous or choreographed, individual or collective. The article does not restrict the term to any single cultural form; it applies equally to the structured liturgical dance of mainline traditions and the spontaneous expressive movement characteristic of African Pentecostal and Charismatic worship.

Worship is used in its broad theological sense to denote the community's directed, responsive engagement with God, encompassing praise, prayer, proclamation, sacrament, and the whole life of devotion. The article focuses specifically on corporate worship as the gathered assembly's common offering to God.

Inculturation refers to the theological process by which the Christian gospel is expressed, practised, and interpreted through the cultural forms of a given people in ways that maintain theological integrity whilst affirming the dignity and validity of indigenous cultural identity (Peprah 2024:353). It is distinguished from syncretism, which involves the uncritical fusion of Christian and non-Christian religious elements, and from accommodation, which implies mere surface-level cultural adaptation without genuine theological engagement.

Historical and Theological Context: Why Conservative Traditions Avoid Dance

Any responsible biblical and theological engagement with the question of dance must first take seriously the tradition of avoidance that has characterised much of conservative Christianity. The Churches of Christ, a movement that emerged from the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement of nineteenth-century America and that now maintains a significant global

presence, including in Ghana, has historically maintained a principled abstention from dance in corporate worship. This position is neither arbitrary nor simply culturally reactive. It rests on coherent hermeneutical commitments, genuine pastoral concerns, and a specific understanding of the nature of Christian worship (Ademiluka 2023; Brewu et al. 2024:2). To engage it fairly is not to concede its conclusions, but it is a prerequisite for any argument that takes the authority of scripture and the integrity of the church seriously.

The Regulative Principle and New Testament Authority

The most significant hermeneutical value that directed the Churches of Christ on the matter of worship is what theologians refer to as the regulative principle, which is the belief that Christian worship must consist of only those elements expressly authorised or modelled in the New Testament. These elements traditionally include congregational singing (Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16), prayer, the reading and preaching of scripture, the observance of the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 11:23–26), and freewill giving (1 Corinthians 16:2, 2 Corinthians 9:7). This principle works on the assumption that the silence of scripture is not in any way permissive, but it is prohibitive: where the New Testament does not prohibit a practice and does not give an example of it, the silence prohibits. The principle has a respectable tradition in Reformed theology and is directly related to the formulation of the Westminster Confession's assertion that God is to be worshiped according to his own revealed will.

In relation to dance, the argument is quite simple. The most important New Testament passages dealing with early Christian worship are the four-fold pattern of apostolic instruction, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer described in Acts 2:42, the list of psalms, teaching, revelation, tongues, and interpretation applied to Corinthians 14:26, and the focus on teaching and admonition through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in Colossians 3:16, which have no reference to dance. This silence is determinative for the advocates of the regulative principle. The replacement of Old Covenant worship by a New Covenant worship is the creation of a new pattern, which does not continue the dancing that typified the cultic life of the Israelites. The high tradition of dancing in worship of the Hebrew Bible is therefore divided

into a previous dispensation, a dispensation that has been replaced by the New Testament church order.

This interpretive position is deliberately opposite to what is sometimes termed the normative principle, which is shared by most other Christian traditions, allowing whatever is not specifically forbidden by scripture, and which considers culture, pastoral wisdom, and lived religious experience as valid auxiliary sources to the theological reflection of worship (Addaquay 2025:146; Peprah 2024:354). It is worth noting that within the Stone-Campbell tradition itself, this hermeneutical question has been the subject of sustained scholarly debate, with some scholars questioning whether the regulative principle as applied to worship is exegetically defensible or whether it reflects a particular hermeneutical tradition rather than a straightforward reading of the New Testament (Ademiluka 2023). This internal conversation is significant for African Churches of Christ, since it indicates that the tradition's own scholars have not considered the question of worship practice closed.

Moral and Pastoral Concerns

Conservative traditions have articulated substantial pastoral concerns about dance in worship that deserve honest engagement. These concerns are not reducible to cultural squeamishness; they reflect a serious attempt to guard the holiness and integrity of the worshipping community.

The biblical record itself provides grounds for caution. The narrative of Herodias's daughter dancing before Herod Antipas (Matthew 14:6, Mark 6:22), an act of calculated seduction that resulted in the beheading of John the Baptist, establishes with force that physical movement can be deployed as an instrument of manipulation, immorality, and violence. This episode does not condemn all dance; it demonstrates that bodily expression, like any human capacity, is susceptible to sinful use. Historical scholarship confirms that similar anxieties about the moral valence of dance attended its regulation across various cultural and ecclesiastical settings throughout history (McCarty 2024).

Pastoral risks specific to dance in corporate worship may be identified under four heads. First, there is the risk of misdirected attention: that the congregation's gaze, and perhaps the dancer's own, shifts from God to the

human body in motion, inverting the proper direction of worship. It must be acknowledged, however, that this risk is not unique to dance; any element of worship, including music, preaching, or ritual, can become a distraction when it draws attention to itself rather than to God. Second is the risk of disorder: that spontaneous, uncoordinated physical movement disrupts the structured progression of corporate worship, replacing clarity with confusion. Third is the risk of emotionalism: that the kinaesthetic excitement generated by dance produces an affective response mistaken for spiritual depth, cultivating a spirituality that privileges feeling over faithfulness to the word. This concern must be held in tension with the legitimate recognition, particularly in African theological reflection, that embodied emotion is not antithetical to genuine worship; the integration of feeling, movement, and devotion is a hallmark of African Christian spirituality and is itself grounded in the biblical tradition of whole-person worship (Asare 2022:44; Ayettey 2022:42). The pastoral task is therefore not to suppress emotional expression but to ensure it is theologically governed and Spirit-led rather than merely self-generated. Fourth is the risk of moral stumbling: that certain forms of physical movement, even when sincerely intended as worship, arouse lustful responses in other worshippers, becoming an occasion of sin rather than edification (Ademiluka 2023).

Simplicity, Reverence, and Pauline Order

Churches of Christ has also always expressed a theology of worship which values simplicity, devotion, and adherence to what they believe to be the apostolic pattern. Worship according to this interpretation is all to God, is a spiritual exchange whereby the community praises, prays, declares the Word, and remembers the supper of the Lord. Anything that takes away focus towards this transaction, anything that brings human performance, emotional spectacle, or aesthetic elaboration in itself is considered a perversion of true worship.

The Pauline injunction in 1 Corinthians 14:40 that ‘everything must be done decently and in order’ (KJV, here and throughout) has been the central proof text for this position. For the Churches of Christ, this verse establishes an apostolic standard of ordered, dignified worship against which all proposed additions must be measured. Physical expressions that appear chaotic, that draw undue attention to individual participants, or that seem more

characteristic of entertainment than of devotion are judged incompatible with this standard. Notably, contemporary scholarship on contemplative movement traditions suggests that this concern is not unreasonable: the literature on contemplative dance practice consistently distinguishes between embodied movement that is disciplined, inwardly focused, and directed toward God, and movement that is primarily performative or emotionally self-indulgent (Hellsten 2021:118; McMillan 2018:72). The concern itself is valid; the question is whether it justifies total exclusion.

Historical Background: The Churches of Christ and Missionary Transmission of Dance Prohibition

Understanding why dance prohibition became embedded in Churches of Christ practice in Africa requires attention to the tradition's historical formation and its missionary transmission. The Churches of Christ emerged in the context of the American Restoration Movement of the early nineteenth century, a movement that sought to restore what it understood as the pattern of the New Testament church by stripping away what it regarded as human accretions to apostolic worship. In the American cultural context of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, popular dance was closely associated with drinking establishments, sexual impropriety, and a lifestyle regarded as incompatible with Christian morality (McCarty 2024). This cultural matrix produced a tradition of prohibition that extended well beyond the corporate assembly into everyday social life.

When Churches of Christ missionaries arrived in Africa in the twentieth century, they brought with them not only the gospel but also the worship practices and cultural assumptions of their American tradition. The prohibition of dance was transmitted as an integral part of what faithful Christian worship required, not as a culturally specific application of biblical principles, but as the biblical position itself. The concept of being 'pagan' was applied broadly to many aspects of African cultural life, including dance, song, and communal ritual, reflecting the missionaries' own cultural formation rather than a nuanced engagement with African theology or the African biblical tradition. As a result, generations of African Christians within the Churches of Christ tradition have inherited a prohibition of dance shaped not by the African

cultural context in which they live and worship but by American frontier culture.

The association between dance and moral degeneracy that shaped American conservative Protestantism has no direct counterpart in most African societies, where dance is understood as a fundamental dimension of communal life, spiritual expression, and cultural identity (Addaquay 2025:148; Ayettey 2022:42). This disjunction raises a significant and urgent question for African Churches of Christ: to what extent does the inherited position on dance represent a faithful reading of scripture, and to what extent does it represent a cultural import carrying the assumptions of its American origin, assumptions that may have no biblical necessity and may actively distort the African Christian's relationship to their own cultural heritage?

Biblical Investigation: Is Dancing Inherently Sinful?

Having seriously considered the custom of avoidance, and the problems which perpetuate it, we now turn to the bigger question, which is, what scripture truly says about dance. An attentive study of the biblical corpus in its entirety, taking into consideration both Testaments, both confirming and warning examples, and the theological framework of the corresponding passages leads to an even more refined conclusion than a complete ban or blind approval. This finding holds particular significance for African hermeneutics. It suggests that the question of dance should not be settled by importing Western cultural taboos, but rather evaluated within each cultural context according to the normative standards of scripture.

Biblical Evidence of Dance as Legitimate Worship in the Old Testament

The biblical account has a number of examples in both narrative and prescriptive literature of dance as a legitimate, in fact a praised, way of worship, thanksgiving, and spiritual gladness before God. These examples are not marginal and accidental; they are found in various genres and eras of biblical literature, and they always identify dance with real, God-approved experience.

Miriam and the Women of Israel (Exodus 15:20–21)

The first and perhaps most theologically rich instance of dance as worship in a biblical narrative occurs at the shores of the Red Sea. Following the dramatic deliverance of Israel from the Egyptian army, Miriam the prophetess, identified by her title as one who speaks authoritatively for God, leads the women of Israel in dance and song. The text records:

> And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam answered them, Sing ye to the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously. (Exodus 15:20–21)

It was a kind of embodied prophecy, a declaration by movement and music of the nature and saving work of God. The prophet in ancient Israelite culture was not only to speak the word of God but to be and to do it; the dancing of Miriam was therefore a testimony of prophecy, visible in the community as a kind of physical action of demonstration to the community of the reality of divine salvation. As Portier-Young (2024:210) points out, this celebration was both an expression of gratitude for the previous deliverance and also a proclamation of the nature of God and the saving action of God by movement and music. The reading is based on the close study of the Hebrew text and the rules of the genre of the victory song; although some scholars might doubt that the genre of embodied prophecy is entirely justified within the text, the reading is based on exegesis and is aligned with the overall Old Testament correlation of Miriam with prophetic leadership. This passage documents that there is no divine condemnation of the dance of Miriam. The fact that she was a prophet, that she was leading the festival, and that the song she was leading contained themes of divine sanction, all suggest that this kind of worship could be sanctioned by God, which could be felt almost instantly in African Christian communities where dance and song served the same purposes as an integrated act of communal spiritual witness (Ayettey 2022:41).

David's Dance before the Ark (2 Samuel 6:14–16)

The most theologically significant Old Testament instance of dance as worship and the one most frequently cited in discussions of this question is the account of David's uninhibited celebration as the Ark of the Covenant was brought into Jerusalem. The text states plainly:

> And David danced before the LORD with all his might; and David was girded with a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet. (2 Samuel 6:14–15)

Three features of this passage are theologically determinative. First, the dance is explicitly performed 'before the LORD'; it is directed toward God, not performed for a human audience. Secondly, it is done 'with all his might'; David does not hold back and gives his whole physical and emotional heart to worship. Third and most significant, the story gives a divine judgment of the event with regard to the story of Michal. David's wife hates him in her heart (2 Samuel 6:16) because, to her, his actions are undignified conduct for a royal. In the moment when she confronts him, David answers theologically:

> It was before the LORD, which chose me before thy father, and before all his house, to appoint me ruler over the people of the LORD, over Israel: therefore will I play before the LORD. (2 Samuel 6:21)

The line of defence David uses is not the aesthetic or cultural, but theological: David does not base his worship on the judgment of human beholders, but on the approval of God. It then tells us that, until her death, Michal bore no child (2 Samuel 6:23). According to the traditional reading, this is divine punishment of her disposition, but other scholars interpret it as a narrative result of the relational breakage between David and Michal, not as a literal punishment. Either interpretation substantiates the fact that the text does not justify contempt of embodied worship. Madden (2021) places this episode in the greater liturgical life of Israel and does not see it as a unique and embarrassing incident but as a theologically vital revelation of the type of worship that God delights in.

The Psalter: Prescriptive Commands to Worship through Dance

The psalms do not just talk of dancing but command it. This difference is of hermeneutical importance, especially to those who believe in the regulative principle, as it puts in place the fact that the inclusion of dance in worship was not merely an accommodation to cultural practice, but a directive of the covenant community worship manual.

The wording of Psalm 149:3 is as follows: 'Let them praise his name in the dance: let them sing praises unto him with the timbrel and harp'. The imperative mood is incontrovertible. Psalm 150:4 places dance in an all-encompassing list of musical instruments for worship: 'Praise him with the timbrel and the dance: praise him with the stringed instruments and the organs'. Psalm 30:11 takes a more individual turn, giving thanks for the transformative effect God has on one: 'Thou hast turned my mourning into dancing: Thou hast dispersed my sackcloth, And bound me with gladness'. Combined, they point to the fact that dance was not an embarrassing or peripheral aspect of Israelite worship but a mandated and glorified way of praising God. These commands in the Psalter do not seem abstract or alien according to African hermeneutics. The unification of rhythmic movement with communal praise is not something secular culture has brought to the Ghanaian and broader West African Christian tradition, but rather something the biblical text itself has authorised, a fact that a number of African biblical commentators have stressed in their studies on inculturation and worship (Ayettey 2022:42; Peprah 2024:354).

More theological provocations have been extended by recent scholarship on these texts. The connection between biblical dance and the doctrine of perichoresis, the mutual indwelling and co-inherence of the three persons of the Trinity, has been addressed by Hikota (2022a:51, 2022b:192); Hikota suggests that embodied, coordinated movement can be a creaturely reflection of the divine relationality which is the inner life of God. Although this is a hypothetical theological suggestion, it is an indication of how seriously modern scholarship is taking the theological aspects of dance, going far beyond the issue of whether dance is even acceptable to question what it can affirm about God and about human beings who have been created in his image.

New Testament Evidence

There is no particular command or prohibition concerning dance in corporate worship in the New Testament. Proponents of the regulative principle consider this silence to be prohibitive. Evidence in the New Testament, however, when carefully read, indicates that the silence is not prohibition but reflects a change of the forms of worship without any denial of the theological validity of embodied worship that is instituted in the Old Testament.

Dancing is also contained in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:25) in the description of the joyful reunion when the prodigal son returned to his father:

> Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and neared the house he heard music and dancing.

Jesus does not condemn the dancing; it is given as a fit manifestation of the rejoicing of the father over his son returning home, and in the parabolic reasoning of the passage the father is actually God. The theologically important datum of the picture of God celebrating the finding of the lost through dancing should be addressed by the supporters of prohibition. Jesus, similarly, in his allusion to children 'who have piped unto thee, and thou hast not danced' (Matthew 11:17, Luke 7:32) also employs the metaphor of dancing as joyful human responsiveness, with no indication of disapproval.

The entire teaching of Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 regulates all corporate worship on the twofold principles of order and edification, but does not give a complete list of things that can be done in worship. The omission of dance is in itself not prohibition; by the normative-interpretation principle, what is not prohibited is within the domain of Christian freedom and falls under the general standards that Paul sets. Paul's assertion of the various gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12, and his explanation of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23 (including joy as one of the major fruits of the work of the Spirit), are both indicators that the physical manifestation of Spirit-generated joy in worship is not a New Testament departure but rather a possible manifestation of it.

The Theological Neutrality of Physical Movement

The above evidence confirms that dance is present in scripture as a valid and mandated form of worship in the Old Testament and as a form of expression that is not outlawed in the New Testament and which is theologically expressive. The question is, is it intrinsically problematic to move physically – is the body a morally dubious means of worship? The biblical response is evident. The incarnation defines the theological honour of the body: in Jesus Christ, the Son of God assumed the flesh of humans and the bodily resurrection proves that the body is not a prison in which the spirit is confined but a creation of God that will be redeemed. The body is an appropriate tool of divine worship as Paul taught believers that they were to glorify God in their body and in their spirit (1 Corinthians 6:20). The physicality of a given bodily act does not define the moral character of that particular act; the orientation of the heart and the intention behind the performance of the act is what defines the moral character of the action – a fact that the scripture spells out: 'The LORD looketh not on the outward appearance but the LORD looketh on the heart' (1 Samuel 16:7). Dance is not necessarily sinful: as with all human powers, it may be used either holily or sinfully, and its nature in any particular instance is decided by the heart whence it is produced.

Cautionary Examples and the Conditions of Misuse

A comprehensive biblical theology of dance will have to come to terms with the passages where dance is not the instrument of devotion but the tool of sin. The picture of dance in scripture is not always favourable and the warning examples are as theologically educative as the positive ones.

The best example of the abuse of dance is the scene of the daughter of Herodias in the presence of Herod (Matthew 14:6, Mark 6:22). The dance in this story is calculated seduction, an act instigated by a vengeful woman in order to deal with a king who was in love with her by manipulating him into an oath that led to the judicial murder of John the Baptist. The reading does not moralise on the ethical nature of the dance in itself; it does not have to. The context of the story renders the fact that the movement was used as a tool of manipulation to serve unjust violence. The narrative does not praise or

disparage all dance; it sets with chilling directness the fact that the powers of expressiveness of the human body may be enlisted to the service of the devil.

The case of the golden calf (Exodus 32:19) is another yet no less educative example. Dancing about the calf, the Israelites sinned because the item they were worshipping was an idol. The sin of idolatry was one thing manifested by the dance. The fact that Moses reacted to it, he saw the calf and the dancing (Exodus 32:19), shows that the idol and the dance around the idol were both signs of the spiritual adultery of the people. The evil under condemnation is the worshipping of a false god and not the physical movement *per se*. This point is essential: the same physical activities, which amount to worship of the living God, amount to blasphemy when toward an idol.

An archaeological history of dance in ancient Greek mystery cults proves that the reversion of sacred motion to false objects of worship is not a rare religious process in the Israelite story (Schlapbach 2021). The moral of these warning passages is not that we should not dance but that all worship, be it of the body or otherwise, must be brought to the test of whether it is offered in the Spirit and in truth (John 4:24), in sincere devotion to the living God who has revealed himself in scripture.

The Importance and Challenges of Dance in Worship

The theological validity of dance as a mode of worship is provided by the biblical evidence. To African Christian communities, especially, the role of dance in worship is not just permissible. In most African cultural traditions, dance is a major form of community expression, spiritual experience, and the unification of the entire self (body, mind, and soul) in the act of worship (Asare 2022:44; Ayettey 2022:42). Indigenisation of the gospel through the incorporation of African dance into African Christian worship can be a unique and potent inculturation of the gospel, by affirming the truth that the God of scripture is known and encountered not only through the cognitive and verbal but also through the embodied and communal (Peprah 2024:356). Several Ghanaian settings have been recorded to have been integrated with indigenous music and dance: Asare (2022:44) reports on the successful application of local music and dance in the healing liturgy of the Twelve

Apostles Church, and Quarcoo, Osei, and Acquah (2025) report the theologically purposive dance practice in Lighthouse Chapel, Ghana.

Simultaneously, there are real challenges in the incorporation of dance into worship that cannot be dismissed. The first one is the difficulty of theological intentionality: dance that starts as a prayerful practice may easily turn into performance or indulgent emotionality without conscious spiritual control. The second is the problem of community discernment: that which is felt by one group in a congregation as edifying, Spirit-filled worship may be felt by another as a distraction, immodesty, or disruption, and the Pauline criterion of care of the weaker brother must guide the way communities manage these differences. The third is the issue of cultural discernment: not every form of dance in the surrounding culture is appropriate to Christian worship, and communities must learn to have the theological acumen to tell which cultural forms can be baptised to the service of the gospel and which cannot. The fourth is the difficulty of prohibition by tradition: in communities whose traditions have long excluded dance, the introduction of dance into worship must be made with pastoral care, catechetical preparation, and a sense of true reverence towards those whose conscience has been trained by a tradition of moderation.

The exegetical inquiry brings a definite result: that dance is not necessarily sinful, that scripture furnishes not only positive precedents but negative warnings, that the moral nature of dance is conditioned by direction, intention, and circumstance, and not by the actual movement. This conclusion provides the theological basis upon which communities can be held accountable by making responsible choices regarding dance in worship. The challenge of the next section is to develop these exegetical results into normative theological principles that can inform practice in a variety of ecclesial and cultural contexts – including those African settings where this question is most in need of urgent attention.

Mitigation of Challenges

These are real challenges that cannot be conquered. The five theological principles constructed in the ensuing section form the main guide in dealing with them. A few additional mitigating measures can be observed as well. The

theological intentionality dilemma is resolved by making liturgical preparation deliberate: the idea of the inclusion of dance in worship must be properly framed theologically, either by the teaching of pastors, explanation before the service, or integrating the movement with the proclamation of scripture in such a manner that the movement is seen to be fixed in the word. The problem of community discernment requires a way of congregational dialogue where the many voices, the more conservative ones included, are actually heard prior to introducing changes of worship practice; community is not unanimity but when a community has reasoned within itself on what it is doing and why. The dilemma of cultural discernment is addressed by the type of inculturation theology exemplified by Sarpong and characterised by Peprah (Peprah 2024:356): a theologically responsible process whereby cultural forms are judged, not by their popularity and emotional appeal, but by their ability to be channelled, in full, towards the worship of the God of scripture. Perhaps the most pastorally sensitive challenge is inherited prohibition, and it demands always, above all patience: reforms of this kind should be gradually introduced, with prolonged catechesis, clear leadership, and the readiness not to proceed as fast as the most zealous reformers.

Theological Principles for the Appropriate Use of Dance

The five principles presented below are based on the larger scriptural doctrine of worship, behaviour, and spiritual formation and are guided by the study of embodied spirituality and contemplation (Hellsten 2021, 2022; LaMothe 2017; McMillan 2018). They are suggested not as rules that have a solution to all cases but rather as guidelines according to which cases should be judged.

Principle 1: God-centredness

The primary and the most basic principle is that everything in worship, including physical expression, should be aimed at glorifying God as opposed to the enjoyment, fame, or emotional satisfaction of the worshipper. This is not a fringe benefit but the qualifier of Christian worship *per se*. The first commandment teaches that the only right object of worship is God (Exodus 20:3); the New Testament teaches that the glory of God is the final standard of everything Christian people do (1 Corinthians 10:31).

In David dancing in 2 Samuel 6:14, there is the paradigmatic biblical example of this principle at work. 'He dances in the presence of the LORD', the line is repeated, defiantly where God is the only listener, receiving all his adoration. The defence of his attitude to Michal is purely theocentric: 'It was in the presence of the LORD' (2 Samuel 6:21). According to Madden (2021), this theocentric intentionality is the one that differentiates between an authentic liturgical dance and performance or entertainment. The theoretic model of movement as having fulfilled quite specifically theological functions, when ordered with a proper intention, can be found in the conceptualisation of shaker dance, as theopraxis or embodied action aimed at the experience of divine communion and not self-gratification of an aesthetic or emotional nature (LaMothe 2017:105). Every dance in worship where the focus of thought is no longer upon God, but on the dancer, where the dancing is judged not by Godly approval of the dancers but by human approval of the dancers, has fallen at the first and most vital test.

Principle 2: Spirit-led Expression

Real worship is what the Holy Spirit does and does in and through the worshipping community; it is not created by human method, human feelings, or social inclination. According to the teaching of Paul in Galatians 5:22–23, the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance, are the typical manifestations of a life changed by the spirit of God. This list is directly relevant to the question of dance: one of the main fruits of the Spirit is joy, and the bodily manifestation of joy has strong biblical roots in the practice of worship. When joy is truly produced by the Spirit and not a work of the emotions, its manifestation in worship is a true product of the work of the Spirit and not a man-made supplement. The additional instruction of Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 about the Spirit working within corporate worship affirms that the Spirit does provide diverse gifts and manifestations to the community to help each other; physical movement is not the only gift the Spirit has to offer. The research conducted by McMillan (2018:74) on the practice of Authentic Movement implies that embodied testimony may be the result of sincere spiritual attentiveness when the practitioners learn to be open to divine guidance and not to act before the human audience. The article by Hellsten (2021:120) on contemplative practice, as a form of dance, suggests that trained interior attentiveness is necessary to achieve authentic spirituality of movement. These reflections are reflected in

the African Christian tradition, which incorporates dance and Spirit-led worship: in most Ghanaian Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, dance in worship is seen as not a method of generating spiritual experience but as a reaction to the Spirit at work already within the community (Asare 2022:44). The work of the church is not to forbid physical expression but to nurture the inner shaping out of which Spirit-inspired worship, whether embodied or not, is possible at all.

Principle 3: Order and Edification

The fact that Paul has gone into an elaborate explanation of corporate worship in 1 Corinthians 14 presents two parameters that can be generalised to all aspects of Christian worship without any exception: order and edification. The orderliness, the structure of worship, is established by 'Let all things be done decently and in order' (1 Corinthians 14:40). Mutual upbuilding is established by 1 Corinthians 14:26 in the statement, 'Let all things be done unto edifying'. Both are standards of dance, and each has practical application.

The first standard is broken by dance that interrupts the sequential flow of corporate worship, that causes the congregation to focus on other things than scripture and proclamation, that creates confusion and not clarity. It does not imply that dancing should be strictly choreographed or that spontaneous movement is necessarily improper; it simply implies that, however dance is expressed in worship, it must be adding to, and not subtracting, the God-focused, coherent movement of the common prayer of the gathering. Dancing that results in spectacle instead of piety, in separating the congregation between actors and spectators, in weakening the weaker believers, either by distraction, offence, or temptation, is contrary to the second standard. The edification standard is tough: worship embodiment has to contribute actively to the faith of the people present and strengthen scriptural truth and help with the development of the entire community spiritually.

These standards are attainable according to African Christian evidence. Research by Asare (2022:44) on the Twelve Apostles Church in Ghana records how the incorporation of indigenous music and dance in the healing service of the church is successfully done in a manner that is personally felt by the community as highly edifying. Quarcoo, Osei, and Acquah (2025) also record the usage of popular styles of dance in Lighthouse Chapel, Ghana, in a way that

is purposeful, contextually relevant, and theologically structured. These illustrations indicate that dance may play a role in the Pauline standards of order and edification in situations when it is theologically motivated and contextually aware.

Principle 4: Modesty and Concern for Others

The New Testament also makes a constant appeal to believers to think about the consequences of their behaviour to other people in society, especially those who are lesser in faith or who are more prone to temptation. The principle directly relates to the shape that should be taken by the dance in worship. Modesty of dress as taught by Paul in 1 Timothy 2:9 is also a subset of a wider Pauline question of the external testimony and the inner integrity of the worshipping people; the suggestion is that how one presents one's physical self in worship needed to be restrained by the concern of other people rather than just by the desire to express oneself or the beauty of things.

The most worked out Pauline form of this principle is given in Romans 14:13–21. The point is Christian freedom, such as freedom in matters of practice where scripture neither commands nor forbids, has to be exercised with unceasing consideration as to its influence upon the other believer:

> it is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother is offended, or made weak. (Romans 14:21)

In its application to dance, it also implies that not only is it theologically permissible that a particular kind of physical expression is pastorally sound, but it is also serviceable and productive of the overall spiritual wellbeing of the community. Dancing that provokes erotic urges in other believers, that incites those who are of a more conservative conscientiousness or who introduce an air of separatism into the congregation, has not passed this test, however good may be the spirit with which the dancer does it.

Principle 5: Cultural Contextualisation and Authenticity

The issue of dance in worship cannot be discussed independently of the issue of cultural identity, indigenous theological expression, and the heritage of missionary Christianity in the African Christian setting, in particular. This last

principle deals with that intersection. The studies conducted in various African settings have proved that indigenous dance practices, given appropriate contextualisation and theological interpretation, could be viewed as a valid and genuine means of Christian faith and worship (Addaquay 2025; Ayettey 2022; Peprah 2024). Dancing in African Christian liturgy is not giving in to syncretism; when done with theological clarity and pastoral tact it can be an authentic and loyal inculturation of the gospel.

The theology of inculturation by Peter Kwasi Sarpong is studied in detail by Peprah (2024:356), which provides a relevant case study. The work of Sarpong shows that the integration of Asante cultural forms, such as music, movement, and ritual gesture, into Catholic worship in Ghana is not always impossible to achieve in a manner that maintains full theological integrity and at the same time respects the dignity and richness of indigenous cultural expression. The standard that he applies is not a question of cultural accommodation but of theological discernment: what aspects of Asante culture can be baptised into the service of the gospel and what cannot? According to Addaquay (2025:149), the main issue of such work is that it is difficult to reconcile the authenticity of culture and faithfulness of theology in a globalised world where each is subject to pressure.

This principle asks African churches to disobey two extreme yet equally dangerous misjudgements. The former is blindly adopting secular or syncretic dancing without theological scrutiny, bringing into the worship whatever happens to be culturally popular or emotionally stimulating, and not even questioning whether it is actually addressed to the living God. The second is the almost equally unthinking abandonment of indigenous cultural expression in worship due to inherited Western theological presuppositions which might have been culturally prejudiced instead of a biblical requirement. Both fallacies are failures of theological discernment; it is difficult to discover the wisdom to discern between the two.

Conclusion

This paper has contended that the issue of dance in Christian worship is not an issue that can be answered easily and generally, but it is also not an issue that can be resolved by inherited norms or cultural impulses, whether such

impulses are restrictive or permissive. The argument has followed three steps: a sober and sympathetic exploration of the tradition of avoidance, especially in the version it has taken in the Churches of Christ; a systematic biblical inquiry that proves the moral impartiality of dance as an act of physicalness and the lawfulness of dance as a mode of worship in narrative and prescriptive biblical literature; and the expression of five theological principles: God-centredness, Spirit-led expression, order and edification, modesty and concern to other persons, and cultural contextualisation, which can be employed to guide critical practice in various ecclesial and cultural contexts.

The inferences made via this inquiry are evident. The Churches of Christ and the other conservative traditions have been correct in their warning. Hermeneutical dedication to New Testament authority, the pastoral interest of order and holiness, and also awareness of the vulnerability of dance to moral abuse are all indicative of sincere and admirable theological beliefs (Ademiluka 2023). They cannot be brushed aside; they need to be involved, listened to, and permitted to make the nature of that attentive discrimination which the effusion of dance into worship demands.

Meanwhile, the biblical support fails to support the fact that dance is essentially sinful or that its application in Christian worship is absolutely forbidden. This physical, kinetic glorification of God has an honourable place in the life of faith, through the embodied prophecy of Miriam at the Red Sea (Portier-Young 2024), the wholesome devotion of David before the Ark (Madden 2021), and the express reference of the Psalter to the use of dancing to praise God. The evil examples in scripture, the dancing of the daughter of Herodias, the dancing round the golden calf, persuades, not that dance is in its nature sinful, but that every human faculty, the faculty of bodily movement included, must be placed under the rule of theological intentionality and the law of true worship in the spirit and in the truth.

The stakes of this question for the churches of Africa in particular are high. The conservatism of much of the traditional approach to dance in the West is, to some extent, the heritage of cultural assumptions of nineteenth-century Protestantism, assumptions within which the concept of embodied movement has little organic relation to African cultural contexts in which embodied movement is a major source of communal meaning-making, spiritual identity,

and contact with the sacred. The difficulty with African Churches of Christ (and other conservative African congregations) is being able to determine what scripture actually demands, rather than what a certain cultural tradition has come to suppose, and to be able to affirm the former with some measure of confidence and cast a critical eye over the latter.

This article presents five principles which are articulated and provide a framework for that scrutiny. They are not the answers to all questions, the cases that should be resolved; they are the criteria according to which cases should be judged. They celebrate the liberty in Christ enjoyed by believers, yet remind them that it must and must always be exercised in love: in love to God, which is worship directed to him; in love to the neighbour, which is the care of the spiritual welfare of the entire community taken at all times. Since the African church continues to seek its own path in the vexed dialectic of cultural identity and theological faithfulness, between heritage and indigenous expression, may it do so in the unity of scriptural rigour and pastoral wisdom and humble discernment, which the question demands and to which the people of God are entitled.

Recommendations

Based on this exploration, a number of suggestions can be provided. To leaders in the congregations of African Churches of Christ and similar conservative traditions, the suggestion is to engage in a new, congregational-specific engagement with the biblical and theological evidence herein presented, not to dictate to it an outcome but to provide the environment within which communities may make informed, biblically based decisions regarding dance in worship that are consistent with their own culture but not necessarily the inheritance of another time and place.

To theological educators and institutions, the suggestion here is to make the theology of embodied worship, African liturgical studies, and inculturation theory part of the curriculum of ministerial formation so that the next generation of church leaders will have the means of responding to these questions theologically and pastorally.

To the greater African church, the suggestion is to shun the false dilemma of biblical faithfulness and cultural authenticity, and to seek rather the type of creative and discerning theologising synthesis that has defined the most productive moments of Christian mission in every cultural setting. The application of worship practices in Churches of Christ in Ghana and West Africa in general, the acceptance of dance by conservative African Christian communities, and the creation of contextually relevant liturgical instructions, which can serve as a practical tool to help the community to address these issues in a faithful way, require further study.

Appendix: Comprehensive Biblical References to Dance

Reference	Quotation (KJV)	Context	Purpose	Classification
Genesis 31:27	Dance implied: 'with mirth, songs, tabret and harp'	Household celebration after family interaction	Cultural expression of joy	Cultural/ family
Exodus 15:20–21	Miriam 'took a timbrel […] and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances'	Women dance after Israel's deliverance from Egypt	Thanksgiving, worship, embodied prophecy	Sacred/ worship
Exodus 32:19	Moses 'saw the calf, and the dancing'	Israelites dance around the golden calf	Dance directed toward a false god	Idolatrous/ negative
Judges 11:34	Jephthah's 'daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances'	Daughter celebrates her father's return	Family and community celebration	Secular/ social
1 Samuel 18:6	'the women came out […] singing and dancing, to meet king Saul'	Celebrating David's victory over Goliath	National joy, recognition of God's hand	Secular/ celebratory

2 Samuel 6:14–16	'David danced before the LORD with all his might'	Bringing the ark to Jerusalem	Worship, thanksgiving, spiritual expression	Sacred/ religious
1 Chronicles 15:29	'David dancing and playing'	Bringing the ark to Jerusalem	Worship and praise	Sacred
Psalm 30:11	'Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing'	Personal expression of deliverance	Worship of restoration	Sacred
Psalm 149:3	'Let them praise his name in the dance'	Command to praise God through dance	Worship, spiritual offering	Sacred
Psalm 150:4	'Praise him with the timbrel and dance'	Comprehensive doxology	Worship and praise	Sacred
Ecclesiastes 3:4	'a time to mourn, and a time to dance'	Dance as part of life's rhythm	Expression of joy in God's order	Secular/ human
Jeremiah 31:4, 13	'shalt go forth in the dances' 'the virgin rejoice in the dance'	God promises Israel restoration	Symbol of healing and restoration	Sacred/ joyful
Lamentations 5:15	'our dance is turned into mourning'	National lament and loss	Dance mirrors	Contextual/ symbolic

			communal joy or grief	
Matthew 11:17 / Luke 7:32	'We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced'	Jesus illustrates human unresponsiveness	Social illustration	Cultural imagery
Matthew 14:6 / Mark 6:22	'the daughter of Herodias danced before them'	Dance leads to John's execution	Cautionary example of misuse	Negative/ secular
Luke 15:25	The elder son 'heard music and dancing'	Prodigal son's return celebrated	Joy, communal celebration, restoration	Sacred/ cultural

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