

Dancing in the Light of the Beloved

The voice of my beloved!

Behold, he comes

Leaping upon the mountains,

Skipping upon the hills.

My beloved is mine, and I am his.

He feeds his flock among the lilies.

Until the day breaks

And the shadows flee away,

Turn, my beloved,

And be like a gazelle

Or a young stag

Upon the mountains of Bether.

Song of Solomon 2:8,16-17 nkjv

My first official dance, with real music and real girls, was in Junior High—eighth grade, to be exact. I can't imagine a more treacherous, high-wire age at which to take such a traumatic first step. It was a school band picnic, you see, an end-of-year party that included swimming, food, and, gulp, a dance.

At the close of that school year in 1965 I was all of thirteen, a brand new teenager in every sense of the word. Every nightmare ever visited upon the pubescent boy was visited upon me: raging hormones and racing corpuscles, quaking demeanor and explosive facial skin. I was scared of my own shadow and I was utterly, debilitatingly, petrified of girls.

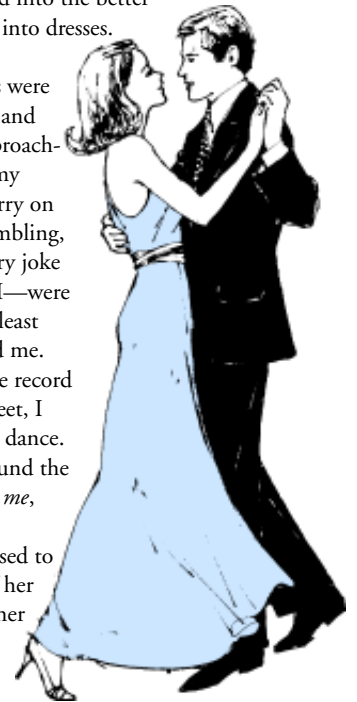
The band picnic was, back in that simpler era of the mid-Sixties in the heartland, a wholesome, well-chaperoned affair. Activities and intentions were reasonably pure. Swimsuits were modest by today's standards, and even the shorts the girls wore reached almost to their knees. And when it came time for the dance, we all changed into the better clothes we had brought—the boys into slacks, and the girls into dresses.

I can't speak for anyone else—especially the older, more sophisticated ninth-graders—but to this young lad the girls were nothing less than fascinating aliens. I was at once drawn to and repelled by them. I couldn't take my eyes off them, but approaching them ignited primal vibrations that threatened to tear my body apart limb from limb. I wanted to talk to them, to carry on witty, urbane conversations, but all that came out were stumbling, stupid stutterings that, I was sure, made me the butt of every joke told behind my back. The girls—even those younger than I—were cool, calm, and *maddeningly* mature. They didn't seem the least affected by the same churning and misgivings that plagued me.

But as the afternoon wore on, and the tunes spun on the record changer switched to a tempo I could master with two left feet, I sucked in my courage and asked Bonnie Smith for the next dance. Bonnie was cute, and popular, and I don't know where I found the nerve to imagine she would ever condescend to dance with *me*, but, to my surprise, she did.

Hands have never been so clammy as those I clumsily used to draw her close. One hand to hers, the other to the small of her back—and I didn't know whether to shout or faint. I held her like a fragile china doll, not daring to breach the hallowed distance between our two shuffling bodies. The title of the song being played is forever gone; the names of anyone else in the room have long since been forgotten; the day of the week, the condition of the weather, and what we ate at our picnic—all now gone from the memory.

But the magical and mysterious moment when my hand dared to make contact with the back of that pretty pastel blue dress and take her small hand in mine, and the delightful surprise that Bonnie smiled at me, and actually seemed to enjoy herself, well, those memories are forever etched into the dusty halls of my now middle-aged brain.



Aspects

Encouraging believers to know
God and His ways,
and to enjoy a more intimate
communion with Him

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The Life-Dance

How uneasily, even fearfully we approach the Life-Dance we are invited to have with the Lord—our holy Groom. There comes that sweet moment when we accept His unconditional love in the form of our eternal salvation. We reach out and take it—often in the abstract: the invisible God’s love extended by grace, words of coaxing proffered often by a preacher. It is so easy that once we grasp that ease, we think that that is all there is. A done deal. *Finis*.

But then we come to realize that instead of taking up residence we’ve only cracked open the door—that though our eternity is secured, there has yet to occur the full-flowering of our salvation. We must step out and take the hand of our new Savior, we must risk our reputation and safety to conduct the rest of our lives in His company.

It is a dance—an exquisite, breathtaking dance with the dearest object of our affection. He is, in every sense of the word, our lover: tender, understanding, intimate. He stands before us with outstretched arms, saying, “Take my hand. Come into my arms, and I will show you things you’ve never dared to dream. Trust me to lead you through every step, every turn that would have been too much for you alone. I love you with all my heart; with all my body I gave myself for you. Come into my arms.”

But we stand there with knees knocking and palms sweating. We’ve never done this before! Can’t we just admire from afar?

“You may,” He says, so full and rich with grace. “But then you’ll never become what I have planned for you. You will never reach that full potential unless you risk it all to come dance with Me.”

So with clammy hands and a lump in our throat, we step forward, take His hand... and begin the Dance.



The Dance Begins... with a Longing

We love because he first loved us. 1 John 4:19

Our invitation to the Dance comes from the cross. Everything begins there. The cross is the navel of all eternity: everything before the cross accelerates toward it—everything after looks back to it as its source.

The Christian’s deep, visceral longing to be with the Lord is based—at least in part—on what Christ did at Calvary. Our love for Him is based on the Spiritual and historical truth that He loved us first, with a love so profound and complete as to cast into shadow any similar expression of man.

Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. John 15:13

The longing is also a part of how we are made; there lies within every person a God-space—a space in which the Lord of heaven will perfectly fit, if only asked to come in. Since the Garden—since the first man created from dust, and the first woman created from him—man has been made with a God-space. In these first two the space came filled, but since their Fall, man and woman have been made with it vacant. Every person is made with the hunger, but only some fill it with its intended guest.

Five years after that junior high dance in the cafeteria, I was on the other side of the world, spending the last six months before my wedding on a ship off the coast of Vietnam. Not since Odysseus pined for Penelope has a sailor longed so for his love. In the cold ugliness of life with men on a small steel prison, thoughts of my intended kept me grounded; lost in the insanity of

Jesus, the very thought of Thee

With sweetness fills my breast;

But sweeter far Thy face to see,

And in Thy presence rest.

Nor voice can sing, nor heart can frame,

Nor can the memory find

A sweeter sound than Thy blest name,

O Saviour of mankind!

*O Hope of every contrite heart,
O Joy of all the meek,
To those who fall, how kind Thou art!
How good to those who seek!

But what to those who find? Ah! this
Nor tongue nor pen can show,
The love of Jesus, what it is
None but His loved ones know.*

Bernard of Clairvaux

war, she remained my beacon of hope. Her letters were my lifeline, her picture my escape. Just so, our longing for the Savior keeps us rooted in hope. Our thoughts of Him remind us of a better place. In the ugliness of life among the lost, in the cold brutality of this earthward sink, our thoughts of the Lord Jesus hold our sanity like a sturdy raft for a shipwrecked sailor. The world may not see it; those foundering in the depths may imagine us grasping at air. But the believer knows his lifeline is sure, and tied fast to a rock.

Our longing to spend time with the Lord, our thoughts of His beauty and grace, may be only a beginning, but they sustain us through those times when we are swirling through the sucking whirlpool of life's tempest. Stuck for awhile upon this temporal plane, the longing for our Groom is a ready reminder that we are no longer of this place. The longing is the steady hum emanating from our God-space, now inhabited by the Lord Himself.

*I thought about the former days,
the years of long ago;
I remembered my songs in the night.
My heart mused and my spirit inquired:
"Will the Lord reject forever?
Will he never show his favor again?
Has his unfailling love vanished forever?
Has his promise failed for all time?
Has God forgotten to be merciful?
Has he in anger withheld his compassion?" Selah
Then I thought, "To this I will appeal:
the years of the right hand of the Most High."
I will remember the deeds of the LORD;
yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.
I will meditate on all your works
and consider all your mighty deeds.
Your ways, O God, are holy.
What god is so great as our God?
Psalm 77:5-13*

Quiet Intimacies

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. Galatians 2:20

There is a human longing sweet in itself—sufficient in itself to overshadow the object of its desire. There is a longing that can be superior to that for which it longs. But the intense longing that we experience in anticipation of the Lord must be satisfied by the object of its desire. The longing is sweet; it energizes our desire for actual contact. But if that contact never comes, we disrupt the flow of holy communion for which we have been designed.

Before we know the Lord, the distant echo from our empty God-space coaxes us only toward the longing—but the longing is childish, unformed, erratic. We pursue the frivolous, the fad, the inane—things as empty as the space we hope they will fill. They satisfy, at best, only for a while, and, at worst, distract us from the Truth shaped perfectly to fill our cavernous longing.

Once we discover that truth, once Christ is in residence, filling the vacancy left for Him, the longing becomes only a pleasant prelude to the more substantial experience of actually living with Him.

A wonderful Saviour is Jesus my Lord,

A wonderful Saviour to me;

He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock,

Where rivers of pleasure I see.

First Touch

The very idea of being baptized caused in me an almost paralyzing fear. At the tender age of eight I had accepted Christ; now nine years old, and on the list of those to be baptized the following Sunday evening, I was petrified at the prospect.

The baptismal in the old Baptist Temple of Marshalltown, Iowa, was a massive oak-paneled affair—rounded and jutting out into the congregation. None of this high and lofty, perched above the choir loft business; no, this one was right down there by the first row, next to the piano. It was huge—especially to a nine-year-old. A broad body of water in which one practically had to swim to reach the pastor. And hence the rub.

I couldn't swim. I wouldn't even put my head under water. (Oh Lord, why couldn't I have been born Episcopalian?!)

The instructions had been to wear a white shirt and bring a white handkerchief—which would be placed over the nose at the crucial moment. I searched out the widest, fattest white handkerchief I could lay my hands on. I rehearsed the moment, running it over and over in my head: *Let's see, I fold my arms across my chest. Pastor will grab my wrist. With my other hand I forcefully wrap this wad of cotton over my nose, hermetically sealing it against the remotest possibility of one drop of water getting in.*

I was certain I would drown. I was certain the pastor would haul me up out of the water sputtering and gasping and I would be publicly humiliated before the entire congregation—including my girlfriend, who would be seated just inches away on that front pew. Talk about being persecuted for your faith!

I stepped into those waters with fear and trepidation. Up the few wooden steps, down into the water, turn the corner and part the heavy curtain—everybody's staring at me!—reach for the pastor's arm before I slip and fall helplessly beneath the waves. He asks me a question, to which I answer in the affirmative. Do I have a verse I would like to recite? I think so; I mean, I did just a minute ago.

My mind is a blur, hopelessly focused on the burning question: Will I survive this ordeal? Suddenly the Trinity is being pronounced, the pastor's hand is up over my head, I'm sinking, I'm sinking! Quick, the handkerchief! I squeeze my eyes closed; I shove the folded cloth against my face, praying I haven't left a tiny portal for water to seep through and do me in.

Before my life can pass before me in this watery grave, I'm up and out. My mom is dabbing at her eyes, my dad is beaming, and my girlfriend is grinning at me. Praise be! I haven't humiliated myself after all.

When I came up out of that baptismal pool, there was only rejoicing. All memory of the procedural agonies was gone; any discomfort or embarrassment was forgotten. In a moment, rapture replaced dread. In a moment, I felt cleaner than I had ever felt after the longest bath. Suddenly I understood: Though my sins were forgiven when I had accepted Christ as my Savior, I had just experienced (and demonstrated) in a tangible way that all of my sins had now been thoroughly washed away. To those who had witnessed the moment, I was now a new person. With Jesus, my Savior, I had passed through the waters of His baptism into a new life.

Most believers could tell a similar story from the earliest moments of their walk with Christ. Those early days are energized by a pristine excitement not unlike the earliest days with our mate. And as it is with two lovers who have invested themselves fully in each other's lives, the sweet and powerful intimacies of first contact need never leave our steady communion with the Lord. Oh, they may, but if they do, it will be our doing, for Jesus never tires of spending time with us. He never becomes bored with the process of investing more of His life into ours.

Once we move past the longing, to make contact with Him, the Dance truly begins. Once we entrust ourselves to His arms, Christ then becomes, for the first time in our lives, truly *Lord*.

A wonderful Saviour is Jesus my Lord,

He taketh my burden away;

He holdeth me up, and I shall not be moved,

He giveth me strength as my day.

With numberless blessings each moment He crowns,

And, filled with His fullness divine,

I sing in my rapture, oh, glory to God

For such a Redeemer as mine!

When clothed in His brightness, transported I rise

To meet Him in clouds of the sky,

His perfect salvation, His wonderful love,

I'll shout with the millions on high.

He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock

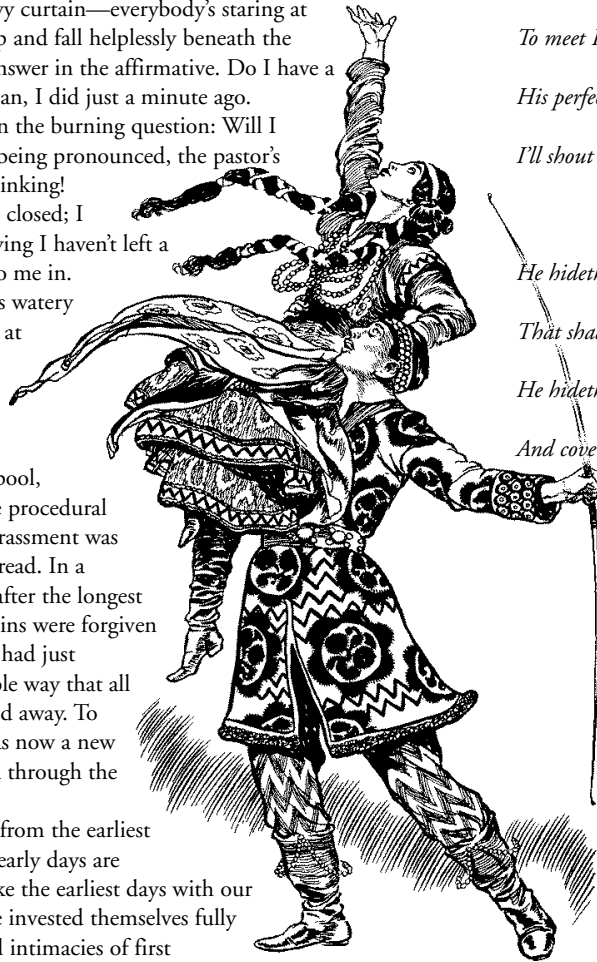
That shadows a dry, thirsty land;

He hideth my life in the depths of His love,

And covers me there with His hand,

And covers me there with His hand.

Fanny J. Crosby



Does Jesus Care?

*Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.
Why do you hide your face
and forget our misery and oppression?
We are brought down to the dust;
our bodies cling to the ground.
Rise up and help us;
redeem us because of your unfailing love.
Psalm 44:23-26*

Jn every relationship there comes a moment of doubt. It may come early on, when so much remains unknown about the other, or it may come much later, when passion has chilled, or a rival contends for the other's heart.

The Christian life has been in existence for almost 2,000 years. In that long span of time it has become a well-oiled, brightly polished industry, replete with marketing departments, salesmen, highly-paid CEOs, accountants, and customer service representatives. Travel the roads of the US—especially in the deep South—and every other number on the radio dial will present a different flavor of Gospel message; flip through the television channels on a Sunday morning in any part of the country and the viewer will see everything from evangelicalism and Pentecostalism to perfectionism, determinism and Catholicism. Within each formal denomination there are subgroups that apply a slightly different twist on the beliefs of the larger group; outside of the denominations are the more radical sects and cults that spring up around the beliefs and teachings of, usually, an individual.

Even within the more established, traditional divisions, such as Methodists, Baptists, Catholics, or Lutherans, one will hear leaders or teachers that press specific priorities that define their own small niche. One preacher may emphasize the love and grace of God, while another may emphasize obedience to His commandments; one may push missions and evangelism, while someone else will push fellowship within the Body; one may preach exclusively from the New Testament, while another preaches only from the red-lettered words of Jesus.

With so many different voices preaching so many different flavors of Christ, how is a believer to know the one that is true? And without that knowledge, how are we to know what to expect from Him?

This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ. 1 Cor. 2:13-16



Does Jesus care when my heart is pained

Too deeply for mirth and song;

As the burdens press, and the cares distress,

And the way grows weary and long?

Does Jesus care when my way is dark

With a nameless dread and fear?

As the daylight fades into deep night shades,

Does He care enough to be near?

Does Jesus care when I've tried and failed

To resist some temptation strong;

When for my deep grief I find no relief,

Though my tears flow all the night long?

We really do not live in a spiritual age. The history of man includes epochs in which God—or at least a pantheon of gods—has played a more integral role in the conduct of civilizations—but this is not one of them. We live in an age of self-determination, where human problems are solved with human solutions. God, for many people, has become an inconvenient appendage to the glories of civilized society—an ancient old man hovering impotently over the vast accomplishments of modern man. We pull out God, like a dust-covered old doll from the back of the closet, to offer Him uneasy homage on His special occasions: at Christmas we brighten our faces to celebrate Christ's birth; at Easter we look sad and remember His suffering and death.

So in an age where the unseen has become unimportant, we are called—oddly, it would seem—to have a “personal relationship” with Jesus Christ, the Son of God. At a time when man himself has become the preeminent god, we are told to embrace as a brother and Lord the unseen Son of an invisible God. And when He fails to live up to the behavior we’ve been told to expect, where do we turn? To which voice do we listen for the answers to our lingering doubt?

Whenever I have a misunderstanding with my wife of twenty-nine years, it doesn’t occur to me to consult with her mother or father, or the next-door neighbor, or the village innkeeper. I don’t ask the opinion of her best friend or the local postmaster. No, when she has somehow failed to live up to my expectations, I go directly to her. I ask, then listen to her answer, directly from the source.

And whenever I have a misunderstanding with Jesus, it doesn’t occur to me to turn on the radio to seek out a voice, or turn on the television to find a preacher to watch. I don’t consult the annals of the various conventions to determine a denomination’s official stance on the subject. No, when Jesus has failed to live up to my expectations of His behavior, I go directly to Him. I ask, then listen to His answer, directly from the source.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Hebrews 4:14-16

It is *His* Dance, you see; Jesus is leading. When there is a misstep, *He* is the one who will get me back in step. When I trip over my two left feet, Jesus is the one who picks me up, supports me in His strong arms, and whispers encouragement into my ear. Does He care that I have questions and doubt? Oh, yes, He does. And in the gentle touch of His embrace through prayer, and through the timeless counsel of His words in Scripture, Jesus graciously answers every one of my questions, every doubt that springs from my having to live in an alien land.

If Christianity was something we were making up, of course we could make it easier. But it is not. We cannot compete, in simplicity, with people who are inventing religions. How could we? We are dealing with Fact. Of course anyone can be simple if he has no facts to bother about.
C.S. Lewis

Does Jesus care when I've said "good-bye"

To the dearest on earth to me,

And my sad heart aches till it nearly breaks—

Is it aught to Him? Does He see?

O yes, He cares; I know He cares,

His heart is touched with my grief;

When the days are weary, the long nights dreary,

I know my Saviour cares.

Frank E. Graeff

The Joy of His Embrace

*Your love, O LORD, reaches to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the skies.
Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,
your justice like the great deep.
O LORD, you preserve both man and beast.
How priceless is your unfailing love!
Both high and low among men
find refuge in the shadow of your wings.
They feast on the abundance of your house;
you give them drink from your river of delights.
For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.
Psalm 36:5-9*

Praise Him! praise Him! Jesus, our blessed Redeemer!

Sing, O Earth, His wonderful love proclaim!

Hail Him! hail Him! highest archangels in glory;

Strength and honor give to His holy name!

Like a shepherd Jesus will guard His children,

In His arms He carries them all day long:

Praise Him! praise Him! tell of His excellent greatness;

Praise Him! praise Him! ever in joyful song!

Praise Him! praise Him! Jesus, our blessed Redeemer!

For our sins He suffered and bled and died;

He our Rock, our hope of eternal salvation,

Hail Him! hail Him! Jesus the crucified.

Sound His praises! Jesus who bore our sorrows;

Love unbounded, wonderful, deep and strong:

Praise Him! praise Him! tell of His excellent greatness;

Praise Him! praise Him! ever in joyful song!

Praise Him! praise Him! Jesus, our blessed Redeemer!

Heavenly portals loud with hosannas ring!

Jesus, Saviour, reigneth forever and ever;

Crown Him! crown Him! Prophet and Priest and King!

Christ is coming! over the world victorious,

Power and glory unto the Lord belong:

Praise Him! praise Him! tell of His excellent greatness;

Praise Him! praise Him! ever in joyful song!

Fanny J. Crosby

The Dance begins at the cross, and it is there that our love is periodically renewed. But beyond this, our Life-Dance with Christ is conducted in the mundane normalcy of everyday life. The Dance is played out amidst business meetings, changing diapers, mowing the lawn, shoveling snow, mending children's clothing, taking out the garbage, working the third shift, and in the marriage bed. The Dance is a tapestry of Spiritual love woven intricately throughout the highs and lows, the disappointments and ecstasies of the believer's life.

The Dance is a glorious ascent from the leaden soil of earth into the gravity-defying arms of Jesus. It is not escapism, but a re-energizing of truth in a Maelstrom of lies; it is a raft of peace in a churning sea of discontent. For the Christian, eternal life with God and the present indwelling of the Holy Spirit are automatic; the Dance with Christ, however, is optional.

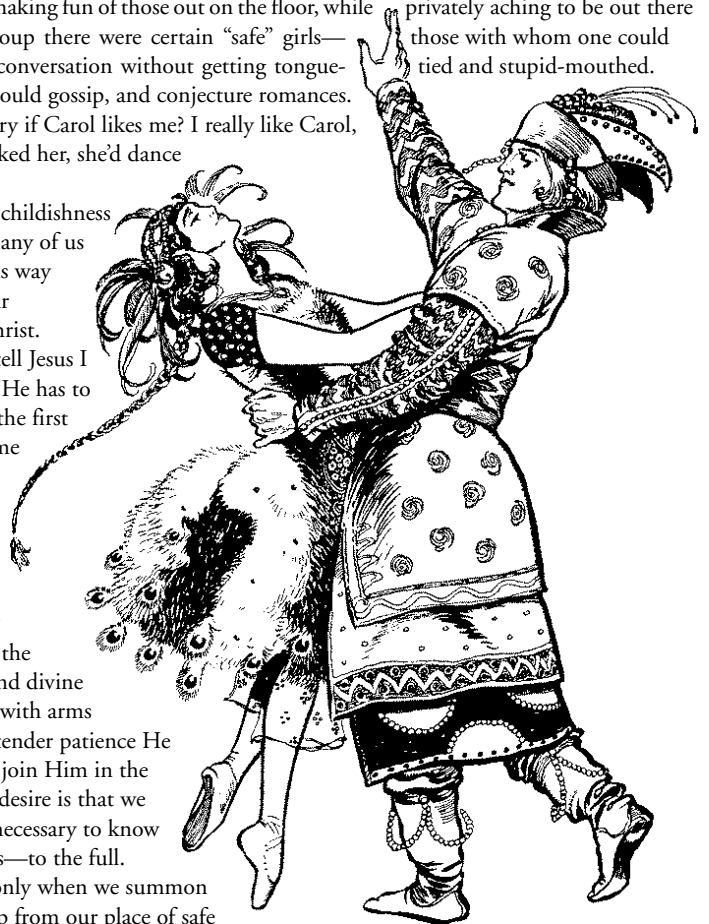
Salvation by grace—in the vernacular of the church, “accepting Christ”—is not the ultimate destination, but only the portal through which we may enter the Dance. Oh, that salvation is secure either way, but to realize the full and rewarding riches of a *relationship* with Christ, one must join the Dance.

The Body of Christ is filled with wallflowers. Every congregation or group of believers includes those who may have shown up at the school cafeteria for the event, but while others spin about with their partner, they have remained huddled on folding chairs along the outside wall. For reasons known only to them, they have decided to sit out the Dance, to remain spectators only of the One they claim to love. But those more courageous—those willing to step into the Dance and experience all the free-flowing riches of life in Christ—these are the brave souls who will realize everything He has to offer.

In my high school there was the venerable institution of the after-game dance: after every home football and basketball game the students retired to the school cafeteria to dance to the latest 45s or a home-grown band. My buddies and I spent most of those Friday nights huddled in cynical misery—making fun of those out on the floor, while privately aching to be out there ourselves. In our group there were certain “safe” girls—those with whom one could actually carry on a conversation without getting tongue-tied and stupid-mouthed. With these few we could gossip, and conjecture romances. “Would you ask Mary if Carol likes me? I really like Carol, and maybe if you asked her, she’d dance with me.”

We wince at the childishness of those days, but many of us are still behaving this way when it comes to our relationship with Christ. “Pastor, would you tell Jesus I really like Him, but He has to be the one to make the first move. He can find me sitting here in this comfortable back pew.”

Jesus Christ, the one who has already expressed toward us the entirety of human and divine love, stands waiting with arms outstretched. With tender patience He invites each of us to join Him in the Dance. His deepest desire is that we will do whatever is necessary to know Him—and ourselves—to the full. This we will know only when we summon the courage to get up from our place of safe ignorance, to throw off the leaden, earth-bound weights that deaden our feet, and with holy abandon enter into His embrace... *in the Dance!*



Aspects

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