

Dancing in Lutheran High Schools

John Chworowsky

California Pastoral Conference  
Alpine Lutheran Church  
Alpine, CA  
January 24-25, 1983

California Pastoral Conference  
Alpine Lutheran Church, Alpine  
January 24-25, 1983  
John Chworowsky

### DANCING IN LUTHERAN HIGH SCHOOLS

The position that many within our Synod had held, and which many today still hold regarding dancing in our synodical schools, seems to me to be summarized well by Prof. Armin Schuetze in an article in The Northwestern Lutheran, January 18, 1959, entitled: "Is Dancing a Sin?"

"...let a person ask himself two questions. First, are you completely sure (that dancing arouses no evil thoughts in your mind)? Have you honestly searched your heart? Be sure that you are not deceiving yourself. Secondly, can you also be sure that you are not causing evil thoughts in your partner? Are you perhaps becoming a temptation to others? We are to flee temptation, not to expose ourselves wilfully to it; we are to help others overcome temptation, not lead them into it."

In warning his readers this way, Prof. Schuetze quotes Matthew 5:28:

"...whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart."

Colossians 3:5: "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desires" (RSV).

I Peter 2:11: "Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul."

I Corinthians 6:18-20: "Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body. What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's."

In raising his questions, drawing his conclusions and expressing his warnings, Prof. Schuetze is also expressing the sentiments of Lutheran leaders of past generations. C.F.W. Walther stated:

"Ah, my beloved, the worldly dance is a net in which our poor youth is caught, and unawares drawn down into the gulf of impurity and vice."

And again:

"'Yes, but,' you perhaps reply, 'we do it only in order that our children may acquire grace in bodily posture.' Oh, dear parents, do but think, in the first place, which is better: without a graceful posture to come to heaven, or with a graceful posture to go to hell?"

And again:

"However, my beloved, those who wish to be true Christians are to refrain from worldly dancing and not to permit it to be practiced by their adolescent sons and daughters, not only because such dancing is a sin against the Sixth Commandment, which commands chastity, but also for the reason that the worldly dance gives great offense both to the world and to the heterodox."

Walther also quotes Luther:

"The third degree of unchastity consists in six signs [one of which

is the "embrace"]...These above mentioned signs nowhere occur more often or more grossly than they do in the public dances. It is past utterance how many and great sins take place there, and what the senses of sight and hearing take in on such occasions; besides the mischief which touch and talk bring with them. In short, world is world, yea, impure and an enemy of God. One must not seek anything good and God-pleasing in the world, for there is nought but sin upon sin, and you may perceive the immeasurably great wrath of God; yet people laugh and dance, are merry and gay, just as though it were all harmless, yea, good and useful." (Walther: Tanz und Theaterbesuch pp.41-46)

The sentiments of Schuetze, Walther and Luther are reechoed, I believe, as late as last November in a paper delivered by Pastor Steven Degner entitled, "Teaching Adiaphora Properly."

"There is no doubt in this speaker's mind that certain forms of dance arouse the passion and incite the lust. To claim otherwise would show gross naivete. The grinding beat of certain rock music at high decibels arouses the lust and lowers the inhibitions. A slow dance, pelvis to pelvis, will send a young man home burning with lust over his new found excitement."

Prophetically, he added,

"These are problems that need to be addressed as we seek to have dances in our high schools."

While Degner, Schuetze, Wather and Luther all speak these strong warnings against social dancing, they also all agree that not every form of dancing is sinful. Schuetze, for instance, asks:

"Does Scripture say that dancing is a sin? If we are looking for a commandment that reads: Thou shalt not dance, we shall not find it in the Scriptures.

He then points to examples of God-pleasing dancing that are in the Scriptures and to Ecclesiastes 3:4:

"There is...a time to dance."

and states:

"Scripture thus recognizes dancing as a way of expressing joy."

Prof. Schuetze concludes:

"There is no commandment in the Scriptures which says: 'Thou shalt not dance (hop, skip, swing about).' but there is a commandment which very clearly says, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.'"

Likewise Walther, in quoting the statement earlier by Luther makes a point that this was a quote from the very same Church Postil in which Luther defends the wedding dance. Walther adds, however,

"...he (Luther) is there speaking only of that permissible dance which consisted of nothing more than graceful steps, in connection with which the one person at most extended the hand or the finger to the other."

You may find it interesting to hear that quote of Luther in which he defends the wedding dance, which, I might add, was supplied for me by my faithful Vicar.

"Is it a sin to pipe and dance at a wedding, since they say that much sin comes from dancing? Whether the Jews had dances, I do not know. But since it is the custom of the land, just as inviting

guests, decorating the house, eating and drinking and being merry are customary - I do not know why I should condemn it unless people go out of bounds, and the dance becomes indecent or is carried too far. But the dance alone is not to blame for the fact that people commit sin while it is going on, for they commit such sins even at table and in church. In like manner, eating and drinking are not to blame for the fact that some folk turn into pigs. But where decency prevails, I let the wedding run its usual and rightful course and dance as much as I please (tanze immerhin). If you are decent and moderate, you cannot dance or sit away faith and love." (St.L. II, p.467ff.)

Pastor Degner, furthermore, concedes the same point in his paper when he says:

"Our youth can be lead to see the difference between sinful, worldly dancing and dancing that remains within the freedom they have in Christ, freedom to not sin in their dancing."

I believe it is accurate to say that there has never been a blanket condemnation of dancing in our circles. I have never read from anyone of kindred faith with us who made the claim that anyone who dances sins or provokes others to sin by that act. The position usually taken seems to me to be that certain forms of dancing, basically because of the embracing involved in the dance, and/or the music that accompanies said dancing, are lust provoking and stimulate sexual excitement. Hence the warnings of kindred minds such as Luther, Walther, Schuetze and Degner.

It also seems to me that it is a position, as stated above, that has led our Synod supported schools and most area Lutheran high schools of our Synod to prohibit on-campus dances and kept them from sponsoring dances for their student bodies. On the other hand, to the best of my knowledge, none of these schools has forbidden members of their student bodies from attending dances organized by other schools or even organized by their own students at off-campus locations. That practice is consistent with our congregations' attitude toward members who have wedding dances or anniversary dances at a rented hall.

The position is, to state it in a somewhat more negative way: We will not dictate the behavior of our students or the members of our congregations in regard to dancing, but we won't encourage or sponsor any dances or permit on-campus or in-church dances. In this regard, our position on dancing parallels our position on drinking alcoholic beverages. We acknowledge that it can be dangerous, but if the individual feels he can handle it and he doesn't offend anyone, that is his business. Do not, however, expect your school or church to open a bar.

I, for one, felt fairly comfortable with the position I've described above. It saw me through a few years as an area high school teacher, a few years as a dean at Northwestern College, and for the years since. I must admit, however, that except for the past few months, the years since 1973 didn't give me much opportunity to exercise my attitude. We have no synodical preparatory schools in Hong Kong, and no room at Immanuel Lutheran English Middle School was large enough to hold a dance, even if one had been suggested, which it hadn't.

To me, this position protected our precious Christian liberty while keeping us from getting involved in encouraging or promoting

something which had fairly generally been looked upon as loaded with danger and sin. While warnings continued to be spoken and recognition given to the dangers, it seemed to me that we of WELS could not be labeled as legalistic or pietistic on this score. We didn't, as it struck me, treat dancing as an adiaphoron, but we acted toward it in what I might call, if I may be as bold as to coin a term, an adiaphoronic way - we don't condemn dancing, but we won't encourage or promote dances either.

This position, however, was never totally comfortable to me; liveable, yes, but not totally comfortable. In fact, I can see how the position would inevitably lead to the problem which occasioned the assignment of this paper to me. I hesitate to guess, by the way, why I was chosen, unless someone figured he wanted to choose someone who has stood solidly, almost to a fault in many people's opinion, on the side of our historic position. It was probably more a matter of alphabetical order.

Picture, if you will, the scenario at an area Lutheran high school in the Midwest, attended by pupils whose eyes were open to what was going on around them. Good solid families in the congregations were having dances at their childrens' wedding receptions and at wedding anniversaries. Not a few of these pupils may have attended dances in the Watertown area arranged and attended by Northwestern College students and attended by DMLC girls and even Mequon Seminary students. A popular miss might even keep homecoming and Winter Carnival night open for her NWC boyfriend, for these were the "Prom Nights" for NWC, not as formal, no doubt, but probably a lot more fun.

Then picture these reasonably aware teenagers approaching their own faculty members or principals with a request for a dance at one of their school activities like homecoming or Winter Carnival, and being given an answer similar to that which I described earlier. One could hardly avoid feeling a good deal of pity for those faculty members trying to explain how an unsupervised, unchaperoned dance with ample supplies of alcoholic drinks being served, could be accepted or at least tolerated, while their 7-Up punch and well supervised event was intolerable.

I must confess, to my great astonishment, if not relief, none of these over-worked and brave souls on the faculties of these schools (nor anyone else, for that matter) ever lodged a complaint with the NWC dean's office in the four years I was there. If you're thinking that people within our Synod are reticent to come to NWC's dean's office with complaints, I think I should set you straight.

I doubt that to this day there are many who would like to pursue a course which would come down hard on our NWC or DMLC students for attending or arranging dances on their own. We may not like it or approve of it, but I suspect that any of us who would insist that a tighter rein be held at our schools or that policies be drawn forbidding it, or suggestions be made for policing a stricter policy, would not get very far. Such suggestions would in many people's eyes, I believe, smack of legalism and pietism. Such policies would furthermore be difficult, if not impossible to enforce, for a number of practical reasons, not the least of which would be that no one on the faculties of these schools would have the heart to do it.

I might even suggest that some of you who have sons and daughters old enough to attend one of these affairs, would not likely forbid your children from attending. Warn them, perhaps. Forbid, I doubt it. And if you did, I wonder how you would see that they obeyed. As dean, I was never asked to be the one who would be the agent for enforcing any parent's rule, if any of them had such a rule.

To this scenario could be added other practices in vogue in our society and in our schools today. There is a much more relaxed attitude today regarding dress. The miniskirt era removed a lot of apprehensions about what problems an exposed female knee might cause. The beaches, to say nothing of almost any other public place, have made that which might have raised charges of indecent exposure a generation or two ago, hardly noticed today. Look at athletic events like basketball where the participants are scantily clad. Consider the girl cheerleaders at football and basketball games. Examine magazines, newspapers or television programs. Consider the amount of physical show of affection among people today compared with years ago.

Consider, for instance, a comment by Walther in the paper quoted earlier.

"A father would throw a young man out of the house as an utterly shameless fellow if he should come upon him on any other occasion in such close contact with his daughter."

Or again:

"It would be an unpardonable insult on the part of a gentleman, even if he were a visitor or a friend, if he would throw his arms around a lady in the reception hall, pressing her hand and drawing her so close to him that he could feel the beating of her heart. To be sure, no husband and no father would tolerate such a thing, but would take the fellow by the neck and throw him out as a filthy creature."

Walther adds:

"Through the dance he (the devil) has prevailed even upon Christians to regard such unchaste conduct as something innocent."

Walther is obviously talking about an era when such things were as he says. Would any or most of us today be ready to share his feelings in this generation?

Think also about the automobile which has given our children easy access to undisturbed solitude on country roads and the drive-in theater. Is the dance floor at an area high school all that dangerous by comparison? Are we, in forbidding the latter while condoning the former, opening ourselves to the just charge of straining at gnats and swallowing camels?

It is not surprising to me that over the past two years the practice of not sponsoring dances has been reversed in at least two of our area Lutheran high schools. Nor can we, I believe, accuse Arizona Lutheran Academy of being precipitous in their action, avant garde as they were. ALA had sponsored square dances at their school prior to 1981 with no adverse reaction. When in December of 1980 the pupils in the Junior and Senior class requested that they be allowed to have a dance in connection with their Junior-Senior Farewell, that matter was brought to the faculty, discussed with area pastors and finally, because no area pastor objected, brought to the board of directors and approved.

Furthermore, ALA has rather strict guidelines regarding any on-campus dance, including chaperones, choice of music and regulations forbidding anyone from leaving the dance prior to its finale. The faculty and board of ALA are in agreement that their dances are a valuable, acceptable social activity.

California Lutheran high school faculty likewise went to its board of directors with a request for an on-campus dance. There was not in this instance, I believe, much conferring with area pastors and supporting congregations before agreeing to hold their first dance. I feel this was unfortunate. In fairness, however, they did have a precedent in the practice of ALA, and therefore may not have felt the need as much as ALA did. Besides that, it is much more difficult to confer with the far flung pastors supporting CLMS than it was with the rather compact constituency of ALA.

The faculty and board of ALA was further encouraged to take their action by a paper delivered by Prof. E.C. Fredrich of our Mequon Seminary to a Faculty Conference at NWC in June 1976. While not giving social dancing his stamp of approval, he stated in part that the decision on the matter ought to be left to the presidents and deans of the various schools. He wrote:

"The persons who do the decision making should be, as much as possible, persons close to the scene and in the know. The decision about social dancing among [the area academy] students should be made, subject of course to broad guidelines, at [the area academy] and not at Saginaw or Watertown or New Ulm or any combination of them."

"The [area academy] should deal with the larger issues and the [area academy] dean and president should apply these to the specific situation. That will be the best way to handle social dancing among [the area academy] students." (p.14)

In explaining to me, in a general way, the posture of the school in this matter, both the principal and the chairman of the board of ALA stated that they considered social dancing as they conducted it at the school no worse than previously allowed activities of the school or by the families connected with the school. They spoke of roller skating parties, public displays of affection, the young people's opportunity to go to drive-in movies, the fairly free use of TV and the reasonably free use of cars for dating.

A generation or two ago these practices might have been considered scandalous, and to some among us they may still be. Yet they are commonly practiced among high school pupils today. One can only imagine what Walther and others would think about today's TV, magazines, use of cars, drive-in movies, roller skating parties, styles, uniforms worn by basketball players or cheerleaders, etc., if they were permitted to return to us today. If they were to apply the decorum of their day, by which they roundly condemned dancing, to all the matters we accept as commonplace today, I believe most of us would brand them as legalists and pietists. A careful reading of Walther's essay on dancing would, I believe, lead one to conclude that he would have forbidden everyone of these aforementioned practices with much the same vigor that he opposed dancing.

The problem does not, I maintain, stem from a difference in interpretation of God's Word, but rather in the change of climate in which we live. Most of our wives, if they lived fifty or a hundred years ago and dressed with the styles they do today, would have been roundly condemned, and we with them.

We agree that adultery is a matter of the thoughts as well as the words and deeds. We know and say amen to Paul's encouragement to flee fornication. Those admonitions are as much in place today as they were 1900 years ago. Yet we know, as our Lord told us, that it is from the heart that these things procede, not from every type of social activity which might possibly provoke lust. We are living in 1983, and with the strength God gives us through Word and Sacrament, we must fortify our sin prone hearts against today's world as it is, not as we nostalgically wish it were.

If you or I or a student at one of our high schools cannot go to a football game or basketball game without lusting after cheerleaders or players of the opposite sex, then we shouldn't attend. If we can't go by a girl in shorts without lusting, we whose lives are to be sanctified by God's Word and prayer, we should flee from any possible place where we'd see such dress - like the North Pole, in the summer, at least. If touching another person at a skating party, a social dance or any other place sends a young person home burning with lust, he needs counsel, perhaps to stay far away from such occasions or perhaps to receive the kind of spiritual strength that keeps his or her mind on the fact that both he and the other person are souls bought with Christ's holy blood, and temples where the Holy Spirit wants to dwell.

I wish I could be certain that advocating no social dancing in our area high schools or synodical institutions would be in the best interest of our young brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, or in the best interest of our other fellow Christians. I am not. And if I were, I am not certain that I would want my feelings to govern the decisions of those who administer or set policy for these schools. That dances, dress, and a score of other things can provoke lust in people, I will not argue. We do well to address each issue regularly and do what we can with God's help to encourage chastity and decency and to discourage any behavior which individuals find lust provoking. But to forbid any activity which might be an occasion for prompting a person's lust, or to demand that no such activity ever be held in our schools is, I believe, unreasonable and impossible.

I would like to conclude this excursion into the dangerous waters of a controversial question with the hope that you might receive my paper in the spirit in which it is meant - that recorded by St. Paul in Galatians 5:13-14:

"You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge your sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other."