

CHRISTIAN PIETY AND THE SCHOOL PROM

By Phillip Gray

Our Thesis: attending the typical high school prom (dance) is a sinful activity that a pious Christian seeks to avoid in his own life and not encourage in others. The “prom” has been around since 1811, derived from the nineteenth century term “promenade ball” (in *Prom: A History Lesson*, at <http://prom.about.com/od/introtopromsformaldance/a/promhist.htm> as posted on Sept 16, 2008). Christians should be warned about attending the prom. The word “prom” is “short for promenade,” which is “a formal dance given by a high school or college class.”

Why this subject? Years ago, brother Marshall Keeble was once asked why he preached on dancing when others were going to do it anyway. He said, “I thought I might slow it down a little.” We hope at least to slow down prom attendance among Christians.

Granted, no text explicitly says, “Thou shalt not dance” (as none says, “thou shalt not take LSD, do crack cocaine, or join a nudist colony, etc.”). But the *generic moral principles* of Scripture undeniably find *specific contemporary application* to the modern ballroom dance and the typical school prom that includes such a dance. Too often our preaching only makes brief mention of the “sin of dancing” or “going to the prom” without explaining in an expanded, detailed manner, why these activities are sinful. We will here follow a carefully crafted chain argument to establish the thesis:

I. UNLAWFUL SEXUAL DESIRE (LUST) IS SINFUL.

But, what is *unlawful* sexual desire? Any sexual desire (lust) not within the private confines of holy matrimony is unlawful (Heb. 13:4; 1 Cor. 7:1-7). Sexual desire (lust, imagination) for someone other than my God-ordained mate is sin. Jesus said in Matthew 5:28, “but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” [All Scriptural Citations taken from the *NASB*, 1997 ed., unless otherwise indicated.] Job 31:1 says, “I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I gaze at a virgin?” Moses said, “you shall not *covet* your neighbor’s wife” (Exo. 20:17; Deut. 5:21). Paul wrote in Rom. 6:12, “Therefore do not let sin reign in your moral bodies that you obey its lusts (*epithymia*).” He also warned against “concupiscence” or “lustful passion” in 1 Thessalonians 4:5. Unlawful desire is sin.

II. DELIBERATELY ENGAGING IN ACTIVITIES OR ATTENDING EVENTS THAT KNOWINGLY PUT ONE UNDER UNNECESSARY TEMPATION (UNLAWFUL SEXUAL DESIRE OR LUST) IS SINFUL.

We are taught to pray, “And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matt. 6:13). Joseph is the model—he fled from Potiphar’s wife and removed himself from the *place* and *source* of temptation (Gen. 39:13). Prov. 6:27, “Can a man take fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned?” Prov. 4:14-15, “Do not enter into the path of the wicked...avoid it, do not pass by it, turn away from it and pass on.” Rom. 13:14, “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.” Obvious applications of this principle would include: an alcoholic visiting friends at a bar, a curious young man visiting a brothel to “see” what goes on there without “participating” (these are particular spots on the planet where a Christian generally would not want to be found), a young man reading a pornographic magazine, etc. (It won’t do to argue, “I can go to such places and read such material and not be tempted myself.”) So, deliberately engaging in activities or attending events that knowingly put one under unnecessary temptation is sinful.

III. DELIBERATELY ENGAGING IN ACTIVITIES OR ATTENDING EVENTS THAT KNOWINGLY TEMPT OTHER PERSONS TO FEEL UNLAWFUL SEXUAL DESIRE (LUST) IS SINFUL.

Jesus said in Matt. 18:6-9, “but whosoever causes one of these little ones which believe in me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.” Dancing with a member of the opposite sex can cause the other person to stumble. Paul added in Rom. 14:13, “...but rather determine this— not to be an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way.”

The principle behind the sin of “lasciviousness” (*aselgeia*) is relevant here (Gal. 5:19; cf. 2 Pet. 2:7, “sensual conduct”; Rom. 13:13). The word means, “licentiousness, debauchery, sensuality...indecent conduct...licentious desires” (Arndt & Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*). Another source gives the definition of “sensuality, indecency, vice” (Barclay M. Newman, Jr., *Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*). The NASB version of the Bible translates the term as “sensuality.” The older *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* defined it as “*wanton (acts or) manners, as filthy words, indecent bodily movements, unchaste handling of males and females, etc.*”

The principle behind the sin of “revellings” is also relevant here (“and such like,” Gal. 5:21). Dancing, as done at the typical school prom, at least involves “such like” if not the very sin of “revellings” itself. So, deliberately engaging in activities or attending events that knowingly tempt other persons to feel unlawful desire is sin.

IV. THE TYPICAL MODERN DANCE IS AN ACTIVITY OR EVENT THAT KNOWINGLY TEMPTS ONESELF AND OTHER PERSONS TO FEEL UNLAWFUL SEXUAL DESIRE.

What is the appeal of the typical *modern dance*? How does it differ from other types of dancing, as some of those mentioned in the Bible for example? “Modern” in this context is not

the antithesis of “postmodern.” It refers to the contemporary form of dancing in which males and females dance together (ballroom dancing, social dancing, mixed dancing). (“Ballroom dancing” refers to dancing typically between members of the opposite sex in numbers larger than one couple, group dancing.) It differs significantly from most dances mentioned in the Bible. A scholarly article in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (under “Games,” 1956 ed., Vol. II) summarizes with two types of dances generally mentioned in Scripture: “the dance of public rejoicing, and the dance which was more or less an act of worship.” It also noted that dancing “is scarcely ever mentioned in the Bible as a social amusement...” Moreover it observes that “women seem generally to have danced by themselves.” (The separation of the sexes in the dance of rejoicing seems to be alluded to in Jer. 31:13.) Furthermore, “Of the social dancing of couples in the modern fashion there is no trace.”

We must add that the daughter of Herodias dancing salaciously before the lustful Herod more approximates the moves and purpose of the modern dance (Matthew 14 and Mark 6). This activity is not narrated with approval or indifference! Also, 1 Cor. 10:7 refers to the rebellion of Israel when they rose up to play, an allusion apparently to the dancing (and nakedness) and consequent fornication in idolatrous revelry (cf. Exo. 32:19, 25).

What is wrong with the modern (ballroom) type of dancing? *The Encyclopedia Britannica* says, “To a certain extent all dancing is sexually stimulating...” (“Dance,” 1956, VII, 14, cited in Stafford North, *Shall We Dance?*, Dallas, Tx.: Christian Publishing Co., 9). *Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (X, 359), says, “The dancing of the modern ball room is...a refined form of (sexual) stimulus” (cited in North, op. cit.). Dr. Leta S. Hollingsworth, professor of education at Columbia University confirmed the sex appeal of the dance (though she approves of it), saying that “dancing ‘affords a partial satisfaction to the sex impulse which (among the adolescents) cannot as yet achieve full and specific expression...it seems that partial satisfaction of a normal craving is better than no satisfaction at all, or than perverted satisfaction” (in *The Psychology of the Adolescent*, 122, cited in North, op. cit.).

Conservative commentary (of Media Watch) Brent Bozell III cites Laura Sessions Stepp writing in the *Washington Post* about the trendy grinding moves on the dance floor, who herself quotes a young man as saying, “Men like to dance, and women like to have sex. But neither are [sic] supposed to show it. Grinding allows them to do what they like in a socially acceptable way” (in Brent Bozell III, *Nightmare on Prom Street*, at http://townhall.com/Columnists/BrentBozellIII/2008/06/07/_nightmare_on_prom_street as posted on Sept 16, 2008). A dance teacher on the internet advises the prom-goer to follow the school’s rules for the slow dance—“As Sister Mary said, make sure to leave room for the Holy Spirit.” What kind of flippant remark is this? It is from a worldling who recognizes the danger (sexual temptation) inherent in slow dancing. The world attempts to sugarcoat, supervise,

chaperone and formalize an activity that even it recognizes as inherently dangerous from a moral point of view.

This writer disobeyed parents as a teen and briefly entered a dance hall with a worldly friend where a dance was being held in an Alabama high school many years ago (if he remembers correctly, in order to see and talk with someone briefly who was at the dance). He witnessed the salacious activities going on there and later heard the lewd (unrepeatable) comments his non-Christian friend made about the apparent biological effect the obvious sex appeal of the dance was having on the young males who were on the dance floor. What planet is any Christian from who seriously quibbles with the manifest point that the modern dance is designed to arouse sexual desire in those who are involved in it, and generally achieves this purpose?! So, the typical modern dance is an activity or event that knowingly tempts oneself and other persons to feel unlawful sexual desire.

V. THE AVERAGE HIGH SCHOOL PROM INCLUDES THE TYPICAL MODERN DANCE.

Suppose one says, “we don’t dance at my school’s prom.” Then, either it is not really a “prom.” Or, at least it is not the type of prom we are talking about (we are not talking about a mere formal banquet). But, even if it is not, one must be careful about defending the right to go to his prom, in church company for example, since kids from other schools may be emboldened by this *example* to attend their own proms with the other forms of more sexually explicit dancing.

We are talking about the typical high school prom where dancing (social dancing, ballroom dancing, mixed dancing) between members of the opposite sex occurs as one of the main elements of the occasion. The *Wikipedia* on line says that, “Common prom activities include dining, dancing, the crowning of a prom King and Queen, and socializing” (at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prom> as posted on Sept 16, 2008). For example, at Bremen High School in Haralson County, Georgia earlier this year of which an internet posting mentions (the more “tamed”) Cha-cha Slide (a line dance), The Train, and various sets of Slow dances. (The Train can become a “grinding chain.”)(See <http://www.acwmusic.com/htmdocs/bremenprom.htm> as posted on Sept 16, 2008). Some of the so-called dance “classics” an internet website recommends are: “the running man, the moon walk, the kickworm (okay, maybe not the kickworm), the Vincent Vega, the matador, the Thriller, the Axl Rose, the Back The Bus Up, the Hammer, the Slim Shady, the Humpty Hump, the Butter Churn.” PG: These are not mere Miriam rejoicing by the sea side dance moves! Look these dance moves up, if you dare, and find that they all involve sensual movements, or close proximity of the opposite sexes, or salacious swaying of the hips or other rhythmic moves of the body to mood music (sometimes “sexually explicit music” as Brent Bozell III wrote in 2007).

If the echo says, “Miriam danced by the Red Sea,” and “David danced before the ark,” we reply, “we are not talking about school ‘dances’ where the Miriam Move is in vogue (as sheer rejoicing, women alone and not dancing with men, in the daylight, spontaneously showing their joy) or where Davidic Ritualistic (solo) Dance is all the rage—these schools might be pretty rare anyway!!! Secular author (of Media Watch) Brent Bozell III asks, “Should the high school prom be renamed the high school porno? They call it “grinding” or “freak dancing” when students grind their pelvises into each other to the beat of sexually explicit music, sometimes in chains of three or four or more. This kind of dancing is so commonplace with high-school students that some parents and cultural writers are suggesting all attempts at school dancing decorum should be abandoned.”—Brent Bozell III, *Nightmare on Prom Street*, at http://townhall.com/Columnists/BrentBozellIII/2008/06/07/nightmare_on_prom_street as posted on Sept 16, 2008. Bozell is a secular author and not a member of the church, so far as I know. As a worldlying who seemingly would approve of well-supervised or tamed dances, he nevertheless recognizes the inherent sex appeal of the modern dance. Bozell derisively cites Laura Sessions Stepp who suggested “‘no evidence’ that simulating sex on the dance floor for hours leads to sexual activity eventually” and asks, “Is this woman serious?” (The answer is, yes, he later says.) Bozell also implicitly recognizes that at least the dances at the prom are “sexy” and at worst they are “sexual.” He wryly notes, “Ah, but you can hear the Wobble-Knees already. What, specifically, is this kind of behavior? How do we distinguish between sexy dancing and sexual dancing? How do we know it's indecent, never mind obscene?” (ibid.) Yes, how do we make such distinctions? And is “sexy” dancing OK for a Christian while “sexual” dancing is vulgar and punishable by school authorities?

The dirty dancing (freak dancing) phenomenon is apparently a trend that is getting out of hand (the fruit of the earlier more traditional permissiveness of formal school proms). For example, headlines read, High School Bans “Sexually Explicit” Dancing at Prom.” This was in Ft. Smith Ark in May of 2007. A letter from Principal Wayne Haver written on May 4 stated: “dance styles we are prohibiting at the prom are the sexually explicit styles where students simulate having sex on the dance floor. These styles include the girlbasically doing a 'lap dance'...” [Here was a sexually explicit description better for married adults only, See Article by Roger Gowens, *High School Bans “Sexually Explicit” Dancing at Prom* at http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/255005/high_school_bans_sexually_explicit.html?cat=8 as posted on Sept 17, 2008].

Even the worldlying knows that the prom is a time for dances and what dances are all about—sex appeal! A website designed to teach high school “prom etiquette” says as one point, “**Get a Room.** Since the beginning of time, school administrators have had heart attacks over the latest version of freak dancing sweeping our nation. While much of their consternation is a time-honored tradition of adult breakdowns over teenage sexuality, there's no need to

court a restraining order by XXXXXXXX your date on the dance floor. Seriously, reserve the *Girls Gone Wild*-style grinding for your stint on *Real World XXXIII*." (emphasis mine, PG, vulgarity deleted) It is simply understood by this web site prom etiquette author the kind of heightened sexual temptation to which prom goers will be subjected! Also, **"Don't Overstep Your Boundaries:** Don't make your partner feel uncomfortable by standing too close or touching anything you shouldn't be touching on a dance floor. Even if the groping opportunity is ripe, you may want to save it for a more private venue." Both the above from http://www.mahalo.com/How_to_Dance_at_the_Prom. We observe that the groping opportunity is obviously ripe at a dance, as the worldling admits. The remark about "adult breakdown over teenage sexuality" is a snide way of admitting that teenage sexuality is part and parcel of the dance event. This sort of "advice" is similar to the TV ads for liquor products which counsel us to "drink responsibly." (Think: "Lust responsibly!") So, the average High School prom includes the typical modern dance.

VI. THEREFORE DELIBERATELY ENGAGING IN THE ACTIVITY OR ATTENDING THE EVENT OF, THE AVERAGE HIGH SCHOOL PROM IS A SINFUL ACTIVITY OR EVENT.

It is not helpful for those for those confronted with this Biblical teaching to throw around the charge "you are telling me that I am going to hell!" Even those who dance recognize that many things are wrong without sitting in judgment over whether a particular individual is going to hell who does those wrong things. There is forgiveness and redemption, but it requires repentance (remorse and reformation of life style). We know that if we continue in willful, deliberate acts of sin we are not walking in the light as he is in the light (1 John 5:7; cf. Heb. 10:26) and our souls of course could be in grave danger.

We are not saying that dancing/the prom is the worst sin or the only sin young people must confront, nor that anyone who has ever danced is necessarily (now) living an immoral life. Even if dancing is not the worst sin, it does no good to compare sin to sin in an effort to minimize the guilt of what we may deem "the lesser sin." (For example, soft porn may not be as "bad" as hard porn, but neither kind of porn is something a Christian should be involved in! Our sons should no more drool over the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue than our daughters should watch hardcore pornographic films!)

High school prom dances are getting out of hand, as even the worldly types are beginning to admit. Why would we want to get on this run-away band wagon? If we are concerned about the abuses, we should not have our sons and daughters there in the first place!

We reiterate that deliberately engaging in the activity or attending the event of the average High School prom is a sinful activity or event.

VII. ANSWERING COMMON OBJECTIONS.

1. "I can go to the prom without dancing." But, by going and watching the sensual activities the others are engaged in, one can be tempted (sexually stimulated) by the visual and aural stimuli alone. This is especially true for young men at a time when the hormones are already raging! See the recent Emory University study of the differences between male and female sexual responses. "Men are generally more interested in and responsive to visual sexually arousing stimuli than are women" (in Stephan Hamann, Rebecca A. Herman, Carla L. Nolan & Kim Wallen, "Men and Women Differ in Amygdala Response to Visual Sexual Stimuli," in *Nature Neuroscience*, Vol. 7, No. 4, April 2004: 411). Seriously, do we have to have psychologists or neurologists tell us what is already common knowledge? But the science of mapping the brain response to visual sexual stimuli clearly confirms our common knowledge. Your good example is damaged by being there. (Would you dare take out a Bible and preach good morals to another person on the sidelines at the dance? Cf. 1 Tim. 4:12, "...but show yourself an example of those who believe;" 2 Tim. 2:22, "now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness..." You would have a hard time admonishing a fellow Christian not to dance while there as you stand on the side lines. Ephesians 5:11 says, "Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them!"

2. "I can dance at the prom without lusting." This is a disturbing quibble. It either reflects a serious medical problem or downright dishonesty! It is like praying, "Lord, lead me into temptation so that I can learn better how to resist it!" Do your movements on the dance floor cause another to lust?

3. "Some people in the Bible danced apparently with God's approval or indifference (as Miriam, David, etc.)." (We already answered this above.)

4. "The Bible does not explicitly condemn dancing." (Already answered above.)

5. "Someone might lust if I do a number of different things in an inappropriate manner, like walking down the street, sitting at my desk at work, or playing sports, etc. So, why single out the dance?" Answer: A TV commercial had a man telling his doctor "it hurts when I do this." The doctor replied, "Then don't do it!" If one lusts at my walking, sitting, playing sports, etc., because I do them in a salacious manner, then I must stop doing them that way! But the modern dance is an act that is *inherently* or *intrinsically* salacious. Salaciousness is not some annoying, incidental consequence. It is the very *essence* of the dance. It is a way of moving the body to music that is a lewd and sexually stimulating act.

6. "My school prom is well chaperoned."

This objection of course recognizes the inherent danger of the dance and the need to chaperone it. James Meadows says, "Sin supervised is still sin" (in *God Speaks to Today's Teenagers*, Number 1, Montgomery: Bible & School Supply, 1970, 29). Is it really possible for an adult standing by on the sidelines to chaperone the thoughts of the youths' hearts on the dance floor?

Conclusion: Paul wrote, "Abstain from all appearance of evil" (AV), or literally, "every form of evil" (1 Thess. 5:22). He does not say, "learn to participate responsibly around every form of evil," "parents, chaperone every form of evil," but abstain from it! The pious Christian would seek to stay away from the school prom, no matter the small perks of "doing the senior walk" or "just having his picture taken." Such trivial things can better be done in other more wholesome contexts than a school dance. The prom is not the place for Christians to be.