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Full Article

THE USE OF AERIAL DANCE IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

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Introduction

During the past three decades, God has brought an ongoing awakening to the restoration of the arts and their use in the Christian Church worldwide. Gradually different artistic expressions have found acceptance within the Church after understanding that God is the giver of all creativity as a tool for humanity to glorify him.

Certain expressions of art have been more readily accepted than others. For example, in the area of theatre, plays related to the crucifixion of Jesus have had better acceptance by the historical churches rather than comedy related themes. Both are branches of theatrical arts, but people tend to associate or relate church with crying and reflecting rather than with laughter and celebration. The same thing happens with dance and body movements. The church has allowed certain styles of dance while others have been misinterpreted or rejected. My intention with this article is to speak about a non-traditional style of dance that is emerging within the Christian liturgy. My intention is to create a dialogue towards the study and comprehension of the correct use that can be given to this form of art and in that way expose the dangers and excessiveness from which we have to be aware. Any kind of art expression in the church and produced by children of God should evidence purity and beauty that testifies of God. Different to others types of fine arts, dance is one of the visual expressions that we must be careful with and should be presented with holiness and a pure heart. All styles of dance can become sensual and deviate from its purpose if it is not presented with a correct heart, knowledge, or necessary technical skills. Before speaking properly of the aerial dance and its use in the church, I would like to briefly describe the development of this type of dance.

Aerial Dance

Aerial dance begins in the late 1960s and early 1970s from the search for new expressions in modern dance. After its development, its usage becomes popular in contemporary circus acts. Although other skills related to body movements such as the contemporary dance, physical theatre, creative elements etc. are also incorporated in these circus acts, aerial dance has a strong ability to capture the attention and imagination of the public. Aerial dance allows choreographers to create scenes and interactions in a new way being the air - the perfect canvas for painting fascinating motion scenes.

Aerial Dance in the Church

Like other forms of body movements, God began to awake in the hearts of Christian artists to innovate and bring a variety to their style of presentation. According to my knowledge, the first Christian arts ministry to incorporate the use of aerial dance in their presentations was "Way of Life/Acrodramance Arts". This ministry also inspired others to seek new ways to present the Message in a radical and different form. In 2005 we began to introduce aerial dance in the "Escuela de Adoracion y Bellas Artes en Puerto Rico" (EABA School of Worship and Fine Arts) through classes, preparing students from different churches in this discipline. Multiple events and theatrical productions were held where aerial dance was incorporated as part of the artistic expressions contributing to the message represented through the art. Currently, our ministry, "Imaginare! Performing Arts Ministry", continues to also incorporate in its presentations the use of dance, acrobatics, physical theatre and aerial dance.

As time goes by we see other ministries and Christian art schools also beginning to include this type of art as part of their presentations and academic curriculums. I personally believe that not all art ministries or schools are called by God to incorporate or use this type of dance. Now I do believe that we all should have knowledge and the opportunity to speak openly about this topic in order to learn how to respect and support those who have been called by God to use this form of art.

The Bible and Dance

What does the Bible say about aerial dance? It's a question I have been asked on numerous occasions and I usually respond with another question... what does the bible say about ballet, jazz, or modern dance? Obviously there is no verse in the scriptures that mentions "classical ballet" or "aerial dance", but the Bible calls us to praise the Lord through dance (Psalms 149,150). It also says to "dance before the Lord with all your might" (2 Samuel 6:14). The Bible does not speak of "different styles" but of attitude and correct purpose with which we should dance for the Lord.

The word dance in the dictionary is defined as "the execution of movements to the rhythm of music that allows emotions and feelings to be expressed". That collection of coordinated movements to the rhythm of music may include simple leaps of joy to technical and professional movements. Aerial dance is simply another style of dance as is contemporary dance, hip-hop, African or Spanish folklore dance.

I believe that parting from this premise, the question should be... How should we express our heart before the Lord through movements? We can present an Israeli folklore dance wearing all the traditional costumes and garments of that dance style, but if there is pride and boastfulness in our hearts its useless. I believe that our dance should be composed of innocent movements like those portrayed by children when their father arrives home to more precise and elaborate movements that exalt the greatness of God in all our art. Our art has to honour and glorify God, showing His creativity, expressing joy, praise and worship in accordance to the scriptures. We have one common mandate and it is to "praise Him through dance".

Obviously defining and explaining the different mentions of dance and the diverse Hebrew and Greek words and how they are translated to dance in the Bible is not the purpose of this article. My intention is to show that aerial dance is just another style of dance with the same biblical foundations as it is for any other style of dance or corporal movement in general.

God is Creative

In addition to the above-explained, God is creative in nature. He created man in His image and placed in us gifts, abilities and talents in order to manifest His creativity and bring glory to His name. Aerial dance is just another creative way to express our love for the Lord. It's another way to testify to the creative and artistic nature of God. The Bible says that "all that exists was created by him and for him" (Colossians 1:16) therefore everything should honour God be it dancing with our feet on the ground or from the air.

Our creativity testifies of our Creator. Therefore we should not grow tired of seeking new ways on how to worship God and to present in an original way the message and plan of redemption. This is the most visual society to have ever lived on Earth and we have to flow under a creative anointing in order to present them the message.

Aerial Dance at Imaginare! Arts

Our ministry, "Imaginare! Performing Arts Ministry", has been using aerial dance for about 10 years. Our motto is "Created for heavenly places, designed to manifest heaven on earth." Therefore aerial dance is part of our identity as an arts ministry. As we worship from the high places we are declaring that heaven invades earth!

In "Imaginare! Arts" we believe that this style of dance and acrobatics are powerful tools, that if used properly can enrich a dance performance so that the message of Jesus can reach the hearts and minds of the audience. As mentioned at the beginning, this style of dance because of its elevation, physical strength and artistry has the ability to capture the audience's senses. That ability is precisely what the Holy Spirit uses to make the message enter through the senses and go directly to the heart of man. In our plays and dance presentations, aerial dance is not used to simply show an art or to innovate, but as a means to present the Gospel of Jesus.

We have also used in our church (International Restoration and Worship Center, West Palm Beach, FL) aerial dance during times of praise, prophetic worship, spiritual warfare and intercession. We have experienced moments of great conviction of sin in people who have heard God's voice in our presentations with acts of aerial dance. Our Artistic

Director in "Imaginare! Arts" and aerial dance teacher, after a severe pain in her arm due to an injury began to dance in the aerial silk and while rising into the air her pain was healed permanently. Aerial dance for us is a way of representing the reality of the spiritual and celestial realm through the creative movements.

Know that every church has its own culture and not necessarily the use of aerial dance during worship services will be appropriate in some congregations. We must be wise and prudent with this style of dance because it is something novel and attractive. Art should never divert our attention, on the contrary, our art should be a vehicle for focusing people's hearts to the greatest artist, God.

Physical Training and Safety

Unlike other styles of traditional dance, aerial dance requires training and is to be taught by professionals trained in this area. Aerial dance depends greatly on strength and physical endurance as well as grace and technique in the movements executed. The execution of an act with aerial dance involves a high degree of danger to the dancers who decide to use this type of style. Our recommendation is to not try to incorporate this type of dance style without having teachers who are prepared to teach, correct, and promote the safety measures necessary for its proper use. Besides the physical aspect it is important to have knowledge of all the security measures, types of knots, care for equipment and aerial dance apparatus, etc. In our experience, we have trained students by levels and have seen them progress, but again I want to mention that not all ministries will necessarily incorporate elements of aerial dance in her performances. That is directly linked to God's calling for that ministry, the culture of the Church and the vision of its pastors / leaders. Given all these reasons, it should be clear that the use of aerial dance requires a level of spiritual maturity, excellent physical training, and should be used in a way that brings glory to God and not distraction to the congregation.

Beware of Excess

Unfortunately, like any other form of movement, it is easy to fall into excesses that jeopardize the acceptance and openness of the Church to non-traditional styles of dance. Aerial dance, like other styles of dance can be sensual therefore must have a high sense of holiness, purity and uprightness of heart in people who will use it. The movements should be well chosen, with grace and a clean technique that highlights the purity of art and beauty of God in it. The costumes or wardrobes should be appropriate for this style of dance but at the same time prudent. We have to discern and apply wisdom when preparing, choosing music, costumes, and aerial equipment etc. Prudence testifies of our level of maturity and love for those who are weak in faith.

A big problem with the art ministries in churches is that they want to fly before walking. Ministers who do not know the principles of purity, prudence and security can easily cause damage when they prematurely incorporate aerial dance, acrobatics, physical theatre, etc. Unfortunately, I have seen videos of Christian groups that have simply tried to copy what they see in the world and try to do it in the church without first having heard God's voice, been mature in their faith and trained in their artistic expression. Because things like this have happened, we will close ourselves to these new styles, but we have to be smart and not let Satan take advantage of our ignorance and impulsivity. The same has happened with other styles of dance. The fact that someone has made a mistake in the process does not mean that the style in itself is bad, but it shows us that there is much to do in terms of education, training and foundation.

Closing Remarks

In "Imaginare! Arts" we are committed to educating and restoring the arts with spiritual maturity and excellence so our dance is more than just an artistic presentation - our expression may be prophetic. We are also on a path of growth and continuous learning. We've made mistakes along the way but we have always tried to learn from them with righteous hearts before God. Our desire is to be used by God to impart wisdom, His vision, passion and heart in the creative and prophetic arts. God is giving us a great opportunity to meet, discuss, study, reflect and evaluate new dance styles that can bring innovative ways to reach this generation. I invite you on this path through prayer ...

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