

# SHALL I DANCE ?

BY REV. E. MERRILL WILSON, B.A.

**QUESTIONABLE AMUSEMENTS** "What should be my attitude towards dancing?" is a question which we all consider sometime. It is one of the amusements commonly called "questionable"—on the borderland between what is clearly to be condemned by a follower of Christ, and what may be indulged in with a clear conscience. "Questionable" amusements are no problem in the life of one fully consecrated to the doing of God's will. The purpose to serve Him will so dominate that everything of a doubtful nature will be excluded, both for our own sake and because of our influence upon others.

**COMMON ATTITUDES** In every community good people are to be found who denounce dancing and cards in such a way as to produce the impression, that in their opinion these were the most heinous and almost the only sins in which a person was apt to indulge. This of course is to "strain at a gnat and swallow a camel." Compared with many habits, the objections to dancing are small. But though conceding that a great many claim to see nothing incompatible with loyalty to Christ in the dance, for the sake of our young people especially, who naturally crave social amusement, and in many communities seem thrown back on the dance to satisfy that demand, may I point out why, in my humble opinion some forms of dancing are open, not only to question, but to objection?

**DANCES OF BIBLICAL TIMES** The modern dance had no parallel in Biblical times. We have all noticed the spontaneous joy of a little child as he jumps and claps his hands over something that highly pleases him. That expression of exuberant feeling is typical of the simpler form of dancing in early times. A more studied form was the pantomime dance in which a number of persons took part in lines with hands clasped much in the same manner as children play, "Here Come Three Dukes Arriving." In these the leader probably danced impromptu and the others followed his movements. They were usually connected with Jewish religious rites, or celebrated some unusual event in the family, community, or national life, and the dances took place in the daytime, in the open air, men dancing alone and women alone. In later times the solo dance, exhibiting grace of movement and liteness of body was introduced. This type came in through Greek and Roman influence and was not really a Jewish custom. The only certain reference to this in the Bible is the dance of Herodias before Herod's guests.

**DANCES AND DANCES** Of course there are dances and dances. Were our dances limited to reels, Maypole dances, flings, clog dances, the old formal minuet and square dances, in which the grace of movement and the execution of figures and evolutions made the dance, and in which no liberties were allowed, I fancy very few would object to them. It is the "round dance" upon which criticism is showered. In this article, by that name, I do not refer to the extreme forms that become a "craze" for a time, but are "taboo" among conservative dancers, but to what are considered to be really respectable.



**EXPECTATIONS  
OF THE  
NON-CHRISTIAN**

Is it not true that the average non-Christian expects a professing Christian to abstain from such a dance? In my short experience as a pastor, individuals in each community where I have lived, have stated that the dance was one thing among others which they felt would have to be given up if they became followers of Christ. If your pastor were to give invitations to even a private dance and were to take part would it not be the talk of the community for a long time? If there are no objectionable features, the minister and church members should be as free as any one to take part without causing comment.

**ORIGIN OF  
WALTZ**

Rev. H. T. Crossley in an article on this subject quotes from Rev. Dr. Pearson's book: "The waltz was born December 20th, 1787, first seen in Vienna Theatre, the progeny of a licentious stage, and its consort the ballet. This gyratory hugging was for a time thought to be too shockingly indecent to be tolerated anywhere else. It found its way into houses of doubtful repute and more slowly into German society. Even Paris for a time resisted . . . . and not till the present century (nineteenth) did it get its present sanction in Paris. Then of course it became the fashion everywhere for Paris sets the fashions' clock for the world." If Dr. Pearson is correct this is the beginning of the most popular type of dancing to-day—not a very auspicious start.

**ATTRACTIONS** The attractions of the modern dance can probably be classified under three headings as follows:

**MUSIC**

(1) The Aesthetic: Music is just as expressive as words and can stir any emotion from the most deeply spiritual down the scale to that which stirs up the evil in us. The line so often drawn between sacred and fast music often puts the ban upon a great deal that is thoroughly enjoyable and helpful. If we appreciate music we can enter into its enjoyment whether it be slow or fast. One often hears comment because a person has entered into the spirit of music sufficiently to follow the rhythm by some motion of their feet or body. Enjoy clean music to your heart's content. It will never harm you.

**MOVEMENT**

It is claimed that dancing makes for liteness and grace of movement. Very few will deny that it does. That has been recognized since the days of Plato. Probably, in part on this account, dancing is included in physical training and in so many of our middle schools. And may I say here, that though the increase in dancing the last couple of years may be in part a reaction from the war, it seems to me the real reason lies in the fact that a large proportion of our young people learn to dance at collegiate or high school, and on leaving school usually become the leader of their community. Even if the parents are opposed to the dance, it puts a very strong strain on the will of the young people to refrain, because at school and in after life the dance is so often the main part of social functions, and a person is apt to feel very much "in the cold" if they do not dance.

**EFFECT OF  
TEACHING IN  
MIDDLE  
SCHOOLS**

**IT IS A  
SOCIAL HABIT**

(2) The Social Instinct: The dance caters to the play and sociable side of life. This is probably the characteristic that has the greatest influence in drawing our young people into the habit, the opportunity to have a sociable time with their lady or gentlemen friends. It is a God given instinct and naturally seeks satisfaction. The criticism has been made that the average community, and more particularly the one in the rural section, is under developed in its ability to play games. When work is done there seems an inability to have a social evening without a dance,



especially in winter when outside amusements are somewhat curtailed. Of course there is skating in winter and an occasional game of tennis for a few in summer, while for the men there is an odd game of hockey, or baseball and even in these many do not join. I firmly believe that we can cater to this instinct and satisfy it by other amusements even better

#### **CAN SATISFY SOCIAL INSTINCT OTHERWISE**

than the dance does, and in such a way that no stigma or question can be cast upon it. For example, in my home church we had a large group of in whom the social and play spirit was fairly well developed. I have never known a group of young people who could have cleaner or more wholesome and enjoyable social amusement, and there was scarcely ever even a hint of a dance heard. They had something better. In summer there are many games suitable for a mixed company, whether at home, or at picnics, aside from swimming, boating and sports. A large number of the school games, looked upon by many as "girls' games," cannot be beaten for real fun in a mixed crowd. Even in winter when we look more indoors for amusement, there is skating and hockey for men or ladies, snowshoe hikes and such; and at parties and social evenings, though it takes more thought and planning than a dance, by a little forethought, through music, contests, and games, these events may be made just as enjoyable as any dance.

#### **EMBRACE OF DANCE**

(3) The Sexual: It is admitted that the embrace, more or less close, of the round dance is an incidental yet an essential one. For good dancing unity of movement is necessary and to get unity of movement, there must be a fairly close embrace of the partners. Ideally there may not be much objection to that if one could have ideal conditions. Were the embrace always the most formal with a minimum of contact such as in former times was laid down for the correct dance, the objection would not be so strong. But in practice it is my honest conviction, based on the statements of those who do round dance, as well as a number of medical doctors, that the normal individual cannot habitually dance without at times at least having feelings aroused that in God's plan should never be aroused unnecessarily outside of wedlock. This is my principal objection to the dance. I believe many of our young people have those feelings aroused at times in the dance, even though many are wholly innocent as to the cause. This statement is based upon the admissions of a number of persons as being their own experience.

#### **OTHER OBJECTIONS**

Such objections as unwise company and late hours can be taken to other social events as well as to the dance. If our members and adherents were to use only those dances in which no liberties of embrace were allowed and to which the above objection could not be taken, they would probably find the leaders of the church ready to stand by them.

#### **"ROUND" vs. SQUARE DANCE**

You may "Pooh Hoo" this objection at first thought, but why is it that the square dance is such a back number. Have you not often heard people say: "Give me a waltz, or something like that, but no square dance for me." Admitting that the music is usually a little different for a round dance, the only other characteristic of any account lacking is the embrace, and any dance that lacks the embrace is "flat." Why is it that one so seldom sees ladies dancing with ladies, and never sees men dancing with men, except as a joke. I remember a few years ago being held responsible for the conduct of a reception at which it was customary to have promenades, but at which some dancing has been formerly done "on the side." I took the necessary steps to ensure no dance. Almost every lady on the committee in protest said it was the dance that was bringing them. The only thing lacking in the promenade was the embrace and lack of movement to the music.



## **A COMMON EXPERIENCE**

In the army and out of it, approximately one hundred and fifty men have from time to time told me their experience in the dance. I remember only two who did not agree that the above objection was at least sometimes true. Many of these have stated it as their conviction, and they had often heard comment after dances to support the conviction that a great many men at the average dance enjoy a dance largely in proportion to the extent to which their partners yielded themselves to the embrace, an embrace which as commonly practiced is such that very few women would tolerate anywhere else than upon the dance floor.

## **OTHER INSTANCES**

Rev. H. T. Crossley in an article written about twenty-five years ago quotes: "The Chief of Police of New York City testifies that three-fourths of the abandoned girls of that city say they were led to ruin by dancing." Archbishop Spaulding, a priest of the Roman Catholic Church, of New York, is reported as saying that nineteen out of twenty cases of lapsed virtue are traceable to the round dance. These figures of course take in public dance halls of all sorts and alcoholic drink played a part it does not now, but the quotation is made to show the objection which exists. While many of our people look with suspicion on the dance hall, and at many private dances discretion is shown as to hours, company and type of dances, and a real attempt is made to keep them as free from objection as possible, yet if the above reasoning holds, the objection still remains.

## **ATTITUDE OF CHURCHES**

At some time practically every church or denomination of importance in Canada and the United States, except I believe, the Mormon Church, has as a unit or through some part of its organization or representative men, declared against the dance in part or in toto. This has not been done with the purpose of cutting off any clean amusement from our young people but because they felt there was some reason for objection. To-day because it is a "questionable" thing there is a tendency to leave it to the enlightened Christian conscience. Though the leaders of the Methodist Church are, I believe as opposed to it as ever they were, witness the number of resolutions against the dance passed by different parts of the church last year, as far as they are concerned it is left to the individual conscience, though they feel that the dance or any questionable amusement, if indulged in, will tend to lower the spiritual life of a community.

## **YOU ?**

If you are making it your first great purpose to live as you believe God wants you, trusting Him for help, honestly and conscientiously consider the arguments pro and con; then, in this as in all other things, do nothing upon which you cannot ask His blessing. And always bear in mind, it is not the untrained or the badly trained conscience, but the Christian trained conscience that is the safe guide.