Is Dancing a New Testament Worship Form?
By Pastor Jim Feeney

Dancing as a form of worship is practiced in some churches today. Those that include dancing as worship usually are Pentecostal or charismatic churches.

I personally have a number of friends in Christian ministry who encourage dancing as a mode of worship. These are good men, and I respect the sincerity of their beliefs on this subject. However, I do not share their beliefs.

In the balance of this study, I would like to share from Scripture why I do not believe that God has established dancing as a worship form in the New Testament. I hasten to add that this is not in any way an attempt to minimize the sincerity of those who encourage worship dancing in the church. Rather, my intent is to evaluate this controversial topic from the entirety of the Bible, rather than from human preferences.

I have drawn the conclusion from Scripture that dancing was valid in certain well-defined contexts in the Old Testament, but it was by no means considered — either by Jesus or the apostles for either the early church or the 21st-century church — to be carried over into the New Testament as a form of worship.

This message is not an attempt to stand in judgment of churches which do incorporate dancing into their worship. It is presented to document why I sincerely believe that Jesus did not intend dancing to be carried over from its relatively few occurrences in the Old Testament and made a worship form in the New Testament church.

In preparing this message, I have reviewed every passage of Scripture which includes the words dance, dancing, or danced and other derivatives. I will quote the five New Testament references to dancing. From the Old Testament, I will quote all references to dancing that have a religious context, or even the slightest relevance to religious activity, whether good or bad. I will omit Old Testament references to entirely secular dancing having no religious relationship whatsoever.

I am quoting from the New International Version (used by permission), which translates some words as dance which are rendered differently in other translations. The inconsistency of translations occasionally presents something of a problem in studying this topic. I will point out such differences as they occur.
OLD TESTAMENT DANCING.

Here are seven conclusions I have drawn from Scripture concerning dancing in the Old Testament.

1. **Dancing was obviously done in at least some parts of ancient society.** Only a person totally prejudiced against dancing would deny this fact.

   In the course of this study, you will see various occasions on which Israelites danced. In addition, it is clear from the famous account of Elijah meeting several hundred prophets of the false god Baal that other religions and cultures of the ancient world also danced. Of that incident, the Bible says, “They took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. ‘O Baal, answer us!’ they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made” (1 Kings 18:26).

2. **The Bible does say there is a time to dance.** “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: ... a time to mourn and a time to dance” (Ecclesiastes 3:1,4). We will see in other passages this contrast between mourning and dancing. It is important to see here that the context does not designate such dancing as a worship form nor as a congregational practice, but simply an expression of joy in contrast to mourning.

3. **Dancing seems to have occurred at certain very great occasions in Israel’s history.** Here are all the Old Testament occasions of dancing on momentous occasions:

   a. **Dancing was prophesied as a future event at the restoration of Israel from bondage and captivity.** The Lord said, “I will build you up again and you will be rebuilt, O Virgin Israel. Again you will take up your tambourines and go out to dance with the joyful.... Then maidens will dance and be glad, young men and old as well. I will turn their mourning into gladness” (Jeremiah 31:4,13).

   Let me mention here a point that I will amplify later, namely, that it is subject to question whether this text speaks of men dancing. Translators and commentators differ here, but in any case it was said that the maidens of Israel would dance on this momentous occasion. In verse 13, the NIV word dance is rejoice in the Lamsa translation from the Aramaic.

   b. **Dancing at the return of victorious armies.** Two instances are recorded in Scripture: (1) the return of Saul and David from battle after
Goliath was slain and (2) the return of Jephthah from victory over the Ammonites.

The Bible says, “When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and lutes. As the danced, they sang: ‘Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands’” (1 Samuel 18:6-7).

This incident is referred to by the servants of Acish king of Gath, who asked, “Isn’t this David, the king of the land? Isn’t he the one they sing about in their dances: ‘Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands?’” (1 Samuel 21:11). Again, the Philistine commanders are quoted as asking, “Isn’t this the David they sang about in their dances: ‘Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands?’” (1 Samuel 29:5). Note that we have here three separate occurrences of the word dance, but they all refer to the same instance of dancing in honor of the returning military heroes.

The other mention of dancing at the return of a victorious army is this: “Jephthah made a vow to the Lord: ‘If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord’s, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.’ Then Jephthah went over to fight the Ammonites, and the Lord gave them into his hands.... When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines!” (Judges 11:30-34). I do not intend to comment on Jephthah’s tragic vow, but simply to note that the daughter came out dancing, apparently to celebrate her father’s victorious return.

c. Dancing at the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. Here is a very great event in Israel’s history. “When Pharaoh’s horses, chariots and horsemen went into the sea, the Lord brought the waters of the sea back over them, but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground. Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing. Miriam sang to them” (Exodus 15:19-21).

Here again let’s note that only the women are dancing. And in fairness it should be noted that this dancing is to the Lord, not something done in a carnal way.

As is the case elsewhere, the word dancing here in the NIV is translated differently in the Lamsa Bible from the Aramaic. Lamsa translates it as timbrels, which are instruments of music, rather than dancing.

d. Dancing at the return of the ark to a tent in the vicinity of Jerusalem. The phrase “the tabernacle of David” often is used when
referring to this event. However, in the context, the King James Version’s use of the word *tabernacle* is not to describe an impressive religious dwelling; it is simply a tent. The phrase “tabernacle of David” (KJV) or “tent of David” (NIV) is mentioned in Acts 15, a passage I will touch on later.

On this occasion, “David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the Lord with all his might, while he and the entire house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouts and the sound of trumpets. As the ark of the Lord was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, she despised him in her heart. They brought the ark of the Lord and set it in its place inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and David sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before the Lord” (2 Samuel 6:14-17).

Note that all Israel brought the ark, yet only David is said to have danced. And it was not a moderate, restrained, or choreographed dance; the Bible records that he was leaping and dancing. I also note that this was a physical tent, a physical ark, and physical burnt offerings. This will become significant later in this study.

This same event is recorded later in the Bible: “As the ark of the covenant of the Lord was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And when she saw King David dancing and celebrating, she despised him in her heart” (1 Chronicles 15:29). So we have two occurrences of the word *dance* referring to one occasion.

e. Dancing at the annual festival of the Lord at Shiloh. The men of the tribe of Benjamin were without wives. “The elders of the assembly said, ‘With the women of Benjamin destroyed, how shall we provide wives for the men who are left?’” (Judges 21:16) They came up with this solution: “There is the annual festival of the Lord in Shiloh.... They instructed the Benjamites, saying, ‘Go and hide in the vineyards and watch. When the girls of Shiloh come out to join in the dancing, then rush from the vineyards and each of you seize a wife from the girls of Shiloh and go to the land of Benjamin.’ ... So that is what the Benjamites did. While the girls were dancing, each man caught one and carried her off to be his wife” (Judges 21:19-21,23). This dancing is being done by women only, and in this case clearly apart from the men, who would surely have attempted to protect the girls had the men been present.

To summarize, this third of seven conclusions about dancing that may be drawn from the Old Testament is that dancing seems to have occurred at certain great occasions in Israel’s history. I have listed dancing after the miraculous Red Sea crossing; dancing at the prophesied
restoration of Israel from bondage and captivity; dancing at the return of victorious armies; dancing at the return of the ark to Jerusalem; and dancing at the festival of the Lord in Shiloh. These are all the Old Testament’s occurrences of dancing on momentous occasions.

4. **Usually it was the women who danced.** This was not always the case in the Old Testament, but it was usually so. It was so as Saul and David returned from battle after Goliath was slain, as we read in 1 Samuel 18. It was so as Jephthah returned from victory over the Ammonites, as we read in Judges 11. It was so after the Red Sea crossing, as we read from Exodus 15. And it was the women who danced at the festival of Shiloh, as we read from Judges 21.

5. **Men occasionally danced.** David danced before the ark, as we read in 1 Chronicles 15. The prophets of the false god Baal danced, as we read in 1 Kings 18. Those two instances are certain. Also, it might be reasonably inferred that men were among the Israelite dancers at Mount Sinai. The Bible says, “When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned” (Exodus 32:19).

As I mentioned earlier, there is some dispute whether Jeremiah prophesied that men would dance with women at the return of Israel from bondage. Let me quote it again: “Then maidens will dance and be glad, young men and old as well” (Jeremiah 31:13). Some read that as the maidens, the young men and the old men all dancing together. However, the Scripture does not necessarily say that. Contrariwise, the dancing of women and men in one another’s presence is a violation of the Jews’ beliefs about dancing: “Dances by men and women combined are never permitted,” states The Concise Encyclopedia of Jewish Music. “When men danced, it was in companies separate from the women,” states Manner and Customs of the Bible. “The sexes never intermingled in it,” states The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary in an entry on Jewish dancing.

As we have seen, there is no clearly substantiated Old Testament reference in a positive context to a mixed congregation in which both men and women danced in one another’s presence, although women danced in the presence of men on some occasions as expressions of joy and celebration. There are two occasions in the Old Testament upon which women danced in public in honor of men, not of God. Those occasions are before Saul and David, and also before Jephthah.

So in the quote from Jeremiah, it is possible but not provable that the intention was that men and women would dance together. However, at least four major translations render it as the women dancing while the men make merry, rejoice, or be happy. There is a substantial question whether the prophet was saying that the men would dance.
In light of the translational disagreements over Jeremiah 31:13, my conclusion concerning men dancing in the Old Testament is that there are only two instances for certain, or at the most three. One is King David before the ark proceeding down the city streets. The other certain one is the prophets of the pagan god Baal. A third probable instance of men dancing was before the calf idol at Mount Sinai. Of these three instances of men dancing, the latter two are associated with idolatrous worship.

6. In some Old Testament instances, dancing was unto the Lord. I have noted four, two of which we have already read: David dancing at the return of the ark (2 Samuel 6) and Miriam and the women dancing on the far side of the Red Sea (Exodus 15), the context indicating that they were singing unto the Lord.

In addition, the Scripture says, “Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with tambourine and harp” (Psalm 149:3), and “Praise him with tambourine and dancing” (Psalm 150:4). In these last two instances, there is not universal agreement that the word dancing is a correct translation from the original Hebrew, although the substantial majority of the translators have it that way. In the King James Version, for instance, the margin notes that the word may be pipe — a musical instrument — in both these Psalms. That would be consistent with the surrounding contexts, which are lists of various musical instruments used for praising the Lord. The Lamsa translation from the Aramaic does not read the word as dancing in either of these two Psalms. In the first it is psaltery; in the second it is pipe, as in the King James margin.

Although Psalm 149 has the statement “sing...his praise in the assembly of the saints” in the first verse, it does not necessarily mean that the entirety of this Psalm is instruction for congregational worship. If this entire Psalm were intended for congregational worship, how would we deal with the phrase “let the saints ... sing for joy on their beds” [italics mine] in verse 5? It is doubtful that verse 3 is instructing the mixed congregation to dance when they come together, as that would contradict the Old Testament concept of no mixed dancing. Part of this psalm is instructing people concerning worship, but it is clear (e.g., vs. 5) that not all of this psalm is to be taken as instruction for congregational worship.

7. Dancing even as worship can have negative associations. Here I refer to the dancing of the pagan prophets of Baal, which we read of in 1 Kings 18. In addition, the Israelites once are recorded as participating in such idolatrous dancing before the calf idol, as we read in Exodus 32:19.

Here is a summary of the seven points about religious dancing that I have drawn from the Old Testament:
1. Dancing was done in some parts of ancient society.

2. There is a time to dance, in contrast to mourning.

3. Dancing seemed to occur at very great occasions.

4. Usually it was the women who danced.

5. Men occasionally are shown to be dancing, but men and women are not clearly shown as dancing in each other’s presence in any favorable context in Scripture.

6. In some instances, dancing was unto the Lord.

7. Dancing, even as worship, can have negative associations.

NEW TESTAMENT DANCING.

In the New International Version (NIV), there are 27 references in the whole Bible to the word *dance* and all forms of the word. Of these, five are in the New Testament. We have just examined all the Old Testament references which have a religious significance. Now I will show you all five occurrences of the word in the New Testament. You will see that none of them has anything to do with *worship* or anything religious.

The five occurrences of the word *dance* are used in recording just three instances of dancing in the New Testament. Here they are:

**Children in the market.** Jesus said, “To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’” (Matthew 11:16-17). This is repeated, almost verbatim, in Luke 7:31-32. Contextually, it says nothing about the dance as a form or worship. Furthermore, the context is clearly negative, not positive.

**The daughter of Herodias danced before Herod.** You’ll surely agree that this is a very secular situation. “On Herod’s birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for them and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked” (Matthew 14:6). “When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests” (Mark 6:22). Again, this was unequivocally a secular context, with no relevance to religion or worship. To the contrary, both the context and numerous commentators suggest that the dance was a lewd, sensual one.
The return of the prodigal son. Here is the story Jesus told of a man whose son left home and squandered his inheritance. Upon his return, "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends" (Luke 15:21-29). Here is a simple thing: music, feasting, dancing. It is a celebration.

Although the story conveys a spiritual message, it would be incorrect to conclude that the dancing here indicates a form of New Testament worship. Note that the Father here is representative of God. For years the older son had been with the father and had obeyed him. Yet he never one time in all those years had a similar celebratory feast with music and dancing.

When the prodigal son returned, however, he did get a festive celebration. It would be an unwarranted assumption to call this celebration an instance of congregational worship. That is far from the context. Furthermore, the dancing had nothing to do with the worship of anyone. But if one does insist on stretching this scenario to mean congregational worship, let him note well that the older, faithful son had never had such a celebration, not even once, in all his many years of serving his father. It was clearly not standard procedure. This cannot be construed to be a church-oriented situation at all. It must be left as it is stated — a unique celebration, described with a sequence of natural references to indicate joy: music, feasting, and dancing.

This, then, exhausts the New Testament references to dancing. Here are five conclusions I have drawn from the New Testament concerning dancing in the church:

1. Dancing is not once mentioned in the context of congregational worship.
2. Neither Jesus nor any of the apostles are ever recorded as either teaching or practicing dancing as a form of praise or worship.

3. None of the 27 books of the New Testament teaches dancing in any context associated with worship. In fact, in the New Testament, dancing is only mentioned five times (as studied above). And all of those were in non-church contexts in the first three Gospels. A further point of immense relevance is that nowhere in the entire New Testament does any reference to dancing occur in any Scriptures recording the time after the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Viewed another way, nowhere does the Bible record even a single instance of dancing under the New Covenant. This would be an extraordinary oversight and omission if dancing were intended by God as a worship form for the New Testament church.

Jesus spoke of a change of worship from the physical to the spiritual. In the Old Testament, worship was largely physical, often with geographical requirements as to where proper worship was to be offered. I mentioned earlier the physical ark, the physical tent that David pitched, the physical burnt offerings before that tent. There came later the physical temple in Jerusalem, to which the faithful made three annual pilgrimages to worship. Fully cognizant of these things in the religion of Israel, Jesus said, “A time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:21-24).

This is of critical importance. Jesus was intimately familiar with the Aaronic priesthood of the Old Testament and all its forms of worship: music, offerings, tents, temples. Jesus’ statement was addressed to a Samaritan woman. The Samaritans had their roots in Judaism, but had blended other things into it. Jesus told her that worship was not to be on a mountain —a physical place — or in Jerusalem — again, a physical place. That is the way she would have understood worship. Jesus said, “A time is coming...” That speaks of change. Then he spoke of leaving her mountain, where worship was partially idolatrous, as well as leaving Jerusalem, a place of worship which had been established by God in the Bible. Three times a year all the males went to Jerusalem: at the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. But Jesus spoke of major change in the next few sentences, a change to what he called true worship, which He referred to as “in spirit.” If you comb the Old Testament, you will not find a verse that speaks of worshiping “in spirit.” It is an entirely new thought introduced by Jesus.
I will add parenthetically that praying and singing in the spirit are taught in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 14:14-15). But phrases such as dancing in the spirit or laughing in the spirit do not appear in either the Old or the New Testament.

The church is in an evangelistic dispensation. Israel of the Old Testament was not. Check back. Israel was not essentially concerned with winning souls. In fact, most Israelites in Old Testament days avoided Gentiles entirely. By contrast, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” (Mark 16:15) is central to Christianity. The New Testament emphasis on evangelism to all peoples is critically different from that of the Israelites prior to the cross.

The apostle Paul charged, “Make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.... Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall” (Romans 14:13,19-21). Dancing in the church would be a serious stumbling block or obstacle to many Christian brothers and sisters, as well as to many unbelievers who might be in the process of coming to the Lord.

This is an evangelistic dispensation of time, in which every person who comes into the church must be taken into consideration. It is possible to be wrong, Paul wrote, by doing something that may be acceptable in and of itself. There was nothing wrong with most of the dancing recorded in the pages of the Old Testament, just as there is certainly nothing wrong with eating. But such things may become wrong if they cause someone else to stumble. Concerning offending others by our eating practices and by our drinking, Paul wrote, “It is wrong... it is better not to.” And Paul expanded that principle to “anything else that will cause your brother to fall.”

Dancing is an Old Testament practice (of infrequent occurrence) that is not carried over into the New Testament. Many things which were ordained of God for Old Testament times are not carried over automatically into the New. Some specifically are carried over, and some specifically are not. There may be dozens or hundreds of things that are left behind in the Old Covenant — things and practices such as animal sacrifices, burnt offerings, the ark, the tent, the Aaronic priesthood, temples, the Saturday observance of the Sabbath, and others.

Not only that, even the seeming strength of some the relatively infrequent Old Testament verses on dancing is cast into doubt by various translations of the word commonly rendered as dance. I have already referred to four of these variations, two in Jeremiah 31 and one each in Psalms 149 and 150. Another occurs in Psalm 30:11, “You turned my
wailing into dancing.” Here the margin of the King James Version says *piping* for *dancing*, referring to a musical instrument. In addition, the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament, and the Lamsa translation, which was made from the Aramaic, use the word *joy* instead of *dancing* here. While the majority of scholars favor *dancing*, I want you to see that there is by no means universal agreement concerning these Old Testament verses.

The progression of the Bible is from the natural to the spiritual. “The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual” (1 Corinthians 15:46). I’ve already mentioned some of the various physical forms of worship used in the Old Testament dispensation: animal sacrifices; temples; altars; a selective, exclusive priesthood; appointed singers. We no longer sacrifice animals, for “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Corinthians 5:7). Now we “offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name” (Hebrews 13:15), among other spiritual sacrifices. God no longer dwells in a physical temple, for now “we are the temple of the living God” (2 Corinthians 6:16). We no longer need certain men appointed as priests, for now Jesus “has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father” (Revelation 1:6). We no longer relegate the music ministry to selectively appointed, special singers, for now we all are enjoined to “sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16). The transition of the Bible is continually pressing from the natural to the spiritual. I conclude that this principle is one more reason why there is no Bible record of dancing practiced as a worship form by the New Testament church.

So I have reviewed four apparent reasons why none of the 27 books of the New Testament teaches dancing in any context associated with worship or church services. Now I will move on to the last two conclusions from the New Testament concerning dancing.

4. **The heavenly scenes in the book of the Revelation do not include dancing.** In the book of the Revelation God has given us a very elaborate picture of activities in heaven. This is perhaps the ultimate in the progression from the natural to the spiritual. In the Revelation’s view of heaven we see the people of God who have gone on to be with the Lord worshiping the Lord in many ways, but they are never shown dancing before the Lord. This last book of the Bible includes many references to worship in heaven, which for the sake of brevity I will omit from this study. However, anyone can easily check the Revelation and see that the following things are included in heavenly worship: people prostrating themselves before God, verbally praising God, singing praises to God, crying out before God in loud voices, casting their crowns before God, singing new songs and playing harps. However, there is no mention or illustration of dancing before God.
5. Dancing as worship is not among the many great rediscoveries being made of biblical truths that had been lost since the time of the early church. The apostle Peter spoke of being established in "present truth" (2 Peter 1:12, KJV). I understand, both from Scripture and from history, that important truths which were lost over the Dark Ages and Middle Ages have been restored to the church. Even such fundamental truths as salvation by grace through faith and baptism by immersion in water were lost and then restored. More recently, the truth of the baptism of the Holy Spirit has been restored to the church, together with such doctrines as the laying on of hands, the fivefold ministry, and the church's call as the bride of Christ.

However, there is a major difference—I emphasize it is not a minor difference, but a major one—between the other items I have listed and dancing. The other things were all commonly taught in the New Testament. Dancing as worship was not. There is simply no evidence of it in the New Testament. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is commonly mentioned in various of the 27 books of the New Testament. The laying on of hands was commonly written of by the apostle Paul, who had much to say about it. The fivefold ministry is recorded in Ephesians 4:11 and elsewhere, with nearly 200 New Testament references to apostles and prophets alone. The bride of Christ was commonly taught by Paul, and also by John in the Revelation. By contrast to these genuine restored truths, dancing as worship is nowhere included in the biblical record of the practice, preaching, or teaching of the early church. It is an error to include dancing in the godly list of biblical truths that are correctly being restored to the church, for the New Testament is devoid of such a revelation concerning dancing as worship.

Some have conscientiously drawn dancing from the "tabernacle of David" as an end-time revelation that they believe God is bringing back to the church. In support, they refer to the mention of David's tent by James, as recorded in Acts 15:16-18: "After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord who does these things that have been known for ages." James is quoting from Amos 9:11-12. But this is a reference made not remotely in the context of worship but in the context of the salvation of the Gentiles.

Many commentators, which whom I agree, believe that the word tent in the Acts 15 quote (or tabernacle as the King James Version has it) refers to the house of David, and by extension specifically to the person of Jesus as the offspring of the lineage of David. Amos's prophetic terminology looks to the raising up of the house of David out of ruin in the person of Jesus Christ, by whom the Gentiles were brought in to salvation.
I believe that it is incorrect to conclude that the phrase “David’s fallen tent” in Acts 15 refers, even indirectly, back to the order of worship employed by King David. The context does not justify that nor suggest it. Rather, the context is a meeting held by apostles and elders of the church to discuss how the Gentiles were to be saved. In that context, James reached back to the prophecy of Amos 9:11-12 and said, in effect, “Even in the Old Testament God showed that He would raise up the house of David in the person of his offspring, Jesus” (my paraphrase). The apostle Peter, in the same meeting, addressing the same discussion of Gentile salvation, declared, “We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we [Jews] are saved, just as they [Gentiles] are” (Acts 15:11, with the Jew-Gentile clarification in brackets).

So this reference to David’s fallen tent is quoted by James as directly relevant to the issue of how the Gentiles are saved. Contextually, it has nothing to do with a supposed revelation concerning a Davidic order of worship for the church — worship to include dancing as David danced before the Lord when the ark was brought to the city of David. In fact, David’s dancing is not recorded as occurring at the tent (tabernacle) at all, but rather during the processional march through the city streets (2 Samuel 6:12-17; 1 Chronicles 15:29). When the procession arrived at the tent, David sacrificed animals as offerings. And we see King Solomon also offering animal sacrifices before the ark in that tent many years later (1 Kings 3:15).

The teaching that attempts to bring the literal practice of dancing over into the New Testament on the basis of the tabernacle/tent of David is inconsistent in leaving behind in the Old Testament the literal ark, the tent itself, and the physical burnt offerings made by David and by Solomon again years later. What is the basis for bringing one of these literal practices (David’s dancing in the streets) forward to the church and leaving the rest behind? The answer I suggest from the New Testament’s utter silence on worship dancing, is that none of those literal practices was to be brought forward to the church.

It is very important to examine the rest of the New Testament to determine how the early church understood James’s Acts 15 reference to David’s tent (tabernacle). On the one hand, consistent with James’s and Peter’s remarks, the emphasis on the Gentiles’ salvation through Christ (of the lineage of David) absolutely fills the remaining pages of Scripture, including those chapters of Acts subsequent to the Acts 15 reference to the tabernacle of David.

But quite to the contrary, the New Testament does not proceed, subsequent to Acts 15, to establish a Davidic order of worship. Quite the opposite! David (and later King Solomon) offered animal sacrifices at the tent. But since Christ, the perfect sacrifice, was offered, the New Testament believer offers spiritual sacrifices to God (1 Peter 2:5; Hebrews 13:15).
contrast to David’s selective priesthood (1 Chronicles 16:6), the New Testament teaches the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5; Revelation 1:6). In place of David’s appointed choir (1 Chronicles 15:16,27; 16:4-5), all Spirit-filled believers under the New Covenant are to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in their hearts to the Lord (Ephesians 5:18-19). No, a Davidic order of worship is clearly not taught in the New Testament.

Here, then, is a summary of the five conclusions I draw from the New Testament concerning dancing:

1. Of the three recorded cases of dancing in the New Testament, none is in the context of worship or the assembled church.

2. Neither Jesus nor any of the apostles are ever recorded as either teaching or practicing dancing.

3. None of the 27 books of the New Testament teaches dancing as a form of worship. I listed four apparent reasons why not: (1) Jesus spoke of a change from physical worship to spiritual worship; (2) dancing is a stumbling block to many, which is of special concern because of the evangelistic dispensation we are in; (3) dancing is an Old Testament practice that, like numerous other Old Testament practices, is not carried over into the New Covenant times we live in; and (4) the progression of the Bible is from the natural to the spiritual.

4. The heavenly scenes of worship (scenes which are many and varied) do not include any instances of dancing.

5. Dancing cannot be considered a lost truth that is being restored to the church, because it cannot be shown biblically that it was ever a teaching of or a practice in the New Testament church that Jesus established.

A personal note: why we don’t dance in our church.

Everything I have stated so far will be summarized briefly one final time, as I list nine reasons why we don’t encourage dancing as a worship form in the church that I pastor. Because of these conclusions that I have drawn from Scripture, I do not consider congregational dancing as an option for us. On the contrary, I believe that it would be inconsistent with these biblical conclusions to include dancing in our church worship.

2. Jesus and the apostles are not recorded as ever dancing or encouraging it. It would be a major oversight on the part of God to leave out of all 27 New Testament books such a key end-time truth (as dancing is considered by some to be) while including extensive New Testament instruction concerning other key truths.

3. Jesus spoke of a transition of worship from the physical and even geographical basis to worship in spirit and in truth.

4. Dancing is a stumbling block to many people. It should not be introduced into the church where we, unlike Israel of old, are trying to graft people in and assist them in serving the Lord Jesus Christ.

5. It is very difficult to dance modestly. I have been in churches where people dance by jumping up and down vertically. This is conducive to immodesty, and especially so among women. That reason alone should bring great inhibition to dancing in church. It suggests, perhaps, a reason why the women of Israel often drew apart from the men when they danced.

6. Many valid Old Testament truths are not carried over to or validly practiced in the New Testament.

7. There is no indication in Scripture that the people of God will dance before the Lord in heaven. I draw that conclusion from Scriptural silence, which is not always an infallible principle for biblical interpretation. However, the silence in this case is quite extensive and persuasive. Many scenes of heavenly worship are included in the Bible, especially in the Revelation, and they include many illustrations of the redeemed worshiping God in many ways. But they include no instances or references to dancing in those worship contexts.

8. The prevailing sweep of the Bible is from the natural to the spiritual.

9. That which we validly receive as present-day restoration of lost truth may have Old Testament roots, but it also must have clear New Testament revelation. Dancing as worship does not meet this requirement.

What will you do?

I trust that this study has helped you to reflect Scripturally on the issue of whether or not dancing is revealed in the Bible as a mode of
worship for the New Testament church. I believe that even one or two of
the nine reasons I gave for not dancing in the church can be quite
compelling. The nine together should give you a firm grasp on why I have
very specifically drawn the conclusion that dancing was appropriate in
certain defined contexts in the Old Testament, but was not by any means
understood or taught by Jesus or the apostles as a worship form either for
the early church or for the church today.

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purposes, you are welcome to post a link to it entitled "Is Dancing a
New Testament Worship Form?". The URL is
http://www.jimfeeney.org/dancingasworship.html

Additional bible studies and sermon outlines on speaking in tongues,
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