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A Grounded Theory Study Of Contemporary Christian Attitudes To Theatre

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A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES TO THEATRE

by

KATHLEEN J. BRANDON

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

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for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

2013

MAJOR: THEATRE

Approved By:

Advisor

Date

________________________________________

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________________________________________
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my parents, who did not get to attend college but highly valued education and enabled me to attend undergraduate and graduate universities. Completion of this project would not have been possible without their continued love, support, and encouragement.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to first thank Bill and JoAnn Brandon for their unwavering support in every way for me and this project. Their love, patience, and willingness to share the burden as I went through this process were priceless.

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And finally, I need to acknowledge and thank God for sustaining me through this difficult and stressful project. Truly, this could not have been completed without the One in whom all things are possible. I am grateful for the friends He sent to encourage me at crucial times, and the gifts of grace placed along the way to renew my mind and strength.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the history of theatre, including its popularity or prohibition in various cultures at numerous times. The intersection of theatre and Christianity reflects this dialectic throughout history. At certain times such as the medieval era, Christian leaders expressed consent or outright enthusiasm for theatre. Some criticisms of theatre are non-religious in nature, such as the edict citing socio-political reasons for closing theatres in London in 1642, but much opposition has come from Protestant Christians. This is interesting because truth telling is at the core of both Christianity and theatre. Theatre reflects the truths of the society in which it is embedded, and Christianity is concerned with getting people to peel away pretenses and face themselves and their world to encounter God as the source of all truth. And both groups are concerned with “deep questions about human existence” (Wuthnow 18). It seems these two camps would work together well. Christianity and theatre share the belief that theatrical performance has a powerful effect on an audience. Although both groups seem to seek the same goal, using truth telling to challenge people to be better, there often exists antagonism between Christianity and theatre in pursuit of this goal.

Since Protestants make up more than half of the American population, it seems logical that theatre practitioners would want to court this potential audience. But they do not. People interested in theatre often lament the low attendance at shows they see or produce. And several reports confirm that the number of people attending live theatre in America has in fact been declining for many years. In regard to Protestants specifically, attendance numbers for theatre do not exist. However, according to a recent survey done by Americans for the Arts, there are still about forty-five million Americans who see live

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1 See Wiseman’s book, Drama and Politics in the English Civil War for a full investigation of these socio-political reasons.
2 Taken from the recent Gallup report dated December 24, 2012.
3 See Americans for the Arts’ 2012 Report, and the 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts and All America’s a Stage from The National Endowment for the Arts for detailed breakdowns of the growth and decline rates of theatres and attendance in America since 1990.
theatre each year in this country. Since a large number of people continue to support this art form, it would be beneficial for Christians and others who work in theatre to find out if Protestants are among those going to theatre or if not, why not.

**Background for the Study**

As evidenced in the following chapters, the tension between Christianity and theatre has caused considerable confusion and alienation for Protestants who attend or work in theatre. Often the historical literature about this topic, especially critical essays, has been written by church leaders or scholars. What church leaders have written has been predominately negative. Little historical evidence exists from Protestant laity that expresses their views about theatre. One wonders whether or not leaders’ viewpoints accurately reflect those of their congregants. From warnings given in historical writings—especially during the beginning of Christianity in the Roman era—we surmise the populace attended theatre, but that is all. We do not have evidence explaining what the general (or Christian) populace thought about theatre or their leaders’ warnings against it during the Greek, Roman, Medieval, Renaissance, and eighteenth-to-twentieth century American eras. Therefore, this study seeks to provide a more complete assessment of Protestant attitudes toward theatre by including a sampling of opinions from laymen.

Literature in the last thirty years about the intersection of Christianity and theatre has been mostly educational (how to run a church drama program), or defensive (Christian artists justifying their chosen profession), and usually written by church leaders or Christian artists. A notable exception is scholar Jonas Barish’s seminal study, published in 1981, *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice*. In this book, Barish describes anti-theatrical prejudice coming specifically from Protestants beginning in the latter part of the sixteenth century (Barish 83). Barish focuses on documenting and commenting on political and religious antagonism toward theatre from ancient Greece to the late 1970s. He admits in his introduction that he does not seek to explain what he labels as anti-theatrical prejudice, though he believes it exists (Barish 3). Due to persistent disapproval of theatre in different cultures and eras, Barish suggests there is “a permanent kernel of distrust” (4). This is where my study begins. I wanted to know what contemporary
Protestants believe about theatre and, if anti-theatrical prejudice does exist among them, to learn why it does and where that kernel of distrust originates. I wonder if past beliefs have changed in our contemporary society. Do old ways of thinking or prejudices still hold true today?

**Definitions of Terms**

The topic and questions of this study have evolved from conversations over the years with fellow Christians in regards to theatre. I myself became a Christian when I was five years old and have been one for forty years now. For clarification, when I refer to Christians, I specifically mean Protestant Christians; this does not include Catholics, Mormons, Orthodox, or other non-Protestant Christians. These groups, sometimes labeled Christian, are excluded here because, unlike Protestants, they have tended to be more supportive about the role of theatre in society. For clarification: “Essentially, Protestantism is characterised by emphasis on the Bible as the sole source of infallible truth and the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone. In addition, Protestants have traditionally encouraged private interpretation of the Bible by individuals rather than relying on the interpretation of the church” (Emberson, protestant.christianityinview.com). As is discussed in Chapter 2, some of the criticism and variance of opinion about theatre within Protestantism arises from this practice of private biblical interpretation.

For the purposes of this study, “Protestant Christians” are defined as those who (a) self-identify as such, (b) believe Jesus Christ is God's Son, His only incarnation (both fully divine and fully human), and (c) practice tenets of faith recognized by the majority of other followers of the first-century Jewish rabbi Jesus of Nazareth. Practices of Protestants include: “regular corporate worship; reference to the Bible as normative for religious belief and practice; private and corporate prayer; celebration of religious rituals” (Senkbeil, *Faith* 9). In addition, “Most formal Christian denominations subscribe to the Apostles’ Creed [see Appendix A], which dates to the third century CE; of the many churches and denominations that do not, most express beliefs very similar to the Creed”(9). The use of “contemporary” or “modern-day” Christians refers to Protestants living currently in the twenty-first century. For clarification, unless in a
quote from another source, when I refer to theatre as an entity or subject it will be spelled with an “re” but when referring to a building where theatre is performed, it will be spelled “er.”

**Rationale for this Study**

In conversations with Protestants, I have perceived uneasiness about the moral standing of theatre, lack of consideration of theatre as a serious art form, and rejection of theatre as a career path or entertainment option for committed Christians. Being a Christian who works in theatre, this intrigued and somewhat mystified me. The rationale for this study started with this intrigue, and grew from the realization that although it seems American Christian churches have been increasingly using theatrical skits in their services in the last forty years (Shores 1, Senkbeil, *Why 5*), the most recent examination of Christian attitudes about theatre was published over thirty years ago. This study is of personal interest to me and significant for the Christian community at large. Perhaps Christians do not know what to think about theatre or, as one of my students told me in September 2009, they were taught that “theatre is evil.” Does this represent Christians at large?

In my conversations with Christians over the years, I have found that most do not attend theatre. I encourage them to see a play and sometimes I recommend plays to them in their area. I often hear back from these people that they indeed went to a play, enjoyed it, and plan to attend theatre more in the future. This makes me wonder why they did not seek it out on their own, as they do with other entertainment choices. I also hear this from Christian college students after I take them to a play, which is a requirement for an introductory theatre class I teach. I find all of this significant and worth investigating because I believe theatre is a powerful medium and that Christians are overlooking something important. Christians are a part of American culture, and the essence of theatre is to reflect and inform its culture. Since theatre is a reflection of society and Christians do not seem to be going to theatre, can the reason be because they do not see themselves represented in it? The root of the problem question why Christians are not going to the theatre needs to be uncovered and addressed so that they can more fully participate in their own culture.
In addition to the previous explanations of the need for this particular study there appears to be a shift in the last twenty years in the belief of many Christians about involvement in culture and the arts (Crouch 9). Rather than abandon the arts as previous generations of Christians have done, more Christians have been training for and entering artistic fields. Perhaps Protestants have new ideas about how theatre and Christianity should intersect. Does the large amount of literature produced in the late twentieth century about this subject testify to Protestants accepting theatre as a legitimate career path or does it signify some other cultural shift? Does this change in belief mean that twenty-first century Protestants are embracing theatre in general?

Only recently has the use of drama and other types of performance within the main church service grown radically in many Christian churches. No longer is drama relegated to children’s or high school ministries. Theatre is especially important for contemporary Christians because the old ways of communicating to a community, such as traditional sermons, do not affect or attract people as they have in the past. In a visually-oriented culture, visual expressions of words may be stronger than the words themselves. In this culture of fragmentation, sound bites, and disconnection, theatre explores the complexity of being human and uses stories to express morality and choices, which appeals to Christians and non-Christians alike. Robert Wuthnow reports that drama is one of the art forms that play “a powerful role in many Americans’ spiritual journeys” (Wuthnow xiv). Is the use of theatre and theatrical devices in church services welcomed by attendees or just tolerated? It seems worthwhile to talk to Protestants about what they think about drama being used in church, and for that reason it has been included in this study.

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4 See Chapter 2
6 This is a key component of Robert Wuthnow’s book, and was stated by pastors and students in this study. Also see Jeremy Begbie’s book for a discussion on this topic.
Significance of the Study

For the past thirty years there have been no published studies that examine what Protestants think about theatre. Even the seminal work of Barish did not include voices of everyday Christians; it was a scholarly discussion of anti-theatrical prejudice and sometimes a defense of accusations made against theatre and actors. Scholarly studies in previous years from Protestants about theatre focus on: Christian-run theaters (Senkbeil, *Faith* passim), theatre as cultural performance (Trotter, *Holy Acts* passim), and theatre as a source of entertainment-education for communities (Shores, *Christian Theatre* passim). Similar to Barish’s book, these studies discuss the merits of theatre, perhaps because the authors and participants of the studies work in theatre. But the voices of the general Protestant community have not been sought after or acknowledged. Since much negativity has come from Protestants about theatre throughout the centuries, this investigation is a good way to find out where Protestants stand today and discover if problems still remain. The study is effective in that it is a qualitative approach that utilizes data taken directly from Protestants about the subject of theatre.

Given that Protestants make up 52% of the American population\(^7\) and yet only 5% of all Americans attend theatre,\(^8\) an investigation as to why there exists such a considerable disparity seems in order. It is curious that although Protestants make up such a large percentage of the American population, neither of the major research organizations I contacted (Gallup and Barna Research) have done surveys targeting this large group about their entertainment preferences, including theatre-going habits. This study’s findings are thus relevant, providing significant feedback to address this discrepancy.

In reference to the low percentage of Americans that attend theatre, it is not just professional theatre attendance that is low. In regard to non-profit theatres in America, The National Endowment for

\(^7\) This Gallup statistic is current, dated December 24, 2012, and is about the same as it was in 2011. See the study entitled “In U.S., 77% Identify as Christian.” Unlike my study, they include other groups besides Protestants in their definition of Christian; hence the 77% in the title. In the chart breakdown they list Protestants as making up 52% of the U.S. population.

\(^8\) From the Gallup report dated January 10, 2012 which polled Americans, ages 18 – 65+, about their activity preferences.
the Arts reported attendance for plays and musicals during 1990 – 2005 has “steadily deteriorated” (National Endowment, All America’s Preface). In 2010, Americans for the Arts also reported that overall, live theatre attendance in the U.S. has continued to decline.\(^9\) This study can help theatre practitioners uncover reasons why Americans may not be supporting theatre, especially Protestants who make up a large percentage of the population.

This study is significant, as well, with regard to the fact that there are more and more Christians working in theatre and the arts in general today than in previous generations.\(^10\) This seems noteworthy for the Protestant community. Peter Senkbeil’s study completed in 1995, Faith in Theatre,\(^11\) looks at several established Christian-run, non-profit theaters across America that employ Christian theatre practitioners full-time. And a study by The National Endowment for the Arts found that secular non-profit theatres doubled in America from 1990 – 2005 (National Endowment for the Arts 2). Is the growth in Protestants working in theatre simply due to increased outlets or opportunities for work? Could this growth indicate a shift in the Protestant community toward accepting theatre artists? Is there still an anti-theatrical prejudice that these Christian artists encounter? If so, do they just choose to live within that tension? Obtaining a more informed understanding concerning the growth of Protestants working in theatre may prove worthwhile to both the Christian and non-Christian communities at large. For the non-Christian community, from a business standpoint, it seems beneficial to discover what is keeping Protestants away and consider making changes to attract this large segment of the American populace.

Professor Robert Wuthnow conducted a large study from 1998-2002 about the relationship between spirituality and the arts in which many Christians were included. He found that there is a growing interest among Protestants to see their churches encourage artistic talents of their members,

\(^10\) See Senkbeil’s article and dissertation for a detailed account.
\(^11\) The full title of Senkbeil’s study is Faith in Theatre: Professional Theatres Run by Christians in the United States and Canada and Their Strategies for Faith-Art Integration.
about 77% of those surveyed (Wuthnow 147). Yet only about 30% of those same people have chosen to participate in some kind of artistic event within a year (Wuthnow 62). Why would such a high percentage of Protestants encourage people in the arts yet not patronize them? At the same time, an average of 25% (30% Evangelical/Fundamentalist, 19% Mainline Protestants) of the same group surveyed believe artists dishonor God, and an average of 57% (64% Evangelical/Fundamentalist, 51% of Mainline Protestants) do not believe the arts are very important (Wuthnow 138, 220). However, 62% of the same group believes art can deepen spirituality, and 51% agree that a beautiful painting is pleasing to God (Wuthnow 92). With all these seemingly contradictory statistics, what are Protestants thinking when it comes to art and more specifically, theatre?

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to discover and explore what contemporary Protestants think about theatre, to determine if an anti-theatrical prejudice exists within them, and, if it does, what the causes and outcomes are. Turning these ideas into practical questions that participants in the study could grapple with and respond to, I developed three main research questions:

RQ1: What are Protestant Christians’ attitudes and beliefs about theatre?

RQ2: If Christians are not attending theatre, why not?

RQ3: What is the source of their attitudes and beliefs?

More specific questions related to these three main areas were also developed and answered in interviews. See Appendix B for the list of questions utilized.

**Research Methodology**

This study explores current thinking of American Protestants about theatre. It takes the form of a qualitative social science analysis of twenty-nine Christians, with supporting information drawn from historical and archival research. Since the purpose of this study is to discover what Protestants think and
feel about theatre, pre-determined surveys or questionnaires would not be sufficient. Members of the Protestant Christian community needed to have the freedom to discuss and explore their perspectives about theatre. The qualitative method called Grounded Theory served the needs of this study well. Grounded theory allows a researcher to move beyond just describing a phenomenon and enter into the “why” of people’s opinions (Strauss and Corbin 19), which directly relates to my three main research questions.

As grounded theory encourages, I initially researched relevant literature regarding Protestant Christianity and theatre. This involved traditional library, Internet, and non-traditional cultural research, the results of which are presented in Chapters 2 - 4. This helped me develop a theoretical sensitivity to the ideas and arguments Protestants have historically held about theatre. From this initial framework, I developed interview questions. Having also researched best interviewing practices, I incorporated many open-ended questions in my interview questions, allowing for more in-depth exploration of the topic. This resulted in the sought-after thick description and rich data that qualitative studies can generate.

Analysis of interview data began right after the first interview. Emerging ideas were discovered through analysis of the first few respondents, which affected and directed subsequent interviews. Researcher memos were written and used as analytic aids in the research process, as grounded theory recommends. Emergent categories and themes were tested until saturation was achieved, thus reducing researcher bias and ensuring validation of results. The core category entitled “reticent appreciation” was identified and used to create a substantive theory, which was the desired result of this method.

Over the course of several months, I conducted twenty-nine interviews in Orange, Los Angeles, and San Diego counties in Southern California. Participants self-identified as Protestants and were part of one of three groups: students, church leaders, or theatre practitioners. A cross-reference sample of age, occupation, and gender was intentionally sought to strengthen the validity of my study. The first group consisted of ten college students recruited from a Protestant Christian university in Southern California.
The second group was made up of ten adults who were leaders in a variety of positions and at a variety of Protestant churches in Southern California. This group included lead pastors, worship leaders, elders, teaching pastors, and ministry pastors with varying years of service. The third group included seven Protestant theatre practitioners (actors, directors, producers, and managers) from a professional Christian theatre group and two professional directors and scholars who are Protestants. Each interview lasted about an hour or longer, and was conducted face-to-face. Only a few follow-up questions were required for clarification from some participants and these were conducted via email.

**Overview of the Study**

The main body of this study provides a context for the exploration of current attitudes and beliefs held by modern-day Protestants about theatre. Each successive chapter progressively narrows the focus of discussion: Chapters 2 - 4 review pertinent literature in the field of Christianity and theatre, Chapter 5 describes the research method used to investigate current Protestants’ views about theatre, Chapter 6 details what those views are in terms of results of the study, and Chapter 7 connects the results to historical areas of criticism and summarizes the beliefs and attitudes of today’s Protestants to theatre.

Chapters 2 - 4 examine historical, academic, and cultural literature that addresses the relationship between Christianity and theatre. Although Plato pre-dates the beginning of Christianity, many arguments from Protestants reflect his writings. Therefore this literature survey starts with Platonic ideas with regard to theatre and continues chronologically with Protestant critiques of the art form through the early twenty-first century. Historical and contemporary arguments for and against theatre are discussed; earlier studies relevant to my topic are considered; and anti-theatrical prejudice is investigated. These chapters are expansive and chronological because it is necessary to provide a context for understanding the ongoing debate about the intersection of Christianity and theatre. The chapters do not reference all the historical literature or debates about theatre, only that which is relevant to the topic of this study. These chapters reveal that some concerns of Protestants have remained the same throughout history, while others no longer exist, having been replaced by newer contentions.
Chapter 5 provides the justification for doing a qualitative study, and explains the grounded theory method chosen for the study. This chapter describes the process and phases required for conducting a solid grounded theory study, and for obtaining the ultimate goal of discovering a substantive theory. This chapter also addresses: the rationale for the three groups desired for the study, how participants were recruited for the study, and how interviews were prepared for and conducted.

Chapter 6 explicates the procedures followed in this grounded theory study, the questions and responses from participants, and the findings from the investigation. As much as possible, I employed actual responses from participants—oftentimes unedited—to preserve their authenticity. This chapter recounts how each phase of grounded theory was employed to discover categories, compare categories, recognize and confirm emerging themes, reach saturation, and solidify a substantive theory. A chart showing the categories and results of the study is included in this chapter. Also, the results of my study are compared with previous viewpoints from Christians about theatre. All the charts presented in the study are pictorial illustrations that reflect the degree of concern—major or minor—at the time specified on the chart.

Chapter 7 discusses the results of this study. The rationale for the study is reiterated to remind the reader why the study was originally conceived, and see if the results correspond with the rationale behind it. Researcher background and potential biases are considered here. Conclusions are presented, along with suggestions for further study in this field.

By presenting these chapters in this way, I seek to provide a clear path showing Protestants’ past outlooks on theatre, their present perspectives, and how those interconnect or differ. This project is not another attempt to justify theatre to the Christian community. It is an attempt to find out the truth of what Protestants really think and feel today about the timeless art of theatre. It seems the intersection of these two worlds would dovetail smoothly. Both groups are passionate and committed to helping people in their struggle to understand their humanity and improve the state of mankind. Unfortunately, this intersection
is complex and has sometimes caused hurts, frustrations, and confusion on both sides. I have lived in both worlds for many years, and have experienced this tension from both sides. The desire to conduct this study came from consistent misunderstanding and resentment I have seen from both groups. Perhaps honest answers from this study will provide a better understanding that can be used to help bridge the gap that exists between these two worlds.
CHAPTER 2 - ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST THEATRE, GREEK THROUGH MEDIEVAL ERAS

Introduction

The literature concerning Christianity is extensive, as is literature chronicling historical developments of theatre. Most of the Christian literature about theatre has been written by those in the Christian community and is often instructive about how to create a drama group for a church. In the academic community, much has been written about theatrical history and developments. However, there are very few academic studies that look at the combination of these areas. Those that exist usually examine Christian themes in plays or Christian theatre groups. This chapter and the following two chapters explore literature pertaining to arguments about theatre from, or relating to, Protestant Christians in America.

There seems to be a long-lasting tension between Christianity and theatre. Rozik says that since its beginning, many within Christianity have “emerged with a prejudice against theatre . . .” (94). And Johnson and Savidge point out that especially in the West, “Christianity has had difficulty with an art so closely tied to the human body. Theatre, for its part, has reacted by retreating from Christianity” (11). Evidence shows there has been criticism about theatre from Protestants for over two thousand years. Jonas Barish coined the term “anti-theatrical prejudice” in 1981 with his seminal book of the same title. The prejudice against theatre, or anti-theatrical prejudice, by Protestants is the focus of this study.

The arguments and injunctions against theatre trace back to early Greek records. Coogin points out that Greek drama arose from what could be seen as religious questions about human destiny and existence and suggests that the theatre itself is sacred like “a divine temple,” its writers and actors considered “ministers of religion” (4). Many contemporary Protestants would no doubt cringe at these sentiments.
Though Protestant Christians did not exist in the early Greek era, and therefore Plato could not be classified as a Protestant, he first articulated anti-theatrical prejudice, and many subsequent critics used his arguments (Barish 5). In addition, Boeree points out that although Plato died centuries before Christ’s birth, the early Christian church made Plato an “honorary Christian” because of his beliefs that God created the world, makes things work according to his master plan, and is inherently good (Boeree 4). Plato’s ideas have lasted a long time among Protestant Christians. Likewise, since Aristotle continues to influence Christian theology and is still actively studied by Christians, his ideas about theatre are also included in this study. Coggin states, “In disagreeing on the merits of the theatre, Plato and Aristotle started an argument which, on changing premises, was to last two thousand years. Indeed, its echoes have not yet entirely disappeared” (7).

For clarity and relevance the arguments will be presented first thematically and then chronologically, although it is sometimes difficult to pinpoint specific dates of historical developments since trends and changes overlap. While not an all-inclusive survey of theatre history or of all religious responses to theatre; I discuss the development of ideas and circumstances that directly informed this study. The four main areas of contention and themes of criticism include:

1. Theatre’s use of imitation/mimesis

2. The purpose of theatre

3. The power of theatre

4. The origins of theatre

**Theatre’s Use of Imitation/Mimesis: Greek Era**

Plato has been recorded as the first to state apprehension about mimesis, or imitating. He does not distinguish between types of art; he treats all art as “forms of imitation” (Barish 5). Barish explains that it is imitation Plato denounces and since drama is “the mimetic art par excellence, what is alleged against
mimesis in general will apply to the drama with particular force” (5). In Book X of the Republic, Plato labels imitation as deceptive and an inferior representation of truth. He accuses painters and poets (playwrights) in particular of being imposters, promoting falseness, not having to truly know their subject matter to do their art, and doing just enough to pass off an imitation or appearance of truth (Republic 599). Plato criticizes poets for using imagination and copying images of virtue instead of taking part in the virtuous actions they describe. He believes imitation does not lead people to seek truth and therefore it is misguided overall (Republic 599-601, 608).

A related argument Plato levies against theatre is that imitation is not only deceptive, but formative (Republic 395). He argues that seeing a character behave a certain way may shape or form similar responses in viewers. Plato cautions that an audience sympathizes with characters in a play and that makes them more susceptible to supporting the behaviors they see, and perhaps adopting those behaviors in their daily lives (395). And those behaviors could be dangerous. Plato says that in viewing “the evil of other men something of evil is communicated to themselves” (Republic 606). His primary concern in regards to this is for guardians of the state. Plato argues that especially soldiers and rulers should be educated only with stories of courageous, virtuous, devout role models, and prohibited from imitating women, slaves, villains, madmen, or base characters (Republic 378, 395-396).

Poets had to show deeds of well-tempered and just men, not good men taking action while drunk or under some other bad influence (Republic 396). Further, good men must be shown as happy and bad men shown as unhappy, even if that is not the reality. Plato’s concern on this topic is so strong that his argument is pursued further in Plato’s Laws, with heavy penalties proposed for anyone who shows bad men leading pleasant lives (Laws 662 b-c). Accordingly, poets were treated more like “technicians rather than creators, assigned distinct tasks to be performed under close supervision, required to compose and emend” as Plato and the judges wished (Barish 27).
Plato’s concern about the formative nature of imitation applies to performers and spectators alike. By its very nature, acting requires multiplication of roles and breaking “natural” boundaries, both of which Plato wrote against. Plato’s “theory of personality” is that each man is given one main talent and that forms his role in society (Barish 18). Once an occupation has been chosen, that person must stick with that role his whole life. When a person attempts to change his social status or occupation, Plato calls this “meddling” and “evil-doing” in the Republic (434). The example of imitating various roles, shown by actors on stage, coupled with theatre’s power to inspire imagination, was feared to cause the public to try new interests. Plato saw this as a dangerous threat to the fixity and stability of social order, and therefore their state. Plato believes “imaginative activity must be restricted at every port: the inner lives of the citizens must be as strictly monitored as their outer lives” for the good of the state (Barish 26).

Plato was troubled by the way men could be altered by their imaginations, possibly in a negative way, which is why he appraised the theatre so strictly (Barish 30). However, Aristotle saw mankind’s imagination as a positive force to shape society (Trotter 85). Aristotle also disagreed with Plato that art leads to a disposition towards evil and that imitation is bad. In the Poetics Aristotle says imitation is a natural instinct fostered in childhood and that people derive satisfaction from imitating things (Book IV). He believed man takes pleasure in imitating because we take pleasure in learning; by imitating someone or something we learn about him or it, which is pleasing because it connects with our deep desire to understand people or things (IV). Aristotle places mimesis “at the heart of the educational process,” and removes dishonor from it (Barish 28). Aristotle argues that through imitation people are not misled about reality; rather, they learn valuable general truths about the world (Barish 28).

Neither did Aristotle find it necessary for art to provide exact representation of life. He did not believe poets should function as historians relating things that have happened. Instead, they should be visionaries who use imagination to write about things that are possible (Poetics IX). Also unlike Plato, Aristotle believes truth could be found outside exact representation, including through imitating. Aristotle
encourages artists to represent things as they are “thought to be, or things as they ought to be” (*Poetics* XXV). He argues this is something a playwright can uniquely do.

By allowing playwrights to exercise their artistic skills, Aristotle offers a related argument that characters do not have to be morally single-minded as Plato preferred. Instead of good characters being seen to only do and say good things and bad characters shown as bad, Aristotle asks that we consider the context of what was said or done, who was speaking to whom, and for what end because it could be “to secure a greater good, or avert a greater evil” (*Poetics* XXV). Characters can be a little flawed, thereby allowing greater audience identification with characters’ pursuit of an admirable goal.

As for the impact of imitation on actors themselves, Aristotle is not worried about imitation causing actors harm in their personal lives. He encourages actors to embody their characters and experience their emotions fully (*Poetics* XIX). Emotions, even anger, are not looked upon as enemies by Aristotle. Aristotle is one of the few who challenges Plato’s position. Subsequent supporters and opponents argue whether to adopt or disregard Plato’s ideas, but rarely do critics confront the position itself (Barish 31).

**Theatre’s Use of Imitation/Mimesis: Roman Era**

During the Roman era, realistic portrayals were preferred by audiences, with no moral or religious restrictions imposed, so plays became increasingly rough and bawdy (Coggin 27). By the time the Republic became the Empire (estimates range from 59 BC to 44 BC), theatre had seriously become morally unrestrained (Barish 42). It was about this time when “a new force had arisen in the world” and its leaders, called Early Church (or Christian) Fathers, spoke out against public entertainments (Ehrensperger 84).

Imitation concerns appear initially from the Christian theologian, Tatian, around AD 160, in *Tatian’s Address to the Greeks*. Similar to Plato earlier in Greece, Tatian took issue with the fact that an actor imitates or pretends to be what he is not (Rylan XXII). He especially reports contempt for male
actors who indulge in “daintiness” and “all sorts of effeminacy” (XXII). Tatian believes actors identify with the characters they play, and the bad behaviors of the characters on stage are also practiced by the actors in their daily lives (Barish 44). Interestingly enough, and also like Plato, he does not assign the same effect to the actor when he plays heroic roles. Thus, Tatian believes actors can be morally or emotionally harmed by playing bad characters but he is silent about the possible benefits from playing good characters. He does not acknowledge any positive benefit from imitation as Aristotle did. And Tatian was confounded that his fellow citizens would praise people who act out murders, effeminacy, impiety, and adultery on stage, and then “revile” their fellow citizens who did not want to view those things (Rylan XXII).

Tertullian, considered one of the early Church Fathers, published his thoughts about theatre in De Spectaculis (est. AD 200). Translated as “the shows” or “on the spectacles,” De Spectaculis is significant because it is the “first Christian work in Latin to deal with the morality of the theatre for Christians” (Dukore 83) and because of the harshness of its criticism. Tertullian was especially concerned with imitation in that he thought immodest actions, content, and costumes that were characteristically seen on Roman stages would cross over and influence actual lives of the spectators (De Spectaculis X, XVII). He does not seem to distinguish between playing a character onstage and being that character. Tertullian felt that portraying a murder onstage was as bad as actually committing one, and the spectator was equally at fault because he participates in the act just by viewing it (Barish 46).

Tertullian is particularly reproachful of actors regarding the mimesis that is central to their craft. He says it is never permissible to pretend to be someone else, not even on stage, and that God condemns that behavior (De Spectaculis XX). He remarks that God specifically hates hypocrisy and false things, including masks, dressing as another gender, or trying to sound or look like anyone besides yourself (XXIII). In regard to imitation via costuming and disguise, Tertullian refers to the biblical sanction against disguise, especially found in Deuteronomy 22:5 (Rozik 94). This misapplication of Scripture becomes a standard reference in the imitation debate for subsequent generations.
In his other writings Tertullian criticizes any alterations made to the body or any attempts at beautifying the body (jewelry, stylish clothing, and makeup). He argues that this tampers with God’s original handiwork, which should be good enough for mankind (Barish 49). Tertullian believes that any attempts to change one’s appearance are evil, including using dye for clothes since God did not choose to color sheep’s fleece from which clothes are made (Barish 50). Tertullian seems to view acting as “an escalating sequence of falsehoods. First the actor falsifies his identity, and so commits a deadly sin. If he impersonates someone vicious, he compounds the sin. If he happens to impersonate a noble soul he is aggravating the crime another way, by pretending to be someone so unlike himself” (Barish 46).

Another influential early Church Father of the Roman era, Saint Augustine, had concerns about possible negative consequences of imitation. Augustine argued that imitation itself is not evil, pointing out that Christians are encouraged to imitate Christ. He recognized that the very nature of theatre and acting requires imitation; he saw it as an acceptable and necessary fact. In the Soliloquies he writes that if actors do not employ imitation, “they can by no means achieve that which they wish and are in duty bound to do” (Book II.10). But he did feel that theatre was subversive and expressed concern that the bad behavior presented so pleasingly on stage would be emulated in real life by an enamored public. But, also in Soliloquies, Augustine points out that imitation is widely used when someone tells a joke, poem, or story, and this is acceptable because the intent is to bring pleasure, not to deceive. For Augustine it is the intent of the imitation that matters and intending to please, rather than deceive, is fine (Book I.9). And he holds spectators responsible if they believe what they see onstage is real, not actors (Book II.3). Augustine does not condemn actors for practicing their craft but, referencing Deuteronomy 22:5 in a different way than Tertullian, he warns Christians against behaving other than their natural selves in real life, calling this action displeasing to God.
Theatre’s Use of Imitation/Mimesis: Medieval Era

Perhaps because of the control exerted by the church or the immense popularity of the theatre-biblical pairing during this time, there is very little evidence of criticism from Christianity toward theatre during the Middle Ages. However, in the twelfth century in his essay about the Antichrist, Gerhoh of Reichersberg did censure fellow clergymen who were actually performing in the plays. He said that “those who represent Antichrist or the rage of Herod are guilty of the very vices they portray” (Kolve 10). Here again the opposition to mimesis appears. Like the viewpoint of previous leaders, there is no recognition of separation between real life and playing a character. Gerhoh further attacks the players in his essay by saying that when they portray evil characters they are just exhibiting their own wickedness, and because they are just as criminal as the original offenders, there would be no absolution for actors playing those characters (Barish 67). Gerhoh wrote one of the few pieces of evidence we have of anti-mimesis and anti-theatrical sentiment at this time, but Kolve offers another perspective to counter the alleged silence about mimesis. Kolve argues that the medieval community and its actors understood drama to be “play” and a game, which helped to distance them from the seriousness of the subject matter they were portraying (Kolve 14).

The principal anti-theatrical document that has survived from the Middle Ages is an anonymous sermon dated 1375, entitled *A treatise of miraclis pleyinge*, translated as *A Sermon Against Miracle Plays* (Barish 67). This sermon is thought to have been written by one of John Wycliffe’s followers during the early years of the Wycliffe movement, which was a precursor to the Protestant Reformation (Barish 67-68). It is interesting that no one claimed authorship of this treatise, which may indicate the unpopularity of the author’s opinions at the time. Chambers writes that there is sufficient proof that it was not leaders of the late medieval Church who opposed religious drama, but rather its heretics, one of whom may have written this sermon (Chambers 102).

For whatever reason this document was written anonymously, its content must have been relevant to discussions of the time since the author presents arguments from supporters of theatre as if they are
well-known before he refutes them. First, concerns about imitation are presented. Like Plato, the anonymous preacher did not condone the fundamental aspect of imitation employed by theatre and clung “rigidly to two polarities: real and unreal, true and false,” allowing no room for playacting (Kolve 22). This writer argues that since we do not have written documentation that Christ laughed, acted, nor told us to do so, these actions “contradict his word” and therefore are “forbidden” (Barish 71). This kind of argument is similar to Tertullian’s stance against dyeing clothes or adding any bodily enhancements because they are not expressly listed in scripture.

The Miracle plays are especially identified as heinous by the anonymous preacher (qtd. in Dukore 113). What is expressly forbidden in the scriptures is not to take God’s name in vain (the Second Commandment), which is what miracle plays depended upon by the very nature of their subject matter (Barish 71). Pious clergy and reverent townspeople took part in these plays, and techniques were put in place to conform to this directive (not using God’s name in vain), but performers had to imitate sacred characters and speak the story as it was written. However, this preacher views imitation as sacrilegious. In the treatise, the preacher says that imitating the Passion of Christ is particularly blasphemous since the performers themselves are not Christ, his disciples, or the tormentors (Barish 68). But Barish presents a good argument that the preacher’s stance against imitating sacred stories lends itself to condemning any performance of scriptural stories, “whether out of doors and in the vernacular, or inside the church in Latin (Barish 75-76).

The Purpose of Theatre: Greek Era

A second area of contention about theatre relevant to this study is whether theatre should serve a purpose and if so, what that purpose should be. Plato’s perspective is that theatre must be utilitarian, serving the best interest of the state. The actions Plato sees as valuable to his state include: successful wars, public service, and inventions (Republic 600). Since he does not believe artists contribute in these ways, he does not see the arts or what artists do as valuable. Philosophers are at the top of Plato’s tiered social structure (Boeree 4). Plato thought that playwrights should prove their work can be useful for
building better lives or a better society, or else plays should be eliminated. He declares that gods and heroes in plays must be shown to do that which the state wants its citizens to do. This is “a view of art as an adjunct to state policy, an instrument for the shaping of good citizens in accord with approved morality” (Barish 19). If playwrights follow his instructions about what they should depict, what kind of characters can be shown, and their usefulness for moral instruction, Plato can support them. Otherwise, he sees plays as a disabling or destructive seductress (Republic 608).

Neither does Plato see providing pleasure as a legitimate purpose for theatre (Republic 659b). Plato believes pleasure itself must be kept to a minimum—limited to what will foster courage—since pleasure for its own sake does nothing for the strength of the state and can disable a person’s faculties (Barish 25). Like his teacher Socrates, Plato supports the conviction that societies must focus on necessities for survival (feeding, clothing, housing, defending) from the earliest stages of childhood. Once mature, citizens can then seek modest pleasures and those who provide them. But for Plato, “The healthy condition is the earlier one, in which only basic natural necessities are appeased;” thus, no poets or musicians are really needed (Barish 16).

Aristotle sees the purpose of theatre in reference to its cultural capabilities and values its ability to entertain more than shape society. Aristotle’s perspective is that plays can provide a much-needed emotional outlet for people, a type of purging or catharsis, necessary for maintaining a healthy state of peace and calm in life (Coggin 19). Aristotle sees merit and purpose in nurturing the emotions of pity and fear in an audience, and he values a playwright’s skill to induce them. The annual Athenian festivals, which headlined theatre, brought together all the people and were important in unifying and educating the Athenians. Coogin writes that “the theatre was the great public institution for the dissemination of knowledge” and sound moral instruction (4).
The Purpose of Theatre: Roman Era

Tatian did not agree with Aristotle who saw useful purpose in theatre’s ability to provide pleasure. Tatian was opposed to experiencing any pleasure that did not arise from one’s faith. Resembling Plato, Tatian saw theatre as worthless, deceptive, a waste of time, and serving no valuable purpose (Rylan XXII-XXIV). The pleasure that spectators, including new Christian converts, experienced at public entertainments was a main reason why the Church Fathers were hard pressed to prevent them from attending.

Aristotle believed a cathartic stirring up and release of emotions served a good purpose, but Tertullian sees this as harmful and unnecessary. Tertullian offers his stance about pleasure and theatre’s purpose in De Spectaculis (est. AD 200). In his essay Tertullian calls theatre a form of lust and invites parishioners instead to seek pleasure from their faith and in their church (Dukore 83). Tertullian essentially denounces all pleasure but especially pleasure derived from the theatre (De Spectaculis XV). Because of continued attendance at the shows by new converts to Christianity, it seems they saw little harm in attending, or perhaps they did not want to give up these pleasures. Tertullian wanted to convince them of its destructive influence on their souls and its incompatibility with their professed faith, even going so far as to say the public shows were forbidden.

In the fourth century, St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, “compared playgoing to swimming on the brink of a whirlpool or walking by the edge of a cliff” (Coggin 37). He meant that there was no good purpose to come from theatre; it was an evil place that would destroy good Christians. He even felt that speaking or thinking about theatre and actors was a misuse of one’s energies, which should be redirected to sobering thoughts and discourse about hell. Such redirection causes a healthy fear that keeps Christians vigilant and humble (Barish 51). Like Tertullian, St. John was especially concerned that Christians should not seek pleasure of any kind, especially not at a theater.
St. Augustine addresses Aristotle’s argument that catharsis is a constructive purpose of theatre. Augustine understands the emotional appeal of catharsis but, upon closer examination, labels it egocentric. He contends that the potentially good practice of emotional sympathy for others, even characters onstage, is really just self-satisfying and “feeds our passivity and narcissism” (Barish 54). However, in *The City of God* Augustine does admit there is a different constructive purpose of theatre (413-426). Augustine distinguishes between “high and low drama,” and he champions using high drama for education (Ehrensperger 85). Augustine offers a more analytic look at theatre than previous critics. He sees theatre as utilitarian, with its purpose not lying in catharsis for an audience, but a beneficial means of instruction to those who perform it. He saw the reading of tragedies and comedies in particular to be valuable for a boy’s proper education (Dukore 95). Augustine did not find theatre inherently evil but remained suspect of its use and influence. He felt theatre was just an aggravating agent of deeper moral decay found in human nature that could be used for “sanctified ends” nonetheless (Barish 59). Similar to Plato, Augustine acknowledges the “educative power of imitation, for good as well as ill” (Barish 56).

**The Purpose of Theatre: Medieval Era**

In the medieval era dramas were originated by clergy, contained scriptural stories, and were performed in churches. Thus, there was little rationale for criticism from the church itself. The church used drama for the purpose of teaching biblical stories and Christian morality to its constituents since much of the populace could not read the Latin scriptures for themselves.

Besides teaching, another alleged purpose for theatre, to provide pleasure, was taken up by the renowned saint, Thomas Aquinas. St. Thomas was “the first ecclesiastic of eminence to give approval to the drama” (Coggin 41). Like Aristotle, St. Thomas recognized that body and soul had separate needs and within reason it was important to meet the needs of both and not to ignore or deny the carnal body (as Plato encouraged). He understood the human need for amusement after hard work. St. Thomas believed that in moderation games and amusements were not only acceptable but commendable (Coggin 42). St. Thomas and other church leaders still disapproved of indecent acts or satires, but they approved of
professional actors who provided honest amusement (Coggin 42). This was a considerable change from
the opinions of the majority of Christian leaders who preceded them. For the first time since Christianity
came into being, theatre and Christianity co-existed in peace during this period.

Later in the period, when the plays moved outside church walls, inappropriate content started to
appear and the plays no longer served the purpose for which the church had embraced them (Ehrensperger
88). When the dramas left church courtyards, control passed from religious leaders to public authorities
and the professional guilds that sponsored the plays (Ehrensperger 89). No longer in charge of this
valuable enterprise, and seeing secular aspects becoming more prevalent in the plays, the church started
voicing its opposition (89). This signified the beginning of a renewed division between the church and
drama, and “for many hundreds of years thereafter, the drama which had begun originally in religious
rites and had been resurrected in the worship of the Church, stayed out of the Church” (88).

By the mid-fourteenth century, prominent reformer John Wycliffe was challenging the Catholic
Church about some of its practices, including its use of drama. In a sermon about “sins of sight,” Wycliffe
calls plays vain, idle, and not profitable to one’s soul (Thompson 32). Concerns of theatre providing evil
fare and lacking worthy purpose are contained in his statement. In addition, the previously mentioned
anonymous preacher (believed to be a Wycliffe supporter), calls plays “idil” amusement (qtd. in Barish
79). If plays are written and performed to amuse and give pleasure, the preacher says those goals are
contrary to a Christian’s pious aims which include using the short time on earth to do good works and
sacrifice all pleasures (Barish 68). The preacher takes issue with the very word “play,” saying a man’s
need for recreation would be better filled by doing “works of mercy to his neighbor” on his day off
instead of being idle and watching a show (Dukore 116). Here idleness is equated with purposelessness,
which is considered wicked and impious.

The anonymous preacher continues to refute arguments about constructive purposes of theatre.
He disagrees with the assertion that plays are performed as an act of worship to God, but rather they are
done to gain attention and approval from people (Ehrensperger 89). The argument that seeing Miracle plays moves people to tears, compassion, and worship also is refuted. The preacher maintains that people are not weeping for their own sins but for something outside themselves (pathos for the characters in the story), and the lack of authentic repentance caused by these plays is reprehensible (Ehrensperger 90).

The final argument of purpose that the anonymous author disagreed with is the line of reasoning that since paintings and sculptures of God’s miracles are approved and have pedagogical value, plays should be considered in like manner. Of even more benefit, this reasoning goes, plays bring the miracles alive through performance, so their influence on the actors who perform them and the spectators who see them is even more profound and long lasting than other art forms (Dukore 114). In fact, the visual arts were thought to be so effective that they could help awaken devotion (Barish 70). The anonymous preacher does agree that certain paintings about Christian subjects can be like books—called quick books—in teaching people about God and their faith (A treatise). But he argues that plays are “made more to delight men bodily,” so “if they be quick books, they be quick books to shrewdness more than to goodness” (qtd. in Dukore 116). So it seems religious imagery such as paintings and sculptures escape his criticism simply because they have been traditionally accepted. But plays were not. And “the greater their impact, the greater their offensiveness” (Barish 71).

The Power of Theatre: Greek Era

Plato recognizes theatre’s potential power, which is why he sees it useful for social instruction. His concern about the power of theatre can be seen in his caution about the impact plays can have on leaders and the general public. He believes plays stir up strong emotions in an audience, emotions that he fears can threaten, weaken, or overtake people’s reason. Plato sees great power in theatre’s emotional appeal, and sees it as dangerous in its ability to persuade. He divides mankind’s being into two halves, reason and emotion, and believes one must rule the other. In the Republic, Plato clearly champions reason taking precedence over emotions, describing the latter as “wasting time,” “irrational, useless, and cowardly” (604). Since he champions reason as the place where good resides, he thinks reason but not
emotion should be developed. The only exception he makes about emotions depicted onstage is for
courage, which he believes serves a virtuous purpose; it emboldens leaders, strengthens soldiers, and is
good for the state overall.

Plato especially is wary of the power dramatists wield (Barish 6). He is harsh with dramatists who
intentionally pander to an audience’s emotions, awakening and nourishing emotion (Republic 605). He
sees this irrationality taking people away from what is good (use of intellect), and this is Plato’s main
criticism of theatre (Republic 605). Plato reasons that if theatre has the power to persuade, it can cause
harm or persuade harmfully. That is, in reality people control their emotions and this is admirable, but
playwrights encourage audiences to sympathize with characters who unleash emotions that should stay
private, which is ruinous (606).

Plato’s concern is that in an emotional groundswell, truth gets minimized. He believes that when
characters are depicted as being torn between passion and reason, the audience’s passion is aroused and
discovering truth loses importance. This passionate tide, along with character identification, can lead the
audience to support foolish or bad decisions the characters make (Barish 9). Plato sees this as a dangerous
step towards approving that type of behavior in real life, thereby disrupting the superiority of rational over
emotional behavior. So Plato views plays as “a disordering force” (Barish 13). In practice he recognized
the value of some emotions in plays, but in general he criticizes plays and theatre (Coggin 7).

The Power of Theatre: Roman Era

During the Roman era, theatrical entertainments had significant power. By the fourth century “the
Roman calendar was mostly holidays—101 days were given to plays, 64 to chariot races, and 10 to
gladiatorial contests” (Ehrenspenger 83-84). Clearly, plays were very popular. Despite heavy penalties,
restrictions, and warnings from the Church Fathers, attendance became entrenched in cultural routine as
the popularity of public entertainments continued to escalate. In fact, emperors could not restrain this
powerful cultural practice, themselves “compelled to attend” whether they wanted to or not (Coggin 27).
Even emperor Constantine, a convert to Christianity and someone with the power to close the theatres down or make other changes the Church Fathers desired, did not close the theaters.

Theatre’s powerful draw was evident in that Christians were choosing to see theatrical entertainments during those times they should have been in church, which upset St. John Chrysostom and other Church Fathers. This problem along with the continued depravity of the shows led the Third Council of Carthage (AD 397) to forbid laity and priests alike from hosting plays or going to see them, even promising excommunication if this directive was not obeyed, which points to the severity of the problem (Coggin 37, Rozik 94).

In the *Confessions* (est. AD 397), St. Augustine affirms theatre’s powerful draw and examines his own youthful devotion to theatre in an effort to understand its appeal. Because of the frequency and devotion with which Christians went to plays, Augustine also expressed concern about theatre’s potential power to be a false temple, taking the place of a true temple of God (Barish 63). This can be seen in a later sermon where he contrasted church gatherings to theatrical gatherings: “There your eyes are defiled, here your hearts are cleansed. Here the spectator deserves praise if he but imitate what he sees; there he is bad” (qtd. in Barish 56).

**The Power of Theatre: Medieval Era**

“Between the fifth and tenth centuries, the things of the world and the things of the spirit presented so few points of contact that the idea of a conflict between them hardly arose” (Coggin 39). However, there is some indirect evidence that Christian leaders balked at theatre’s powerful draw during the medieval era, such as John of Damascus’ rebuke to Christians in the eighth century for gawking at mimes for many hours instead of going to church (Rozik 98). Christians were still attending theatrical shows and leaders still criticized people who choose to attend theatre over church. Reasons for the people’s behavior are not given, but there was obviously some kind of powerful draw of theatre.
Also, during this time period various religious councils issued edicts against viewing or being involved with theatre: in 813 the Synod of Tours, the Synod of Chalons, and the Council of Mainz ordered clergy to keep their distance from mimes; in 816 the Council of Aix-la-Chapelle banned clergy from attending any performances; and in 829 the Council of Paris blamed ministers for attending mime shows instead of seeing to their assigned duties (Rozik 96). Clearly there was some nefarious connection associated with theatre itself and the apparent power it had to draw even the clergy.

The religious dramas were hugely popular and churches could barely contain the crowds that came to see them. Clearly, theatre was powerful. Owing to the increased number of performances, more room needed for staging, and large crowds, priests were required to move the plays outside church walls onto platforms in the open square outside. The draw of these plays resulted in yet larger crowds until these spaces also were unable to hold the crowds. So the shows were moved to even larger public areas, such as marketplaces, which is when secular elements started appearing in the performances. But having recognized the power plays had, the church was not about to discontinue use of such a powerful tool. Though secular plays were performed in secular spaces, liturgical dramas and religious tropes were not discontinued; they continued to be performed inside churches (Chambers 96).

The lone anti-theatrical document at this time, the treatise by the anonymous preacher, questions theatre’s power to cause people to make positive life changes. He specifically addresses the argument that seeing plays may convert men to Christianity where other methods prove ineffective. The anonymous preacher says those conversions would be artificial because only God’s word and the sacraments can truly cause conversion, and he stresses that a truly converted person would denounce such play-going (Dukore 116). Here the preference of words over images in service of being instructive is evident. Barish points out that since this author was a preacher, he may have had a bias toward the belief that only a sermon can produce true and lasting devotion (Barish 69).
The Origins of Theatre: Greek Era

Plato introduces another area of concern to this study that can be called “origins” of theatre. This area includes concerns about theatre’s pagan beginnings or ideas, and its evil provocations. At the outset, Plato connects theatre with evil and evil intent. Plato uses the word evil to mean an irrational nature as opposed to a good, i.e. rational, nature. The playwright in particular is accused of implanting this evil disposition by indulging man’s irrational nature (Republic 605). So, not only do playwrights champion emotions, but it seems they are accused of actually instilling this evil as well. Apparently, Plato believes evil is not so much intrinsic to mankind but that suggestion, even from a play, can cause it. Yet he also praises feelings kept under control through use of reason, which would seem to indicate that strong feelings are already intrinsic in mankind.

Plato also expressed concern that plays revive evil dream-like experiences. He believed there was an evil nature within mankind, previously there to revive. Plato fears that fostering an irrational, a.k.a. evil, nature acquaints us with latent evil desires that, under normal conditions, are safely sequestered in our dreams. Plato thought that seeing these desires take shape in reality onstage could infect daily life which would upset predominance of reason necessary for a strong state. Therefore, Plato fears and distrusts theatre, believing it must be rejected for the good of the state (Barish 12, 26).

The Origins of Theatre: Roman Era

In Greece, theatre had an “honored role in the state religion” but this was not the case in Rome (Barish 38). During the Roman era, the primary concern of Christian leaders was about the evil being promoted by and within theaters. Unrestrained moral and sexual obscenities and bawdiness, brutal violence, and parody of Christian sacraments kept increasing on Roman stages (Barish 43). This was considered evil. The situation had become intolerable to church leaders so they took decisive action to defend their faith and its followers. Though they had valid objections and good intentions to protect their converts, regional church councils issued harsh prohibitions against anyone involved in such entertainments, including the choice of excommunication from the church or giving up their profession
for life (Barish 43). The message was clear: theatre was where evil practices took place and those who worked there were guilty of purveying evil. Tatian particularly demonizes the origin of theatre in his attacks. He condemns dramatic festivals outright, saying they are “held in honour of wicked demons” and cover men who attend them with shame (Rylan XXII).

Church leaders tried to induce their communities to understand that theatre had pagan origins and believed that ongoing ties with pagan gods and festivals would injure their souls if the people continued to attend. “The early Christians met the same problem in the Roman world that their forefathers had met in Old Testament days. Almost all works of art that confronted them were of pagan subjects or inspiration” (Coggin 31). Tertullian says that plays are idolatrous because they took place during festivals founded on and dedicated to the worship of pagan deities (De Spectaculis X, XIII). In fact, he accused those deities of fostering theatre’s popularity in order to distract mankind from worshipping God and luring them into worshiping and serving false gods (X). Tertullian expressed extreme concern for people who would even attend theatre:

Why may not those who go into the temptations of the show become accessible also to evil spirits? We have the case of the woman--the Lord Himself is witness--who went to the theatre, and came back possessed. In the outcasting, accordingly, when the unclean creature was upbraided with having dared to attack a believer, he firmly replied, ‘And in truth I did it most righteously, for I found her in my domain’ [. . .] How many other undoubted proofs we have had in the case of persons who, by keeping company with the devil in the shows, have fallen from the Lord! For no one can serve two masters. (XXVI)

Clearly Tertullian sees it as a matter of choice: true Christians will reject this evil practice (De Spectaculis XXIV). The pagan origins of theatre forever condemn the practice of theatre.

Augustine also believed that demons encouraged people to attend theatrical performances and further, that they were encouraged to cast aside restraint and embrace vile behaviors seen there (Barish
In a later speech, given about AD 400, Augustine called theaters “sinks of uncleanness and public places of debauchery” and claimed they were failing because of their “lewd and sacrilegious practices” (qtd. in Coggin 38). However, unlike other critics of theatre, Augustine did not find theatre inherently evil, and he did not see it as a cause of evil among men. Essentially, Augustine condemns the pagan stage like other Church Fathers but believed it has redemptive possibilities (Coggin 37).

The Origins of Theatre: Medieval Era

It is generally agreed that when drama resurfaced in a legitimate way during the medieval era it was initiated in and by the Church and was no longer representative of paganism. Very little concern about pagan or evil origins of this drama could be levied since subject matter was drawn from the scriptures, the clergy were the originators and performers of it, and the plays took place within churches themselves (Barish 67). However, it is a matter of record that pagan theatre, traveling minstrel and mime shows, and folk rituals also existed at this time (Hardison 179). Hunningher believes the clergy were on good terms with mimes, who performed for and inside churches, enough so that they borrowed theatrical techniques from them (Hunningher 74-77). This would not have happened if the practice of theatre was considered evil. With the public presentation of Quem Quaeritis in the tenth century, theatre was officially brought into the church.

Summary

In the three beginning eras of recorded theatre history—Greek, Roman, and the Middle Ages—all four main areas of contention relevant to this study are initiated. The major, or more dominant, concerns of the Greek era are theatre’s use of imitation, its purpose, and its power. The origin of theatre, though more of a minor concern at this time, is evident too. Plato found imitation to be deceptive and a possible threat to stability of their state, while Aristotle found imitation a natural human trait that was not evil and could be a positive force in shaping society, including helping people learn truth about the world. Plato

12 Eli Rozik agrees with Hunningher, see Rozik 98-99.
and Aristotle agree that theatre could be an important way to educate the public. However, Plato does not see the arts as necessary, especially for promoting a stable state, while Aristotle does. Aristotle believes theatre’s unique ability to engage and purge emotions through mimesis aids in bringing calm to individuals and therefore to the state overall, while Plato worries that emotions can overtake reason and therefore harm the state. Plato references theatre’s pagan beginnings, accuses it of inciting mankind’s irrational nature, and connects it with evil. Aristotle does not see theatre as evil in itself; he points out that evil is within mankind and theatre can be used with evil intent like any other entertainment.

While the major criticisms of theatre for the Greeks were in the areas of imitation, purpose, and power, the dominant themes for the Romans lie in the areas of power, origin, and imitation; purpose is of minor concern. The early Church Fathers saw the popularity, and therefore power, of theatre as a consistent threat. Tertullian, Chrysostom, and various church councils issued several warnings, threats, and edicts to forbid converts from attending theatre. They saw the public’s devotion to theatre, especially choosing it over church services when they happened at the same time, as dangerous.

Roman church leaders could not forget theatre’s pagan origins, in which pagan deities were worshipped, and they felt theaters were still wicked places in which evil spirits tried to alienate people from God. They called theatergoing an evil practice that covered in shame those who attended it. Like Plato these Church Fathers were concerned that the public would imitate in their real lives the immoral behaviors seen in the theaters. Augustine was not against imitation in itself: it depended on whether the intent was to deceive or to provide wholesome pleasure.

The early Church Fathers felt plays misrepresented truth and that actors and spectators alike would suffer emotional and moral harm from what they saw in the plays. Tatian, Tertullian, and Chrysostom all agreed that theatre served no valuable purpose. Augustine saw a positive purpose for theatre in that it could instruct those who read the plays, but he thought catharsis was self-serving and thus, he was not able to support theatre overall. Tertullian and Chrysostom thought pleasure was a
destructive influence on the soul and not compatible with faith, and so theatre (a place that provided pleasure) was especially forbidden. Tatian was not against Christians engaging in pleasure but thought it should only come from one’s faith, so he did not see a purpose for theatre either.

The Middle Ages began in the anti-drama tradition of the church but evolved into the church becoming theatre’s greatest supporter. Concerns from Christians about the origin of theatre were non-existent at this time, since theatre essentially was re-birthed within the Church and clergymen were performing in the plays. Church plays were highly favored by church leaders as a way to instruct their congregants, so during this time, the purpose of theatre was highly regarded. Later in the medieval period, John Wycliffe accuses plays of being idle amusement and not profitable for one’s soul. And the anonymous preacher sees no constructive purpose for theatre. In fact, he says the plays do not awaken devotion nor are able to cause true conversion, as a sermon can, so their original purpose is discounted as well.

Whether it was the mimes at the beginning of the medieval period or the church plays later in this period, the power of theatre to draw, delight, and impact audiences was consistent. This was not an area of negative concern since the topics and behaviors in the plays were church sanctioned. Similarly, imitation was not a large area of contention during this era since play content came from the scriptures and the Christian faith. Later, Gerhoh and the anonymous preacher state concerns about mimesis. Gerhoh states the familiar argument that playing evil characters equates performers with being wicked and criminals. The anonymous preacher believes it is sacrilegious to imitate sacred characters, especially since there is no scriptural evidence that Jesus Christ imitated. Besides these few voices that appeared later in this historical period, for hundreds of years the Church was remarkably supportive of theatre during the medieval era.
Figure 1: Comparison Chart of the Four Contention Areas—Greek through Medieval Eras
CHAPTER 3: ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST THEATRE – THE RENAISSANCE THROUGH 1950 IN AMERICA

Introduction

In an attempt to reform the Church, Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses criticizing the Catholic Church in 1517, initiating a major religious division. Those Christians who joined him in protesting against the Catholic Church became known as Protestant Christians. Protestants who were dissatisfied with the similarities to Catholicism and the relaxed attitudes that they perceived within Protestantism separated themselves into a group known as Puritans, although they still remained under the Protestant umbrella. Members of this group seemed to be particularly hostile toward theatre.

Although *A treatise of miraclis pleyinge* was the chief piece of evidence showing anti-theatrical feeling during the Middle Ages, it did not have a substantial impact on the practice or popularity of plays at its time. The arguments against theater, however, did not go away. Those arguments were revived during the Renaissance, specifically by Puritans in England who “took up the fight against theater with a vengeance” (Godawa 8). Just because the King favored theatre highly was enough to incite the Puritans against it, but other reasons for their dislike were also expressed (Morgan 340). Many of the English Puritans founded and populated American colonies. Since this study traces American Protestant Christian attitudes toward theatre, investigating the mindset of English Protestants from the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries seems essential.

The early-to mid-sixteenth century consisted of only a handful of scattered criticisms of theatre from secular and religious writers. These criticisms primarily centered on idleness, fear of infection in crowds, and public unruliness (Ringler 400). During the Reformation, social concerns about theatre ranged from panhandling to frequent incidents of civil disobedience, sanitary issues, and the degenerates in the crowds gathered to see the shows (Thompson 34-36, Ringler 395).
However, in 1577, the attacks on theatre increased dramatically, emanating mostly from Puritans and Protestants. Most scholars attribute this change to the establishment of permanent theaters. Before this time, there was not an established system for performers or permanent performance spaces so theatre was not considered much of a danger (Thompson 52). The invention and use of the printing press facilitated a flurry of printed tracts, pamphlets, and books published for and against theatre for many years thereafter. From November 1577 to November 1579, “more statements of opposition to the stage were published than are extant from the entire preceding century” (Ringler 410).

The most disturbing early Puritan attack was John Northbrooke’s *A Treatise against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes* in 1577. The onslaught of publications begun in 1577 climaxes with William Prynne’s *Histriomastix* in 1633, which consists of over one thousand pages of scathing attacks on theatre (Barish 83). A Puritan himself, Prynne’s publication expressed Puritan concerns so effectively that it became a reference point for a large number of future critics of theatre. [*Histriomastix* is published in its original handwritten script, without conventional pagination or organization. For citation purposes, I will use Prynne’s section titles and/or page numbers when they are available.]

Puritans increasingly gained powerful positions in the government during the seventeenth century, and thanks to their stance against theater, they have been credited historically with closing London’s theaters in 1642. Some scholars disagree with this assessment, attributing the closures to social and political reasons (Wiseman 2-4). Regardless, in the 1630s many of the Puritans left England for America where they eventually established the state of Massachusetts and Harvard University, taking their moral perspectives with them (Robertson interview).

Since theaters were closed in England from 1642-1660, English-American settlers were used to a theatrical tradition of “non-performance” (Teague 13). Colonists who were young when the edict was issued grew up essentially without ever going to a theater, so if they emigrated when they were young, they had no experience with theatre as a public event. An adult who experienced twenty years of not
going to the theater in London and then resettling in America probably found theater unnecessary and perhaps even peculiar (Teague 13). Once the colonists had learned to survive and produce goods, they could afford some time and money for formal recreational activities (Taylor, A. 118). Theaters began to be built, and Americans began to attend theater on a more regular basis (Butsch 24).

Proponents of theatre reform persevered in America. In the 1880s, a resident of Philadelphia wrote an essay criticizing Protestant churches for employing theatrical devices (Morgan 347). Nevertheless, even facing strong, inherited anti-theatrical prejudice and repeated closings of theaters, theatre in America somehow endured to become an accepted social event by the late-nineteenth century. Melodramas in particular, with their strong moral themes, flourished all across the country, becoming “the most enduring” form of drama in the United States (Gerould 8).

The viciousness of the attacks against theatre from American Protestants seems to lessen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A contributing factor may be the decrease in membership and associated loosening of cohesion within various branches of Protestantism; apparently large numbers of Protestants rejected God in favor of a materialism and self-sufficiency (Larsen 287).

The early to mid-twentieth century witnessed challenges of important social, religious, and historical questions that fragmented and therefore minimized public debate about theatre among Protestants in America. Similar to what early Puritan settlers experienced, Christians found themselves facing more pressing concerns that demanded their attention over whether to support theatre. For twentieth-century Christians such concerns included increasing inter-denominational differences, industrialization, women’s suffrage, the Great Depression, the stock market crash, two world wars, McCarthyism, the Korean War, and the spread of modern liberal humanist ideas. Also during this century, certainly by late century, movies became the dominant form of entertainment, and their increasingly amoral tone led Christians to become more watchful and outspoken about them.
As described in the previous chapter, the four main areas of contention and themes of criticism found in the literature and relevant to this study include: (1) Theatre’s use of imitation/mimesis; (2) The purpose of theatre; (3) The power of theatre; and (4) The origins of theatre. The themes will be examined in this same order and chronologically within each area.

**Theatre’s Use of Imitation/Mimesis: Renaissance and Reformation**

Plato’s initial argument of the power of mimesis and people’s inability to refrain from imitating stage behavior reappears in the Renaissance. John Calvin, who was instrumental in founding several branches of early Protestantism known as Calvinism and Presbyterianism, voiced several objections to theatre in regards to imitation. First, he argues that when artists focus on things in this world in order to imitate or represent them in their art, they idolize those things, which is a sin (Coggin 102). Second, he invokes the injunction in Deuteronomy 22:5 against men imitating women and wearing their clothing, also calling this a sin. Coggin believes that when Calvin voiced this, he “set the Protestant canon against the stage by declaring that the Mosaic law on dress was absolute, applicable to all times and all places” (Coggin 101). In late Renaissance, popular Anglican Bishop William Alley also condemned theatre because of its use of imitation. He argued against even attending plays, believing what people hear is quickly “embraced and put to use” (Thompson 44).

During the Reformation, mimesis especially troubled the Puritans because a central tenet of their movement was the rejection of imitations that they associated with the Catholic Church; the Puritans valued authenticity, both inward and outward. Consequently, the then-normal practice of boys playing female roles was especially loathsome to the Puritans (Coggin 104). William Prynne says that plays are mostly about adultery or fornication and that by seeing these things exhibited in the plays, people were too weak morally to avoid behaving the same way (Morgan 342). In answer to the argument that viewing plays does not lead to sin, Northbrooke references the example of the sin that followed David upon seeing Bathsheba (Northbrooke 160). Prynne also put forward the Puritan belief that theatre actually angered God because the entire enterprise was deceitful and hypocritical, which he said was contrary to God’s
desires as expressed in Scripture. Prynne says that God “requires that the actions of every creature should be honest and sincere, devoyde of all hypocrisie” (qtd. in Barish 92). Stephen Gosson, also a Puritan, particularly argued against theatre saying that its core attribute, imitation, is misleading. He writes that theatre practices deception and offers only an illusion of reality, which is not authentic, and therefore theatre should be avoided (Coggin 103).

**Theatre’s Use of Imitation/Mimesis: America**

The concern that viewing poor moral conduct on stage will cross over into real life also appears in the early 1900s in America. This concern was strong, and the stage reflected the public tug-of-war over enforcement of legally-enacted moral codes. Naturalistic drama in the early 1900s was particularly seen by Christians as an amoral style of theatre, and they spoke out against it. Houchin explains that the problem for Protestants was that naturalistic drama depicted life “without any idealization or regard for moral sensibilities” and naturalistic characters were driven by instincts and environment, rather than by Church-sanctioned moral or religious principles (Houchin 60). Being concerned about mimesis, Protestants worried that people who had viewed such immoral behaviors would use that as an excuse to practice them. In fact, a “major censorship battle” began in 1905 in New York with the production of George Bernard Shaw’s plays because they were deemed offensive to public morality (Houchin 52). The magnitude of the matter can be seen in the action of the police commissioner who closed one of these plays on opening night and issued arrest warrants for everyone involved (55).

The 1920s and 1930s usually bring to mind the golden years of lavish Broadway shows and the emergence of American musicals, but the battle over the immorality of the commercial stage was boiling during this time. Actors who played immoral characters were themselves considered “perverts, who wanted to overturn the moral order” (Houchin 88).
The Purpose of Theatre: Renaissance and Reformation

One of the underpinnings of the Protestant movement was the desire not to rely on priests to understand scripture. Protestants needed to be able to read the scriptures for themselves, and this required education. Martin Luther was an avid promoter of education. He considered music and drama important tools for his educational goals, believing sacred drama could be a way to spread the Gospel (Coggin 99-100).

John Calvin was willing to tolerate the arts “for the edification of the weaker members of the community” and then only if there was no devotional purpose to the art, for that smacked of Catholicism to him (Jensen 62). Luther and Calvin tolerated theatre because of its potential use for religious instruction, but that was as far as they were willing to go. Other committed Protestants supported Luther’s educational reform by supporting theatre, and even by writing plays themselves (Barish 82). “The idea of writing classical plays on Biblical subjects spread from Germany through Holland to England” (Coggin 100). Protestant leaders in London, such as Thomas Cromwell, saw theatre’s purpose as a means to criticize Catholicism and favor Protestantism (Ringler 404, Coggin 100).

While Protestants were using plays to educate people during the early Reformation period, an undercurrent of opposition was also emerging. The purpose of theatre was weighed and questioned. People debated whether theatre needed to have a purpose, what its purpose was, and if it was valuable enough to offset the negative outcomes of having theatre. Puritan John Northbrooke criticized the assertion that many Christians found the plays to be as educational as sermons, or that people may even learn more at a play than from a sermon (Dukore 161). That opinion in itself may have caused anti-theatrical prejudice among fundamentalist religious groups such as the Puritans. As for the claim that plays depicting historical stories in scripture are beneficial, Northbrooke argues that impure and wicked people cannot do justice to biblical stories (Dukore 159-161). Two years after Northbrooke’s publication, dramatists were still claiming theatre was a place of moral instruction. Another prominent Puritan, Stephen Gosson, countered that the very lives of the actors were immoral, which meant the instruction
was ineffective (Coggin 103). He maintains that moral instruction should be sought in church, not theatre (Dukore 157).

Part of the confusion in the debate about theatre’s purpose during the Reformation came from two kinds of plays being done at the time: academic plays and public plays. Academic plays were seen to be educational and therefore allowable; public plays were considered frivolous and pandering to audience desire for cheap amusement. This belief caused the intellectual quality of commercial plays to decline, and therefore they were rejected (Ringler 413). It is interesting to note that Shakespeare wrote public plays and often quoted from the Bible in his plays. Included in the more than twelve hundred references to scripture in his plays are situations showing man’s sins justly damning him: incest, adultery, and vice shown to end badly (Larsen 162). Shakespeare offers a Reformed Protestant view of salvation in his plays so it would seem that the Puritans would embrace this vehicle of moral instruction, but they make no exception for Shakespeare’s plays (Larsen 162).

William Prynne’s viewpoint about theatre’s purpose is very clear in Histriomastix. He states in the dedication of this book that he finds theatre serves a negative purpose; he believes the plays promote vice and iniquity (Prynne *3). Also, he believes plays are viewed for pleasure, to promote “carnall jollity” and pander to men’s beastly lusts (Prynne I:111). However, Prynne considers reading a play invigorating to the mind so he includes it on his list of approved healthy diversions (Morgan 341). Viewing plays left people emotionally spent which was bad, Prynne’s argument goes, for the individual and the nation. Puritans valued healthy recreation and diversions, but they believed healthy recreation should refresh body and mind and energize people to return to work (Morgan 341). Therefore, theatre served no valuable purpose.

The Purpose of Theatre: America

Americans had the same concerns about theatre as their British counterparts. In the New World performances were seen as “unproductive,” actors were sinners, and crowds portended the possibility of
disease (Bigsby 185). Early Americans were focused on day-to-day survival and carving out a new nation; they did not have time nor see a practical purpose for theatre. “The colonial attitude toward theater was not unreasonable. In an economy organized to produce material goods, they created no product, and they took some of the money they earned away with them” (Bigsby 185).

Even though early Americans were used to a theatrical tradition of non-performance, in the eighteenth century, they started looking more to theatre to see what it could offer them. Shakespeare was suddenly found to be relevant to their concerns (Teague 17). Americans became aware of the political and military issues in Shakespeare’s plays, which appealed to their increasing disagreement with English tax policies. Thomas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams often made use of the political issues in Shakespeare’s plays (especially Julius Caesar). They viewed Shakespeare as: “an authority sanctioning violence” and appropriated the ideas they needed to sanction their increasing opposition to English rule (Teague 3).

This interest and purpose found in theatre was short lived, however. Theatre and its value were soon challenged again by American leaders, most of whom were Christians. John Witherspoon—Presbyterian minister, representative of New Jersey, and signer of the Declaration of Independence—represents the typical midcentury type of anti-theatricalism (Barish 296). In his writings of 1757, Witherspoon calls theatre an unnecessary amusement, more wicked than gambling, with no possibility of being reformed (Barish 296-297). Many people associated theatre with luxury and pleasure, and since those were “equated with corruption and social decay,” theatre had to be rejected for the good of the Republic (Houchin 20).

During the Industrial Revolution, people started going to theaters more regularly since they had spending money and more free time in the evenings. Since Christians could not suppress theatre’s popularity at this time, a number of them advocated tolerating it and reforming it to become a teacher of virtue (Morgan 346). In the 1830s a religious revival in the northeastern United States resulted in a new
morality which showed up in American culture and plays. Protestants sought to influence culture through plays, believing “the power of mass culture lies in the power of a story well told or well performed” (Godawa 9).

In 1840 a Philadelphia minister writes about the impossibility of reforming theatre to serve a Christian purpose, seeing this as contradictory since theatre existed only to gratify people’s “taste for licentiousness” (Morgan 346). Related to this opinion, critic Kenneth Burke points out there was a general sense in the nineteenth century that art was not useful (Burke 63). The development and rise of technology caused the use and value of everything to be questioned or measured (63). And since theatre is especially associated with the idea of “playing,” it seemed to serve no utilitarian purpose (Burke 64). This contributed to a loss of status for theatre and engendered even more criticism because “work” was becoming the new American watchword: work was purposeful (64).

Later in the nineteenth century, the debate about theatre’s use or purpose continued to be debated publically. Reformers argued that theatre should cease being only an amusement and work instead for the moral good of the community. Some Protestants argued that theatre should be made “the vehicle of the same sober and pious sentiments” as the church, while others believed to make church more like theatre would make church into an amusement, which would be sacrilegious (Morgan 347).

In New York, William Wilberforce Newton contributed to the theatre reform debate in a paper he read in 1877 at the Church Congress of the Protestant Episcopal Church. A respected minister, he argues that it was their Christian duty to use theatre to spread their message to the world, and that it was a “legitimate and most healthful form of church work” (Newton 11). Newton says that theatre had been used poorly by men with corrupt hearts but he did not find it organically wrong; therefore, it could and should be reformed to serve their purposes (4). He points out that the change would be slow but worth the effort (Newton 11). “The Pulpit and the Stage will ever be the instructors of the masses,” he said, and that
the help of the church was vital in reforming the stage. The church should lead, not follow, in that effort (Newton 18, 19).

In the beginning of the twentieth century Protestants generally were skeptical about theatre, but thanks to theatre’s potential for moral instruction, “American mainline Protestants began experimenting widely with various forms of theatre in religious education and worship” (Senkbeil, Faith 48). While some within the Protestant tradition still believed in reforming existing secular theatre for instructional purposes, others wanted to build a separate system alongside secular theatre. This disagreement is seen in a lengthy 1901 newspaper article by Reverend Charles Sheldon entitled, “Is a Christian Theater Possible?” The article indicates a lingering suspicion and frustration about theatre among Protestants. Sheldon declares that he does not attend theatre, but also says he does not “absolutely” condemn it either (Sheldon 618). He wonders about the feasibility of theatre produced by Christian actors working in a venue owned and operated by Christians (616). Sheldon did not seek to alter or modify existing theatre so much as propose creation of a separate theatre that would operate alongside commercial theaters. The public would be welcome at these Christian theaters.

Like William Wilberforce Newton before him, Sheldon believed that Christians should seize the opportunity to influence society with Christian ideals, and he saw theatre as a powerful instrument for Christianity’s mission on earth (Sheldon 616 - 618). At the same time, Sheldon was doubtful whether Christian theatre was really possible (618). His irresolution about this subject indicates the tension between those who recognized theatre’s potential for doing good and those who resisted its allegedly unmanageable moral nature.

By 1910 America had supposedly become “obsessed with the graphic portrayals of moral degeneracy,” and many Protestants feared this would transform theatre “from a platform for moral uplift into an agent of degeneracy and social disorder” (Houchin 60, 61). In response to increasing public outrage against the new drama, The Drama League of America was formed. Its mission was to promote
“worthy” theatre and ignore demeaning or immoral performances; clearly theatre needed to serve a moral purpose (Houchin 61). Besides this group, many other such sanctioning groups appeared across America. In 1929, Boston ministers defeated an attempt to perform Eugene O’Neill’s *Strange Interlude* there, declaring that “it endorsed atheism, debased marriage, condoned abortion and encouraged infidelity” (Houchin 113). Reminiscent of the complaints by Elizabethan clergy centuries before, one of those ministers held that the stage was not a proper place for moral instruction about sexual relationships. Apparently, that was not considered an acceptable purpose for theatre.

**The Power of Theatre: Renaissance and Reformation**

Commercial drama became very popular in England in the sixteenth century. Of the estimated population of only about 200,000 people in London and its suburbs, between a quarter to a half a million theatre tickets were sold annually (Ringler 413). The stage had considerably captured the people’s favor, a phenomenon that caught religious leaders’ attention. The most popular plays were scheduled on Sundays, leading people to choose between theatre or church, with theatre often winning the power struggle. Therefore, “Puritans looked on the theatre as a rival to the church of Christ” (Morgan 343). The presentation of plays on Sundays is what some scholars believe was the main complaint Puritans had against theatre. In fact, Ringler postulates that if plays had been exempt from Sundays, ministers would not have complained much about the performances on other days of the week (417). Recognizing theatre’s powerful draw, it seems some ministers tried to accommodate both events because there are charges that they rushed through their sermons to leave time for popular afternoon entertainments such as plays (Thompson 43).

One of the major tenets of the Protestant Reformers was the refocus on the scriptures as supreme authority. Protestants also wanted to minimize the predominately visual and sensual nature of Catholic masses and emphasize linguistic, auditory practices instead (Kilde 11). No visual enterprises such as theatre could substitute for the written or spoken Word, “*Sola Scriptura* (‘Scripture alone’) was the motto
of the Reformation” (Larsen 93). This resulted in the sermon becoming “the centerpiece of Protestant worship” (Kilde 11). Imagery, being inherent to theatre, created a fundamental unease among Protestants.

Protestants were wary of the dedicational and emotional power images could have. They felt images were external, materialistic, and could distract or cause people to misplace their adoration towards the images or imagery instead of God. In their efforts to distinguish themselves from Catholics, Puritans (and Protestants in general) stripped their churches and ceremonies of images and anything else similarly sensual. Protestant services grew stark and somber, which only served to encourage people to attend more plays as an anodyne. Martin Luther was not completely against use of imagery or images, provided they were used in service of promoting Christianity and not revered in themselves. He thought the use of imagery so powerful that he was in favor of painting all the stories of the Bible on the outside of houses to help passersby understand and remember their faith (Luther 99). In fact, Luther says that when he hears of Christ, he visualizes an image of Him. He said, “If it is not a sin, but good to have the image of Christ in my heart, why should it be a sin to have it in my eyes?” (99).

The majority of churchmen did not object to plays in the mid-sixteenth century. However, Puritans such as John Calvin reference 1 John 2:15-16 as biblical instruction not to adore anything worldly nor place value on everyday things (Coogin 102). Since the public was adoring and valuing the plays, Calvin believed the public was sinning. And Northbrooke argued that the public viewing the plays would be punished by God (Dukore 159-161).

What they were fighting was the age-old battle of mind or body; theatre appealed to the carnal nature, while Christianity appealed to the mind. We are back to Plato’s appeal for people to be ruled by reason, not emotion. The Puritans believed man had been created in such a way that the mind ruled over man’s emotions but with Adam’s fall emotion took over, and to this “theatre paid court and plunged the soul ever deeper into corruption” (Morgan 344). Like Plato, Puritans believed reason should be restored to its initial supremacy. A sermon appeals to the intellect; hence, Puritans valued sermons over the
sensual appeal of the plays. Emotions were considered only short-term persuasion tools for conversion, so the Puritans rejected them.

**The Power of Theatre: America**

As the population grew and America developed, so did Protestantism. “And when the theatre later became popular in the independent United States, churchmen continued to see in it a rival for the allegiance of human souls” (Morgan 346). In 1877, Newton presented twelve reasons for and twelve reasons against theatre: notably he says that theatre has the power to secularize those who attend (Newton 3). He says theatre’s “capabilities of good and evil are untold; its possibilities of leading its votaries up or down in the moral scale are great beyond any other institution of society” (1). Newton sees theatre as a powerful cultural influence, which is why he proposes to make it “purer and better” (8).

As Johnson and Savidge suggest in their book *Performing the Sacred*, in the 1920s Christians again began to recognize theatre’s power upon the culture: “When theatre and Christianity intersect, the potential for spiritual insight coupled with Truth is formidable” (16). Protestants also realized this cultural medium could be wielded to promote beliefs they were against. And when they started seeing this happen, they started to propose censorship to restrict the content and what could be shown in this influential medium. Civic and religious groups were also requesting government censorship of movies at this time. In response, the government hired respected Presbyterian deacon William H. Hays in 1922 as President of a new censoring agency, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, known today as Motion Picture Association of America (“Will H. Hays”).

The battle to control theatre’s powerful cultural influence was especially evident in censorship of the 1920s and 1930s. Even *Theatre Magazine* joined the existing seven agencies (three of them Protestant) that criticized the state of theatre, asserting in a 1923 article, “a flood of filth and indecency has lately descended on the American theatre,” agreeing with the censors that “official control seems the only remedy” (qtd. in Houchin 86). And official control was enacted. In 1927, actress Mae West,
producers, theater owners, and others were arrested for contributing to indecent productions, and their conviction resulted in fines and imprisonment (Houchin 100-104).

Also in America in the 1920s and 30s, the power of theatre can be seen in Aimee Semple McPherson’s insistence of using skits and theatrical techniques to impact people as part of her “illustrated” sermons (Epstein 254-257). In order to not alienate Protestants who had negative attitudes towards theatre at the time but also be able to use drama as she wanted, she primarily referenced biblical stories and verses taken directly from Scripture in the illustrations that accompanied her preaching. This is similar to the practice used by the Catholic Church during the medieval era, except that McPherson’s style was more unconventional.

From 1931 to 1949, campaigns for tighter control of dramatic entertainment of all kinds spread across the country, causing scripts to be censored, theaters to be shut down, and actors to be arrested or fined in cities such as Boston, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, New York, and Detroit (Houchin 120-161). The accusations of indecency and cries of dissatisfaction with theatre from agencies, media, and religious groups turned people’s interest away from attending theatre. In addition, the economic hardships of the Great Depression along with the arrival of popular new entertainments, such as radio and movies, also reduced theatre attendance. Radio was a cheaper form of entertainment, and increasingly theaters were converted to movie houses or closed down because they could not compete with “the new medium” (Houchin 118).

13 McPherson was a charismatic preacher who had a huge following both in America and abroad. She loved dancing and theatre and at first believed what she was told by the preacher who converted her; that these conflicted with being a Christian (Epstein 48). But by the time she opened the Angelus Temple in Los Angeles in 1923, she regularly incorporated drama and artistic forms of expression into her preaching; complete with costumes, props, and scenery (Epstein 253-254).

14 Epstein includes many examples of these in his biography about her. These include: wearing a shepherdess costume and shouldering a live lamb to illustrate Christ being the good shepherd (254), a live camel and makeshift set of an eye of a needle on the preaching platform to illustrate a rich man’s difficulty entering God’s kingdom (255), and a macaw amidst bold paper-mâché flowers and trees that represented the Garden of Eden (256).
The Origins of Theatre: Renaissance and Reformation

For Protestants, any imported entertainments from pagan cultures such as that of Rome were necessarily suspect. According to the Puritans, “In making images of God, in turning the sacrament into a ‘masse-play,’ the Catholic church became no better than a theatre, a church of the Antichrist” (Morgan 345). Coggin suggests that Puritans opposed theatre because they opposed those who supported it, such as Jesuits and Catholics, and also because of its pagan roots (Coggin 102).

In light of this, Northbrooke allowed no indulgence for plays or actors, saying that they should not be tolerated by the community and that the actors should be punished for choosing such a life (Dukore 159, 162). There were dissenters within Protestantism who turned social and economic objections to theatre into moral objections. Puritans believed theatre practitioners led idle lives (which was a sin in itself), inhibiting the development of citizens who could otherwise be contributing to the nation’s welfare with productive jobs (Prynne “Dedictory” 4). Not to leave out playwrights, in 1560 popular Anglican Bishop William Alley publically condemned playwrights as “defilers of the mind,” and plays as “lewd” (Thompson 44). The argument resurfaces that theatre is evil and that it seeks to deceive or damage its participants, actors in particular. Even the theatre buildings and richness of the actors’ costumes offended Renaissance Puritans, who considered both ostentatious, i.e., sinful (Barish 159).

Although Prynne admits that reading a play could be invigorating to the mind, when the plays were performed on stage, he says they become “an engine of perdition, violating every commandment of God” (qtd. in Morgan 341). Another historical argument that appears in Prynne’s book is the notion that evil forces inaugurated the theatre and continue to influence its way of life. Building his case against theatre, Prynne refers to Augustine, Aristotle, Tertullian, and many early Church Fathers. And Prynne praises Aristotle for advising judges to suppress plays in his own time. Like the early Church Fathers, Prynne attacks theatre “as a kind of anti-church, originating in the worship of pagan deities” (Morgan 343). Prynne believed that the devil invented plays with the specific intent to corrupt and destroy people’s souls (Prynne “Dedictory” **3). Morgan summarizes Prynne’s remarks: “Plays promote drunkenness,
luxury, impudence, theft, murder” (Morgan 343). Prynne sees these as works of the devil and enemies of virtue, daily leading multitudes away from God and on the way to hell (“Dedicatory” **3).

To build his case showing theatre originally was and remains an evil enterprise, Northbrooke refers to scripture. He says that plays are dishonest and not “mentioned or expressed” in Scripture, so they are therefore sinful and should be abolished (qtd. in Dukore 161). Like Tertullian and Augustine, Northbrooke also believed evil powers used theatre (an evil source) for their ends. He says, “I am persuaded that Satan hath not a more speedy way and fitter school to work and teach his desire to bring men and women into his snare of concupiscence and filthy lusts of wicked whoredom than those places and plays and theatres are” (qtd. in Dukore 159-160). And in fact, Prynne accurately takes account of the courtesans readily available in most theatre audiences or just outside the theatres at nearby brothels. This availability allowed for expedient engagement in the type of sexual sinning just seen around the corner in the plays (Morgan 342).

Puritans believed another negative physical problem created by theatre was its alleged inducement to homosexual sin. Puritans believed that men playing women’s roles and wearing female clothing, along with the plays’ emphasis on sexuality and emotion, directly led to sexual perversions and confused gender practices, including sodomy (Coogin 104, Morgan 342). Prynne considers heterosexual sin as bad as other sexual sins and says theatre leads to both of them.

Those who choose to attend commercial plays are reasoned with and harangued by Prynne. He warns that they are exposing themselves to plagues and poisons of the mind and soul (Prynne “Dedicatory” *2b). He says they will be plagued with strange visions and tendencies toward sexual sin, their bodies and will be encouraged to be idle, and they will be conflicted because they have so badly misspent their time, money, and attention (“Dedicatory” *2). Prynne argues that people cannot sincerely be a Christian and go to commercial theaters, that the two are incompatible and a choice has to be made (Prynne 111, 529). Puritans “regarded the act of attending the theatre as a form of communion with the
damned in forbidden rites” (Morgan 344). The stakes were high: Puritans and other fundamentalist Christians felt they not only had to stay away from the theaters but they also had to fight for people’s souls (344).

The Origins of Theatre: America

As in England, the Puritans who settled in America denounced the theater as a “‘Chapel of Satan’ that lured the faithful from church, promoted Papism, corrupted morals, and served as a marketplace for harlots” (Klein 37). Accordingly and not surprisingly then, the first theater in America was not built until 1716 and the first recorded performance of a play there was not until 1718, over one hundred years after Jamestown was established as a colony (Teague 12). Concerns about plays and theatre being unbeneﬁcial and perhaps sinful continued until The Continental Congress declared all theaters should be closed in 1774. And these sentiments continue into 1778, when the United States Congress approved legislation “condemning all theatrical representations” and other pastimes such as horse racing as “sinful and intolerable” (Barish 296). This kind of sentiment lasted a long time in America amongst Protestant Christians.

However, things began to change in the early twentieth century. Newton says that theatre was not organically evil, and he believes Christians can and should be trained to work in it (Newton 4). Protestants began recognizing that theatre and Christianity share essential elements—such as “incarnation, community, and presence”—and this facilitated acceptance of and reduced hostility to theatrical entertainments (Johnson and Savidge 16). Hence, the debate began to change from theatre’s intrinsic immorality (as Tertullian, early Church Fathers, and the Puritans preached) to what could be done in cooperation with theatre. The idea of eliminating theatre altogether was no longer considered practical or desirable.

Then again, in the 1920s and 1930s, moral censors “imagined that anarchistic forces that employed theatre as their principal weapon were attacking their culture and traditions” and theatre was
denounced again (Houchin 88). This sentiment is reminiscent of Tertullian. As the Great Depression wore on, Christians in positions of influence began to believe that the country was being punished for its immorality and hence needed to return to an alleged golden age of morality and discipline. Theatre, like other allegedly immoral cultural enterprises, needed to be “reformed and purified” (Houchin 127). One particular incident noteworthy to this study took place in Boston in 1935. Methodist and Episcopal clergy accused Sean O’Casey’s play *Within the Gates* of being vulgar, and slanderous to Christianity. The play was closed down before it even opened (Houchin 122). It appears that “in Boston any play that questioned the authority of traditional religion or the cruelty of the dominant heterosexual culture was banned as indecent and perverted” (122). It will be recalled that Boston was founded by Puritan colonists, and it seems their anti-theatrical prejudices continued unabated.

**Summary: Renaissance, Reformation, America through 1950**

The popularity and embrace of drama by the church in the Middle Ages changed dramatically in the Renaissance. Old familiar arguments against theatre resurfaced with vehemence. In regards to mimesis, John Calvin and William Alley denounced theatre as sinful because its practitioners imitated opposite genders, and they feared the public would imitate sinful behaviors they saw on stage. Protestants and Puritans such as William Prynne and John Northbrooke also denounced theatre during the Reformation because of its imitative properties and promotion of illusion over authenticity. Imitation concerns in early America were non-existent because theatre was non-existent for the colonists. Later as the country developed and people used their disposable income to attend theatre, imitation concerns arose as a major concern. In the early 1900s, American Protestants began a relentless battle of censorship against theatrical offerings and other cultural influences that they suspected to be harmful to public morality. They were concerned about the poor moral conduct being shown on stage and feared the public would behave similarly in real life, thus destroying proper moral behavior in their society.

As for the purpose of theatre, Protestants such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Thomas Cromwell found theatre quite useful. Luther and Calvin supported plays as vehicles to instruct people
about their faith, while Cromwell found plays instrumental in showing strengths of Protestantism over Catholicism. Later in the Reformation, John Northbrooke and William Prynne lashed out at those who saw value in theatre, writing at length about how theatre served a negative purpose. Early Americans found no practical purpose for theatre. As theaters were built and people began attending theatre increasingly, the debate amongst Protestants about theatre’s value and purpose began. In the nineteenth century, the general opinion was that art was not useful and therefore lacked any valuable purpose. But some Protestants such as William Newton and Charles Sheldon argued that theatre could be of value as a tool to show or spread their beliefs. In the early 1900s American Protestants were split about whether theatre could be reformed to serve their purposes. Alarmèd by increasing displays of a lack of good moral conduct on stage in the 1920s and beyond, Protestants mostly joined committees that censored or shut down commercial plays.

The power of theatre could be clearly seen during the Renaissance. The public attended theatre regularly and consistently chose attending it over attending church on Sundays. When the Reformation began, Martin Luther favored harnessing theatre’s power while other Protestants such as John Calvin considered its power unwieldy and better avoided. In America, theatre also became quite popular and culturally significant. Protestants saw theatre as a powerful tool that could be used to promote desirable or non-desirable social behavior. Protestants’ concerns and wariness about theatre’s power grew as its public popularity grew. In the early twentieth century Protestants were mainly trying to control theatre’s influence through censoring the content and behaviors shown in the plays.

The origin of theatre was not an issue during the early Renaissance, but it was a big issue for Protestants and Puritans during the Reformation. Puritans were offended by theatre’s alleged beginnings in pagan rituals and believed it remained an evil enterprise. Northbrooke and Prynne wrote about theatre as Satan’s tool, an anti-church where evil spirits bring about the downfall of mankind. They offered an ultimatum: people had to choose whether they wanted to be Christians who attend church or spectators who attend plays, but they could not be both. This sentiment also transferred to America when English
Puritans settled there. After one hundred years of living in America the first theatre was finally built, but that did not mean the controversy about theatre was over. While theatre’s pagan roots did not appear explicitly in the debates about theatre in America, a lingering suspicion did. Whenever concerns about public decency or immorality surface, theatre (and other art forms) were attacked or called into question.

The next chapter examines the four areas of contention from 1950 to 2010 in America.

![Figure 2: Comparison Chart of the Four Contention Areas—Renaissance through 1950 in America](image-url)
CHAPTER 4: ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST THEATRE - 1950 to 2010 in AMERICA

Introduction

The progress and retreat of reform movements in America continued well into the 1950s when a determined search was undertaken for Communist subversives in the entertainment community. In 1955 the House Un-American Activities Committee, led by the notorious Senator Joseph McCarthy, successfully associated professional theatre with Communism as well (Houchin 166). Nevertheless, theatres and other entertainment organizations continued to produce plays.

Studies from the 1930s through 1950s suggested that churchgoers were “less likely than the rest of the population to attend arts events in America” (Senkbeil, Why 5). Yet by 1997 there were at least fifteen professional theatres publicly run by Christians throughout North America, a fact which indicates the sizeable changes in Christian thinking about theatre (5).

Senkbeil credits social and political changes in the 1960s and 1970s for contributing to the rise of a considerable Protestant Christian subculture. He credits these changes to four motives. First, the “Jesus Movement” of the 1960s and 1970s promoted the concept of a highly visible Christian counterculture, which led to changes in the worship styles of many churches by incorporating more of the arts in their services (Senkbeil, Why 6). Second, special interest groups such as African American and women’s groups, opened theaters of their own in which they produced plays that allowed them to speak about their culture and express their beliefs as “alternative” groups within the main culture (6). This fact may have given Christian theatre groups a model for their own alternative theaters to produce plays that expressed the Christian viewpoint. Third, colleges and universities significantly enlarged their theatre programs during these years to accommodate the new interest in regional theaters. More Christians were attending college, which gave them access to theatre training that they then shared with their churches back home (Senkbeil, Why 6). And a number of Christian colleges established theatre programs as well. Fourth, the
success of Broadway musicals such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell* showed there was an audience for Christian stories, and, more important, that such stories could be commercially viable (6).

In the mid-1960s, several Christian-owned theatre companies began producing plays that spoke about significant social issues. This indicated that Christians were taking theatre more seriously, developing “a more complex understanding of theatre,” and moving beyond the safe, sanitized form of theatre previously advocated by Protestants (Senkbeil *Faith* 68). And after 1965, “Christian involvement in theatre expanded significantly at all levels” (Senkbeil *Faith* 69). However, Senkbeil also points out that despite all these positive changes supporting growth of Christians doing theatre, they were still having “lingering concerns about the morality of theatre” and its purpose in worship services or as part of the Christian life (Senkbeil, *Why* 8).

While Christians were learning about and embracing drama, they had not given up on criticizing or censoring mainstream theatre. Significant social and moral challenges were fracturing American society, and Christians were fighting a losing battle to retain cultural influence. The general public and mainstream artists endeavored to challenge the establishment, resulting in nudity and sexuality along with profanity and anti-American sentiment flooding commercial and regional theatres during the 1960s (Houchin 174). Also, all kinds of erotic films flooded the American market from 1963-1968 to which Christians responded by voting conservatives into office to tighten laws about what can be taught or shown in public institutions (Houchin 204-207). And in 1970, conservatives organized the Presidential Commission on Obscenity and Pornography (219). After several shocking disappointments about the direction of the culture, by the mid-1970s Protestant Christians had created enough infrastructures into which they could withdraw, leaving the popular culture to its own devices (Houchin 227-228).

While many Protestants followed the path of withdrawal from mainstream culture in the 1970s, some influential voices spoke out against it. In 1973, Francis Schaeffer, Evangelical theologian and Presbyterian pastor, challenged Protestants’ detached way of thinking in his booklet *Art and the Bible*. He
disagreed with the perspective of only focusing on religious issues and forgetting about art and culture (Schaeffer 13). Schaeffer contends that Christians have misunderstood what the Bible says about the arts; and to those who claim it does not say anything about them, he advises they read it more carefully (19).

From about 1910 to the 1970s in America, many within Protestantism had taken the position that the world was lost so Christians should not be involved with it; they should focus on their personal salvation instead (Houchin 227). In the latter part of the twentieth century, disagreements about the moral value of theatre continued, but their nature had changed. Some Protestants and Christian artists began vigorously defending and advocating the arts, including theatre. In 1980, Dr. Calvin Seerveld published *Rainbows for the Fallen World: Aesthetic Life and Artistic Task*, which influenced the Christian scholarly community and many Christian artists as well. His stance is that Christians should be engaged in creating culture. In fact, Seerveld says it is “not optional” and withdrawing from it is not biblical (24-25). He goes on to criticize American Christians for having abandoning the arts in the past few decades and then complaining about “the unbelieving, God-damning artistic culture that results” from their absence (Seerveld 35). Jonas Barish published his aforementioned magnum opus about theatrical prejudice in 1981. In the spirit of the previous authors of this decade, Barish also offers arguments in favor of theatre.

The 1990s showed continued support and arguments in favor of theatre. Interestingly enough, defense arguments in support of theatre often centered on the same four historical areas of criticism from previous eras. Also at this time, a new perspective about performance in the Bible emerged. Max Harris, professor, Presbyterian minister and former executive director of the Wisconsin Humanities Council, explored the intersection of theatre and Christianity in his book *Theater and Incarnation*. He looks at all of Scripture as theatrical telling. The importance of the Incarnation, which Harris says is “through and through theatrical,” moves to the forefront as a key argument in defense of actors and theatre (Harris viii). Also prominent in the early 1990s was the idea that art should be an active part of everyday life, not separate as in a museum, and it has equal weight of impact as spoken words do, i.e., sermons (Begbie193, 248).
With the turn of the twenty-first century, a plethora of books continued to be published in favor of Christians engaging with the arts. In these publications, theatre is generally or directly included in the overall category of “the arts,” so when I refer to art here, that includes theatre. In this century it is difficult to find a publication from Protestants that attacks theatre as in previous centuries. However, negativity towards theatre is still evident, albeit in a more subtle way.

In 2003 Robert Wuthnow published interesting results from his four-year study (1998-2002) about arts and religion in America. There were 1,530 interviews conducted across forty-eight states of a randomly selected sample of adults that included a variety of ethnic, gender, occupation, and age ranges (Wuthnow 249, 253). His discussion is mostly about spirituality in America, and a large number of Protestants are part of his sample (253). Early in his book he makes a summary statement saying that he found widespread, growing public interest in the arts during the four years of his study and that spirituality was contributing to it (19).

In regard to theatre in particular, Wuthnow found that about three-fourths of all the church members of Protestant denominations included in the study have an appreciation for the arts and think it is important to go to the theatre or a museum periodically (137). And apparently many Protestant churches took notice of the interest and connection people had with theatre because over half of the respondents said their church had produced a play or dramatic sketch over the past year (Wuthnow 143). Wuthnow also writes that by 1999, “more than six hundred congregations around the country” were including drama as a regular part of the service (157).

However, Wuthnow also found that one in four evangelical Protestants and one in nine mainline Protestants viewed the arts negatively and were in agreement that artists “dishonor God,” do not respect churches, and “symbolize moral decay” (221). And of the sixty randomly selected pastors in the study forty percent agreed with statements that artists were contributing to the moral decline of society and leading people away from the Bible (Wuthnow 223). There seems to be a disconnect here. Though people
see the arts as a way to connect to God spiritually and they value theatre, there is a subtle negativity, or anti-theatrical prejudice, towards artists and theatre that still seems to be present in the early twenty-first century.

In 2004, Jensen and others reveal a possible supporting underpinning to this puzzling and subtle negativity towards theatre and the arts. Jensen says that the church in which she grew up was not hostile to the arts but it did not value or embrace them either (2). She points out that treating the arts as a non-entity is more dismissive than attacking them. She believes the lack of edification or recognition leaves churchgoers with a sense that the arts are insignificant or to be ignored. And in 2010, head pastor David Taylor adds more directly that he was taught “to view the arts as ultimately expendable, a luxury far from the center of biblical Christianity” (Taylor 21). Despite previous movement and admonition to accept theatre and other arts by and for Christians, in the twenty-first century there still seems to be anti-theatrical prejudice at work.

As a reminder, the four main areas of contention and themes of criticism discussed include: (1) Theatre’s use of imitation/mimesis; (2) The purpose of theatre; (3) The power of theatre; and (4) The origins of theatre. As before, the themes will be examined in this same order and chronologically within each area.

**Theatre’s Use of Imitation/Mimesis**

Concerns about imitation can be gathered from the fervor of the previously-mentioned reform movements of the 1950s and the increasing regulation of what could be shown on stage (or on screen) in the 1960s in America. This area is addressed in the literature of the 1970s, but not in the discouraging way as it has in the past. Unlike Plato, Schaeffer believed that good art did not have to reproduce reality exactly (Schaeffer 91). Earlier arguments about it being sinful to alter what God had made, because this kind of imitation was not authentic, are addressed by Schaeffer as well. In support of it being acceptable to alter what God has made, Schaeffer references God’s specific commands in Exodus 26:14 about dying
fabric and ram skins for the Tabernacle (24). With this in mind, Tertullian’s aversion to dying cloth seems unfounded. And contrary to Plato, Schaeffer would say true mimesis does need to include non-heroic moments or characters. He believes that Christianity represents the whole of life and that art done by Christians must also be holistic or it will just remain ineffective, sentimental art (Schaeffer 85).

In 1977, Frederick Buechner, in his book *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*, expands Schaeffer’s argument that Christian art should not be sanitized. The fear or concern that people would simply imitate bad behavior that they see on stage in their real lives seems to be outdated or ignored. If Christians and their art are to be culturally relevant, Buechner argues that they need to show the whole story in their art, including the unpleasant things (Buechner 4). Just showing good or redemptive parts of a story is not telling the whole story. He reminds readers that Good Friday came only after bad things happened, but the bad was necessary for the good to occur (Buechner 36).

In 1980, L’Engle includes this defense, showing the continuation of this argument amongst Protestants, but L’Engle does not see any topics as off limits to Christian artists. She references God taking the form of sinful man to ground her argument, “There is nothing so secular that it cannot be sacred, and that is one of the deepest messages of the Incarnation” (L’Engle 56). And it is significant that though she does not reference past groups such as the early Church Fathers, L’Engle addresses the ancient argument that artists are sinners and lead sinful lives. She makes the point that God gives everyone the gift of freedom to make choices but “the artist has more temptations to abuse the gift” than perhaps those in other professions (L’Engle 91).

In 1981 Barish addresses the lingering sanction against imitating others by wearing costumes/clothes not their own. In regards to dying cloth for costumes and men wearing women’s garments in plays, which upset Prynne and other Puritans, Barish calls attention to how female saints “dressed as men in order to escape their persecutors,” joined monasteries, and lived commendable lives, all the while in so-called disguise (Barish 90). Barish points out that even authoritative Christian reformer
Martin Luther made allowance for male actors to wear female costumes in comedies or tragedies (125). And to Tertullian and the Puritans who equated change with hypocrisy or being ungodly (since God is unchanging), Barish points out that Christian teaching does not condemn such changes, “even such expressly histrionic forms of change as disguise” (Barish 113). In fact, Barish mentions how God and angels appear in disguise in scripture several times, which could be evidence of using disguise for sanctified ends (114, 125). Since these written narratives are permitted, Barish says “it must be lawful for the stage to do likewise” (125).

Barish address another imitation concern of Puritans and others before them, and that is that theatre depends on deception. But he presents this as a positive rather than a negative feature, saying deception allows plays to instruct. Use of deception enables plays “to teach without dogmatizing, to convey valuable lessons while seeming merely to tell stories” (Barish 204). This cannot be condemned since storytelling is the vehicle Jesus used to teach lessons in his parables.

In 1991, Jeremy Begbie offers a related argument for seeing imitation positively. He says that use of one’s imagination in theatre enriches and illuminates everyday life (Begbie 252). His need to justify using imagination is a telling sign of the lingering anti-theatrical prejudice that imagination was considered dangerous, passed down from Plato and the Puritans. Begbie ends his book with what he sees as the church’s position at this time: “The belief that the arts are always aimed at creating illusion, or that they can express nothing more than emotional states, or that they can never be anything more than ornamental – all these are regrettable misunderstandings which can only impoverish the Church’s life and mission” (258).

Diana Trotter, Christian scholar and professor, looked at Christian theatre companies for her dissertation in 1995. Of particular interest to my study were the statements from the actors. She found several actors who spoke of the personal and spiritual benefits gained by playing characters. However, it also seems Plato’s concern about the negative effects of imitation, especially on performers, still lingers
in 1995. The struggles the Christian actors in Trotter’s study expressed were about the discomfort they felt playing certain negative characters (Trotter 56-59). Rather than outside critics, these were the performers who experienced an internal struggle with the incarnational demands of good acting, fearing some kind of contamination would result from playing negative characters or imitating immoral actions (58). It seems the actors themselves had inherited theatrical prejudice about the very art they loved to practice.

Apparently negative criticism of actors, especially debated in Roman times, was still resonating in the early twenty-first century amongst American Protestants. In 2005, Max Harris lays out a direct challenge to the idea that acting is hypocritical, condemned in scripture by Jesus and Paul in the New Testament. Harris explains that Jesus himself playacted but was not hypocritical because, like actors, Jesus did not pretend to be someone on the outside that was inconsistent with who He was on the inside (Harris 71). Harris uses theatrical terms as he refers to Jesus as a revealer of truth who “walked the dusty stage” of Earth (11) to shed light “on the world offstage” in a unique way (49). Harris calls Jesus a “consummate performer” who knew how to keep a crowd waiting for his next word (65), apply subtext through facial expression (25), challenge and provoke an audience (66), and leave an audience wanting more (72). He pronounces that Christ’s modeling of these traits endorses the actor’s craft. This perspective is quite bold and radically different from previous eras where actors and the imitative craft of acting were resoundingly condemned as evil.

In the instances where Jesus and Paul used the word hypocrite, Harris says that they were not condemning playing or playacting, but rather the “dissonance between public façade and private sin” (Harris 71). In fact, Harris points out that “Jesus cast himself in the role of servant” especially during the Last Supper, and the role of “condemned criminal” where he died for real in front of an antagonistic audience (66-67). His conclusion is that Scripture and the Incarnation are inherently theatrical, which should direct Protestants to reconsider any latent anti-theatrical prejudice.
As for depicting sinful behavior on stage and whether that incites imitative behavior, Brian Godawa\(^{15}\) writes that the Bible shows mankind’s sinful behavior but as part of the larger story of redemption (Godawa 12). He then proceeds to list specific behaviors mentioned in the Bible and their scriptural references, of which here are a few: adultery (Prov. 7), incest (Gen. 19:31-36), masochism and satanic worship (I Kings 18:25-28), sexual orgies (Ex. 32: 3-6), prostitution (Gen. 38:12-26), rape (2 Sam. 13:6-14), vulgar insults (I Kings 12:10), and the list goes on (Godawa 13). Also, Godawa writes that theatre should not be rejected as a materialistic undertaking because God chose to substantiate the importance of the material world by incarnating Himself and then using the example to act out the “dramatic performance of His Word and will within time and space. Jesus acts out God’s scripted will of a redemptive story” (13).

**The Purpose of Theatre**

In the 1950s, American churches began re-considering drama’s potential. There was a post-war boom in church membership, and Protestants were looking for ways to reach out and spread their messages to new congregants and the American population (Senkbeil, *Faith* 57). Churches began to welcome drama performed in church again, but conditionally, and only if the church plays served the church’s purposes (Johnson and Savidge 43). Coogin writes that by 1956 churches had almost fully overcome their earlier resistance to drama and committees even started advising churches how to produce religious drama for instructional purposes (Coogin 282). Several Protestant seminaries developed theatre education programs (Senkbeil, *Faith* 61). Attitudes towards theatre had definitely changed; Protestants not only saw church drama as a means to share their beliefs, but through commercial drama as well.

However, the quality of the theatre being done by Christians at this time was criticized. Ugo Betti, a devout Christian and one of the greatest playwrights of the twentieth century, was one of those critics. In his article originally published in 1960 called *Religion and the Theatre*, Betti states that he sees

\(^{15}\) Godawa is a Christian author, lecturer, and award-winning screenwriter.
the desire to reestablish religious tenets as more important than ever in people’s consciousness (Betti 114). He believed theatre could facilitate people’s hunger, but he found that there was either indifference to the subject of religion in the plays at that time, or the plays that had a Christian perspective or message were failing to meet people’s needs (122). Betti said that most Christian-message plays were not sufficiently realistic, and therefore ineffective, and that they lacked the kind of emotive power that could lead people to make changes in their lives (119). Clearly, Betti saw theatre as an instructional tool for spiritual transformation.

Ehrensperger’s Religious Drama: Ends and Means, published in 1962, explains how to lead a drama group for churches. An example of a typical Protestant publication about drama at the time, the book offers insight into the Protestant Christian view of theatre, which is that drama should serve to show truth, meaning, and purpose in life that will result in spiritual growth (Ehrensperger 21, 67). Ehrensperger, an influential Christian leader, is positive about the benefits of this art form for everyone, Christians in particular, and he does not limit drama to that performed in church. He saw value in theatre specifically because of its unique ability to provide perspective through vicarious experience, thus influencing individuals to be less self-centered (Ehrensperger 72). While Puritans and earlier Protestants believed that imagination was dangerous and sinful, Ehrensperger sees it as essential to developing good Christian character, naming theatre as the best way to develop appropriate moral values.

The majority of Protestant Christians had forsaken culture and the arts in the 1970s, believing they were righteous by focusing only on religious topics. But Schaeffer speaks against that kind of separation. He argues that the arts serve a purpose and should not be peripheral in a Christian’s life (Schaeffer 18). For those who are gifted in theatre work, theatre’s purpose is to be their place of work. For non-artists, Schaeffer believes every Christian has the gift of creativity and should use it to make their life their greatest work of art (Schaeffer 49).
In regards to the purpose of art, Schaeffer draws attention to the artwork God instructed Solomon to create for the Temple in 2 Chronicles 3-4:3. Most of these designs illustrated non-religious subjects and served no utilitarian or pragmatic purpose; they simply showed that God loves beauty. Schaeffer contends this shows God’s point of view, that art does not have to be utilitarian or express a specifically religious subject matter (Schaeffer 26). Several years later, Frank Brown addresses the debate about whether art has to be beautiful or useful for it to be justified, and like Schaeffer, believes that art does not need to serve a purpose beyond itself (Brown 83). Like all of God’s designs, some art is to be enjoyed just for its own sake.

Schaeffer responds to the belief that Christian art is simply a mode for a message and that drama used only as a tool for education or for evangelism is acceptable. This was the persistent position especially popular with Christians from the medieval era and early 1900s. Schaeffer criticizes Protestants for ascribing value to a work of art only if it appeals to our intellect and can be reduced to a religious tract, and he warns this type of thinking “reduces art to an intellectual statement and the work of art as a work of art disappears” (Schaeffer 54, 56).

In addition, Schaeffer wrote that art done by Christians does not have to be about religion at all. He reminds us that when God created the universe, he did not just create things with religious subjects or objects. Rather, He created mountains, trees, bird songs, birds, the sound of the wind, oceans, suns, galaxies, and so on. (Schaeffer 88). And since much of this God-created art was not placed inside a religious building nor had Bible verses stamped on them, Schaeffer argues that neither does our artwork need these things to be acceptable (38).

Defense for the purpose of theatre continued into the 1980s. As for the purpose actors can serve, in 1980 Calvin Seerveld published a book proposing that artists cultivate culture and contribute greatly to

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16 Doors and walls were overlaid with gold, precious stones were inlaid into the walls, angels were carved on the walls, statues of oxen held up the altar, angelic sculptures and patterned curtains were inside, and free-standing columns with attached ornamentation were outside.
society. He calls their hard work “priestly service” that requires everything from them (Seerveld 27). This touches on the inherited anti-theatrical prejudice, especially touted by the Romans and Puritans, that actors are idle and useless. Seerveld compares the gestation time it takes artists to prepare and produce their work to the nine months it takes a pregnant woman to create a child, granting both acts cultural significance (28).

In 1981, Barish questions the anonymous preacher from the fourteenth century who found no purpose for theatre since he believed Christians must be pious, sacrifice pleasure, and not perform in public. Barish says that David and Israel’s engagement in music, dancing, and displaying of self (2 Sam. 6:5 and 2 Sam. 6-20-21) is in essence theatrical play (Barish 74). He defends David’s dancing (with no evidence of negative consequences) as God approving joy and gladness, which could be considered valid purposes of theatre as well. Barish also defends performing miracle plays, even on Sundays, saying God commanded “mirth and ease” on holidays as a foretaste of Heaven (Barish 75). Essentially saying that whether one saw the purpose of performing on Sundays as for pleasure or education, there was biblical support for the occurrence. And as mentioned earlier, Barish finds value in theatre’s ability to instruct, even though deception is employed.

In the 1990s, the education versus entertainment debate of theatre’s purpose was clearly still in the forefront of discussions amongst Protestants. Jeremy Begbie recounts previous eras where art was thought to convey only pleasure, not transmit information or truth, which he believes created an isolation where art did not connect with people’s everyday experience (Begbie 189). Thus it became ineffective and irrelevant (194). And he includes art done by Christians in his criticism, which he says deteriorated to “inoffensive and superficial Kitsch which turns a blind eye to the pain of the world” (213). Begbie believes works of art should be purposeful, engaging with the disorder and distortion of the world to which Christians can offer a unique perspective (179). This perspective can serve the purpose of helping individuals to change attitudes about their daily lives (Begbie 252).
Trotter agrees that drama should have a purpose but says the purpose-driven perspective can go too far. She points out some churches and Christian theatre practitioners see theatre as a “conversionary” tool, used to communicate their beliefs to outsiders in hopes they will convert to Christianity (Trotter 116). This seems to be the perspective of late nineteenth to early twentieth century Christians who were advocating that the Church be supportive of drama for such purposes. Conversion plays are ineffective, says Trotter, though not the essential purpose of drama, even in church. Trotter offers that theatre’s purpose is in its “inclusive” nature, its unique ability to create connections and bridge gaps between the Christian community and the outside world (118). And she wishes Protestants would recognize drama’s value to speak also to its own membership (159). Rather than having a conversionary purpose, she believes theatre can be helpful to Christian communities for self-discovery, developing compassion, revealing truth, challenging beliefs and practices, affirming identity, and exploring new possibilities (159).

Despite the growth he sees of the church embracing and using drama in their services, Pederson also testifies to the resistance to use drama he still finds in churches. In his experience, a significant amount of Protestants dismiss drama as merely “entertainment,” not fit to be used in church. The rationale is that a traditional worship service for Christians is an inappropriate venue for anything that hints at entertainment, because “worship and entertainment are antithetical” (Pederson 15). He declares that drama is entertainment, but does not see this as a negative as Christians historically have done. He states that good entertainment can be “truthful and enlightening,” elicit healing laughter, or deeply move people; and as a result it is desirable (15). This belief does support the point of view that drama must serve a purpose to be used in church. But unlike early twentieth century Protestants, Pederson does not believe drama in church should preach; that is still the pastor’s job (25). He believes the drama should serve to break down people’s defenses and help them “get in touch with an issue or problem” that the pastor can then address (25).
Moving into the early years of the twenty-first century, the purpose of the arts, including theatre, is still being debated. In his impressive 2003 study, Wuthnow discovered that though about seventy-five percent of those surveyed said they were interested in spiritual growth, they also admitted they did not think church teachings were the best way to help them know God (Wuthnow 52). Wuthnow’s survey results and interviews with church leaders also showed that the majority of congregants and leaders thought the arts could help people deepen their spirituality (68-69). Yet only half of those in the study reported that their congregation did a drama or skit within the previous year (143). Clearly, people are seeking spiritual growth but not being assisted in a helpful way at church, and while many churches agree the arts could assist with this, they are not consistently following through on incorporating drama. Perhaps this is related to the idea of drama as entertainment and not fit for church that Pederson found in 1999.

Wuthnow found a backlash among some Protestant churches against use of the arts and imagery. This is especially true in the nationwide assemblies of Calvary Chapels, where emphasis on preaching and prominence of words “reflects a broader pattern in American evangelicalism in recent years” (Wuthnow 159). One pastor interviewed in Wuthnow’s study displayed a persistent anti-theatrical prejudice when he said that he thought images encouraged people to worship them instead of God. This pastor also remarked that since people are no longer illiterate, they do not need visual arts as they did in the past; reading the Bible is sufficient (Wuthnow 159). But music employed during services, this same pastor insists, is a tool to get people ready to hear from the Bible, just “a means rather than an end in itself” (Wuthnow 160).

The Puritanical inheritance that things must be utilitarian or they are useless still seems to exist among many contemporary Christians. However, as in the 1970s, there are some prominent voices that speak against the seemingly majority perspective. Joel Pelsue is an ordained minister, classically trained musician, and founder of Arts & Entertainment Ministries. He advises and gives seminars for Protestant Christian pastors and artists throughout New York and California about Christianity and the arts. I attended some of those seminars in October 2010. Pelsue says that the art in the Temple and the
Tabernacle proves that art does not always have to be functional (lecture). He says creativity has been given by God for the purpose of increasing fellowship among peoples, and being creative should support this intention. In theatre, examples of this are the fellowship among the cast and the actor-audience relationship that produce a sense of community and satisfaction for everyone that occurs when a performance is well done (Pelsue, lecture).

As for whether there is value or purpose to theatre, in 2010 Godawa writes that “God considers theatrical expression to be an important means of disclosing truth, as well as disclosing Himself,” scripture being “a dramatic script written by God for the stage of the world” (11). He further states that the intent behind God’s use of dramatic means is to show man’s frequent inhumanity to others and his rebellion against God; it is not simply, or not only, entertainment (Godawa 13).

The Power of Theatre

The prolific regulations in the 1950s and 1960s attest to the presumed power of film and theatre on cultural behavior and acceptable social norms. And in the 1970s it is apparent that the early Church Fathers’ concern about the power of images on worshippers is still prevalent in American Protestantism. This is evidenced by the fact that Schaeffer includes this concern in his 1973 book in which he explains the popular argument as follows: the biblical commandment that prohibits making graven images means people should not make a likeness of anything in Heaven or earth, which leaves no place for art in a Christian’s life (Schaeffer 19). Schaeffer does not deny the power images can have, nor does he ascribe negativity to that power. Rather, he points out the reasoning behind that Second Commandment, found in Leviticus 26:1, which says people are not to make or set up images that will be worshipped. Worship is for God alone. Schaeffer brings this different perspective to the age-old contention, claimed to be found in scripture, against theatre. He clarifies, “Scripture does not forbid the making of representational art but rather the worship of it;” idolizing art is wrong but making or enjoying art is not wrong (Schaeffer 20). To prove his point Schaeffer reminds us that of all the ways God could have chosen to save the Israelites in
the desert. He told Moses to make an image of a snake as a means for their salvation (Num. 21:8), and Jesus later used this same work of art to illustrate his upcoming crucifixion (33).

Schaeffer also references the seemingly persistent argument (sacred to Plato and the Puritans) that words and the intellect should be preferred over images and emotions. He replies there is “no dichotomy or hierarchy between the body and the soul” because God made them both; therefore, both have equal value (14). Schaeffer calls attention to the importance God gave art when He gave the Ten Commandments (words) at the same time He commanded the Tabernacle be built containing representational art everywhere (Schaeffer 20-21). And in answer to the rebuttal that art in the Tabernacle was acceptable since it had a religious subject matter, or that theatre has to have a religious subject matter to be acceptable, Schaeffer points out all the non-religious subject matter God ordered (22).17

A few years later, in 1977, Buechner emphasizes that Jesus Christ chose to illustrate the gospel message. Instead of prioritizing sermons to teach God’s ways, as the Puritans preferred, Jesus chose to tell provocative, irreverent, and sometimes elusive stories to illustrate God’s principles (Buechner 63). This was a powerful way to communicate, and one that was closer to the common people he wanted to reach.

Using images and metaphor to illustrate truths leads back to a concern of Plato’s, though Buechner does not make the connection. Plato feared images would speak to that uncontrollable, secret dream place people had that should not be released. Buechner says that is exactly the place that must be addressed if Christians want “to say anything that really matters to anyone including themselves” (4). This inner part of us—where both good and bad impulses come from—speaks the language of images, so truth must be communicated in that way (Buechner 4). Buechner sees the image-heavy medium of theatre as a constructive art form, though it has been seen so negatively in previous eras.

17 These included candlesticks, which were not only non-religious but ornately designed (Ex. 25:31-33), and priests’ garments emboldened with blue, purple, and scarlet colored pomegranates. A pomegranate is not a religious subject matter nor do blue pomegranates occur in nature.
The power of theatre was also recognized and a topic of conversation for Protestants in the 1980s. Unlike the disconnection advocated by the Church Fathers, Puritans, and early Americans, Seerveld advocates deep involvement of the arts by Christians necessitated by an image-driven civilization (Seerveld 36). He believes it is vital that those Christians who cannot be artists should support Christian artists because they are “fighting the fight of faith on one of the most significantly formative battlefields of our modern life” (36).

In the 1990s, there still seems to be a prevailing need to privilege images over words. Harris hypothesizes it is the sensory aspect of theatre, rather than reliance on words, that are safer and more controllable and that causes Christians to remain uncomfortable with theatre (Harris 72). And he argues that a predominately literary approach to Scripture which focuses on the written word is not without value; it is merely incomplete (25).

Begbie addresses the lingering belief that a sermon is more powerful and valuable than an artistic mode for a message: “in the Protestant West, the representative arts are frequently seen as a kind of ornament, a decorative substitute for what can be plainly stated, a colourful wrapping to attract people’s attention, dispensable when the ‘real’ truth appears elsewhere in the service (usually in the sermon)” (Begbie 248). He also addresses concerns originating with Plato about emotional expression. Begbie says churches are suspicious of the arts because they see them as prioritizing emotional expression “rather than the more serious business of truth-telling” (249). Apparently some churches see these issues as mutually exclusive. His point is that use of emotion and illusion are other ways of communicating to people and knowing the world; this is different but not inferior to other ways of gaining knowledge about the world (Begbie 257).

In 2000, Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts, Trevor Hart observes that Christian artists are still struggling against Plato’s ancient argument against theatre. That is, the power of theatre or
any art can be used for both good and immoral purposes. Even in this modern age, art is still “viewed negatively, as a potential source of untruth and idolatry” (Hart 2).

Jensen depicts the church’s stance towards art in 2004, and it was not positive. He believes that the church should recognize the change from a predominately verbal culture to a visual one in which art should no longer be considered extra but “something essential to the shaping of faith and religious experience” (2). Wuthnow reports that when people are asked where they find “inspiration, guidance, or comfort,” it is usually though some type of artwork, “not anything the minister ever said in a sermon” (Wuthnow 245).

Jensen deepens the discussion about the importance of the Incarnation, while battling the prevailing preference of words over imagery. He says, “God did not self-reveal in the words of Scripture alone; God also appeared in a visible, physical form, with weight and mass, color and texture. The notion that theological insight can come through an artist’s creative expression is justified at the very center of our confession of faith” (Jensen 12). And unlike the joyful, happy images Reverend Sheldon wanted to see in the early 1900s, Jensen believes “encountering an image of terrible sadness, horror, or even ugliness can motivate us to compassion and action in ways more effective than any verbal exhortations” (80).

The vilification of art because of its appeal to the senses is also discussed in Brown’s 2005 book, *Voicing Creation’s Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts*, as a modern stumbling block for Christians. But Brown sees it as a positive influence. He discusses how the senses transport the mind to a higher world (Brown 59). The sacraments and the Incarnation are given as justification of the importance of physicality along with spirituality in this world (59).

In 2008 James Maxey, Bible translator for over twenty years, explored the research and possibilities of this new perspective on art and religion. He established that “literary bias” is still prevalent in how people believe they are to understand the Bible today, which has “inhibited reflection of the Bible
as a collection of performance-oriented compositions” (Maxey 183). Maxey finds Scripture inherently theatrical. He argues that New Testament stories in particular were initially performed and not restricted to individual, silent reading as the recommended practice is today. He writes that biblical stories were visual, embodied performances including stage directions, facial expressions, gestures, emotional state, etc., that created strong connections between audience and performer (Maxey 10, 184-186).

And in 2010, Godawa references the continued argument that words or a sermon are more influential or more in keeping with God’s way than other forms of communication. He reminds his readers that of all things, Jesus chose to teach people about the Kingdom of God through stories “of weddings, investment bankers, unscrupulous slaves, and buried treasure over syllogisms, abstraction, systematic, or dissertations” (Godawa 14). And this was not because Jewish culture at the time was too simplistic or uneducated to understand other modes of communication (14). Story was chosen because it is creative, inviting, and a rich means of communication. Dramatic performance is incarnational; it presents a living worldview and is powerful as it “brings concrete bodily expression to abstract ideas” (Godawa 13). Godawa concludes that while we downplay dramatic performance, “God embraces such incarnation as a vital means of communicating his message. We elevate rational discourse as superior and theater as inferior…while God elevates dramatic narrative equally with rational discourse as part of our *imago dei*” (Godawa 14).

**The Origins of Theatre**

Evidence of Protestant contentions with the origins of theatre does not appear in mid-twentieth century America. This does surface in Protestant writings later in the twentieth century. In 1980 L’Engle states that she has found that some Protestant colleges maintain the belief that theatre is “wicked” and

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18 Maxey writes that Mark’s gospel in particular contains performance clues (including pauses for audience applause), and was likely to have been completely performed by early Christians (192, 197). Maxey points out that Acts specifically contain four kinds of gestures to help the performer tell its stories correctly, including the signal giving permission for someone else to speak (197).
cannot show truth (L’Engle 82). She sees this in a more subtle way too; historical decisions are made by many Christian colleges to allow their students to do plays only if they are part of a Speech or Communication program rather than an official Theatre program (82).

L’Engle traces prejudice against storytelling to our childhood when so many of us are told fiction cannot be true, and “telling a story” is equated with lying (L’Engle 59). She also argues Satan is behind this deception. She writes: “It is one of the greater triumphs of Lucifer that he has managed to make Christians (Christians!) believe that a story is a lie, that a myth should be outgrown with puberty, that to act in a play is inconsistent with true religion” (94-95). This is an interesting twist, since in earlier eras Satan was thought to be responsible for enticing and damaging Christians at theaters, while now he is accused of keeping them away from it.

Another attempt by Puritans and other critics to discredit theatre was to point out that it is not specifically mentioned or sanctioned in Scripture (so it must be evil or avoided). Barish records a response to this conviction. To the argument that there is no mention or approval of actors in Old Testament times so all actors are damned, he says neither is there mention of blacksmiths or a myriad of other occupations so by this logic they would be damned too (Barish 121). And as a trade, acting and theatre are not specifically commended in New Testament times but Barish points out that neither were other trades such as dentistry, firefighting, or a host of other professions so this is not a valid line of reasoning either (121). Also directed at Puritan legacy, Barish counters Prynne’s condemnation of plays invented by “idolatrous heathens” by pointing out letters used to write books were also invented by heathens yet they are used freely and without condemnation (Barish 124).

It seems suspicions about artists and their art continue into the year 2000. Hart finds that the products of the artist are still looked at as inferior, possibly suspect, or leading people away from truth (3). And in 2007, Kuritz charges theatre artists to retain integrity while working in what he bluntly calls “Satan’s playground,” meaning theatre (Kuritz 148). It is amazing that such an argument is made in the
first decade of the 20th century. When Kuritz encourages Christian artists to remain strong while working in “the house of Satan” (150), it sounds like remnants of Tertullian, Augustinian, and especially Puritan ideology. These disturbing references are worthy of note because there is no debate about whether they are true or not; they are simply presented as fact.

Pelsue addresses the ever-present argument that art is idolatrous and leads to sin. Besides agreeing with others that the bronze snake example in scripture has been misconstrued, he takes up the example of the golden calf in Exodus 32 (lecture). Because the Israelites created this piece of artwork and then it was destroyed, it has been used as evidence for those who say all artwork is a form of idolatry. Pelsue reminds people that just like the serpent, people had started worshipping this piece of art and that is when God became angry with them. Pelsue points out that anything you place hope or identity in can become an idol, and that even a pastor can mistakenly lead people to create idols like the golden calf. Art and artists are neither evil nor forbidden; they are commissioned by God and used by God, only getting into trouble when the art starts being worshipped in and for itself (Pelsue lecture).

In 2010, Brian Godawa wrote a definitive rejoinder to those Christians who believe drama is unacceptable for many reasons, but mainly because it is not specifically mentioned in the Bible. Since Christians view the Bible as God’s specific instructions, “the biblical use of theater, spectacle, fictional parable, and dramatic performance answers the question of whether the use of theater is ‘false’ or untruthful” (Godawa 11). Given that God uses fictional drama and role-playing often to show truth, Godawa says the medium itself is not “intrinsically untruthful;” on the contrary, the intent “to deceive or tell the truth is what determines the morality of the drama” (12). St. Augustine’s voice seems to resonate in Godawa here.

And for those who are suspect of theatre because they think it does not find approval in the Bible, Godawa gives many performance examples from Scripture. He calls Ezekiel a performance artist who acted out the “play of war” mentioned earlier, cut his hair and distributed it as a story of God’s judgment
(Ezek. 5:1-4), covered his face and dragged luggage around while speaking dialogue (12:1-11), quaked in fear while eating to demonstrate Israel’s upcoming emotional state (12:17-20), and performed a magical act symbolizing Israel’s national merger (37:15-23) (Godawa 10). Godawa also recounts dramatic acts performed by other Old Testament prophets such as Jeremiah and Isaiah with equal detail and breadth. Not forgetting those who say that was only in the Old Testament, while Christians abide by the new covenant expressed in the New Testament, Godawa reports New Testament dramatic acts done through Peter, Agabus, Paul, Jonah, and Jesus (10).

Chapter Summary

In the 1950s and 1960s in America, Protestants were concerned about the imitative possibilities for viewers from what was shown in public entertainment places. The steady and numerous reform movements and civic regulations attest to that fact. In the 1970s the defense of art (including theatre) surfaces in the literature. Beginning in the 1970s and continuing into the twenty-first century, Protestant leaders do not seem to be as concerned as their earlier brethren about the ills of mimesis upon the populace. In fact, use of imagination is seen as a positive occurrence and disguise arguably are biblically sanctioned.

As for the purpose of theatre, it was mostly seen as a tool during the six decades of this chapter. Protestants in the 1950s saw it as a tool to spread their salvation message. Perhaps because of this perspective, instruction and formation of Christian theatre troupes boomed in the 1960s. The 1970s favored the perspective that art should not serve a religious purpose; it was just a tool for enjoyment. In the 1980s artists were recognized as being culturally significant and serving the purpose of creating culture. In the 1990s it was argued that theatre should not be used as a conversionary tool but a tool to connect people and challenge them to better themselves. The early twenty-first century still sees theatre as a tool to be wielded but the backlash against imagery has diminished its use.
The power of theatre is debated through all six decades. The battle of words/sermons over creative vehicles for expression remains strong throughout this time period too. Protestants were wary yet enthusiastic about the power of theatre to impact people in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1970s, the use of imagery was argued to be a positive thing for Protestants to use and embrace in their spiritual journey. The case was made that Jesus predominately chose to tell stories (use images) instead of giving sermons, and it was argued that both are of equal use and weight according to scripture. This continued into the 80s and 90s where it was argued that Christians were now living in an image-driven culture so they should recognize the power that an image-driven art form like theatre could offer them. The power of theatre to do good or harm surfaces as a major contention again in the early twenty-first century.

Debate about the origin of theatre is a minor concern during these decades but is still subtly present. It can be found mostly in the literature from the 1980s through the twenty-first century. It is in the arguments defending theatre where we can see remaining tenets of arguments depicting the evils of theatre. That is, there must still be arguments against theatre in discussions amongst Protestants in order to motivate these writers to address the arguments in their publications. The age-old arguments surface again: theaters are wicked places, acting is not a valid profession for a Christian, storytelling is equated with lying, and neither the profession nor workplace (playhouse) is specifically sanctioned in scripture so it must be rejected. However, Protestants of these decades offer careful and indisputable performance examples in the Bible in their responses to those who attack theatre on these grounds.

Summary of Literature Review

Have the pronouncements against theatre been long-lasting and abusive? Indeed they have. Much of what has been written against theatre has come from Christians. Here I have presented a sampling in chronological order showing the intersection and relatively consistent tension between Christianity and theatre, dating from early Greek records to the early twenty-first century. It seems Christians have sought to restrict or control theatre, certainly to utilize it, according to their own beliefs. It is amazing it has survived, sometimes even thrived, despite all the attacks and controversy. Perhaps this is simply due to
the “symbiotic connection” between theatre and Christianity that Johnson and Savidge propose in their book (16). Opinions discussed here are of Christians from the past, the few who write about this topic and get published. And though theatre is included in the discussion of the twentieth and twenty-first century voices presented here, they often address art as a whole. As evidenced, there seems to be an obvious unease about theatre, in particular among Protestants. Now we need to explore how modern-day, ordinary Protestants feel about theatre, why they think as they do, and if there truly still exists an undercurrent of anti-theatrical prejudice against theatre by Protestants. The next chapter will describe the qualitative method used to explore this tension in depth.

![Figure 3: Comparison Chart of the Four Contention Areas—1950 through 2008 in America](image-url)
CHAPTER 5 - METHODOLOGY

This chapter will explain the process used for this examination, including the approach of the research, the sample studied, and the design and procedures of the study.

Qualitative Study

A qualitative approach was the most effective strategy for this study. Qualitative research “attempts to uncover the nature of persons’ experiences with a phenomenon” and go beyond what is behind the phenomenon, to get to the heart of why it is that way (Strauss and Corbin 19). This methodology worked well for my inquiry because I sought to understand what contemporary Protestant Christians think about theatre, and explore where and how those beliefs and perceptions originate. To get at the heart of this issue, I needed to go behind the “preconceived and prerecorded categories” useful for surveys and questionnaires, and allow members of the Protestant Christian community to identify and discuss their perspectives about the topic (Johnson 83).

Strauss and Corbin point out that qualitative methods can be used for studying “phenomenon about which little is yet known” or “to gain novel and fresh viewpoints on people, places, and events about which quite a lot is already known,” or to “provide the intricate details of phenomena that are often difficult to convey with only quantitative methods” (Strauss and Corbin 19). In some sense, much is already known about historical tension between Protestants and theatre. But there is debate as to whether sometimes those tensions represent individual preferences or wide-ranging societal views. Historically it could be said that in some eras little is known of representative theatrical prejudices in the contemporary Protestant Christian community. That also seems to be the case today. Of the major American research organizations (Barna and Gallup), only one survey involving Americans and theatre has been done in the past twelve years; and the topic of that study was about what Americans do with their spare time. Theatre was one of many response choices listed in the survey and there was no mention of religious affiliation.
Qualitative methodology allows for non-assumptive perspectives to be uncovered and investigated. Creswell explains that this type of research enables a topic to be more fully explored and holistically understood than with quantitative methods alone (Creswell 17). The dialogic format promoted by qualitative methodology opens additional channels of pursuit that are connected to, and might shed further light on, the whole subject. Qualitative methods often privilege the words, individual experiences, and perspectives of the people in the community that is being studied. This offers a more authentic representation of the community than outside assumptive questions that may not address core beliefs or concerns. Miles and Huberman add, “although words may be more unwieldy than numbers, they render more meaning than numbers alone” (56).

**Grounded Theory Defined**

Grounded Theory is a qualitative, interactive research process that is a “method of inquiry” and a builder of theory (Charmaz, *Grounded 507*). Corbin and Strauss state that grounded theories need to “explain as well as describe” a phenomenon (5). This worked well for my purpose since I did not want to merely describe a phenomenon, such as possible anti-theatrical prejudice among Christians, but move beyond description toward developing a theory or providing a framework for further study of the topic. This method offers an established system to investigate the questions in which I was interested and it allows for answers to those questions to become foundational components of a possible theory.

Grounded theory was created by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the 1960s. Glaser and Strauss developed grounded theory out of frustration they experienced when neither existing qualitative or quantitative methods proved adequate for their research interests. Walter and Myrick explain that grounded theory combines “the depth and richness of qualitative interpretive traditions with the logic, rigor and systematic analysis inherent in quantitative survey research” (Walter and Myrick 48). After establishing their theory, years later Glaser and Strauss parted company and Glaser stopped writing about grounded theory. In the 1990s Strauss teamed up with Juliet Corbin and continued to develop grounded theory. The two well-known references I will use by these two researchers can be distinguished by the
order of their names: Corbin and Strauss refers to an article published in *Qualitative Sociology* while Strauss and Corbin refers to their book entitled *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*.

Safeguards are embedded in grounded theory to support good research practices and establish credibility. Grounded theory is “discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon” (Strauss and Corbin 23). In addition, Strauss and Corbin point out that with grounded theory, “One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge” (23). This inductive quality of grounded theory is preferable in an empirical study because results are derived directly from data given by the people who are members of the social world or phenomenon being studied (Walker and Myrick 60; Hutchinson 183). Hutchinson points out the “ground-up” approach in this method—moving from practice to theory instead of verifying theory by studying practice—brings true authenticity to the theory, making it “inherently relevant to the world from which it emerges” (184). This is a very different approach than quantitative methodologies which generally create hypotheses and then test them. Grounded theory has been called circular while quantitative methods are often considered linear (Hutchinson 194). Creswell believes the type of research question dictates the type of inquiry necessary (Creswell 17). Practice to theory worked well for my study since I did not have a theory to verify; I sought to first find out what modern-day Protestants thought about theatre and then explore those avenues.

Besides interviews and observation, grounded theory also encourages data to be collected from books, articles, newspapers, cultural artifacts, and “anything that may shed light on questions under study” (Corbin and Strauss 5). Quantitative studies do not usually recognize these data sources as valid. Grounded theory seeks to offer useful research to amateur and professional audiences alike and so it values any cultural objects about the people, places, and events that it studies (Strauss and Corbin 55). The reasoning behind these inclusions is everything that can be found (or its absence) helps a researcher
accurately perceive, understand, and present the world of the people or social phenomena under study (Hutchinson 182; Charmaz, Constructing 14). Accordingly, this study includes a self-identified Christian theatre company, Internet searches, newspapers, and cultural artifacts such as brochures as equally valid objects of study. For example, a general search on Google combining Christianity and theatre came up with no valid matches, indicating that this cultural concept was not significant enough to warrant categorical results on the major search engine used by mainstream American culture.

**Theoretical Sensitivity**

Grounded theory recognizes that a researcher may become interested in studying a topic through a variety of means. It recognizes that background information gained through reading and personal experience can “sensitize” the researcher to the social world or phenomenon being studied. Reading literature about a topic may produce a desire for further research, but professional or personal experience can also spark this interest. If researchers have practical experience in a field, it can help them to develop a theoretical sensitivity to the topic in ways that outsiders might be unaware of. Strauss and Corbin explain this unique aspect of the theory thusly: a person who has experience in a particular field understands how that field works and takes that knowledge “into the research situation,” which helps her understand “events and actions seen and heard,” and to do so more quickly than a researcher who did not have this background (Strauss and Corbin 42). And in addition they believe, “The more professional experience, the richer the knowledge base and insight available to draw upon in the research” (42).

As the primary researcher for this study, I have been teaching and reading about theatre intensively for eight years, and have been involved with theatre professionally and non-professionally for sixteen years. In addition, I have been a Protestant Christian for forty years. Having so many years of experience in both these worlds aided me in understanding terminology, concepts, and assumptions used by both groups. More important, it has allowed the interviews to do without what otherwise could have been obstacles to deeper exploration of the issues.
In addition to sensitivity gained through experience and study, grounded theory also increases researchers’ receptiveness to emerging concepts through the very process itself. The process causes researchers to consider all “avenues to understanding,” aiding the goal of grounding the theory in reality (Corbin and Strauss 6). Interweaving data selection with data analysis is what causes increased sensitivity to concepts and their relationships to each other, “Each feeds the other thereby increasing insight and recognition of the parameters of the evolving theory” (Strauss and Corbin 43).

The Process of Grounded Theory

Safeguards are embedded into grounded theory to support good research practices and establish credibility. As standard practice, after the first interview the data started to be coded. Coding is a “reductive process that organizes data, from which a researcher can then construct themes, essences, descriptions, and theories” (Walker and Myrick 49). Analytic coding provides the process to understand and develop a theory about a phenomenon, which is the goal of grounded theory. Miles and Huberman prefer to create a list of provisional or “start” codes from their preliminary readings, prior to fieldwork, even though they recognize those codes will likely change as concepts emerge from the data (Miles and Huberman 58). I followed this practice in my study by incorporating topics from technical literature on the subject, start codes such as perceived messages in theatre, and Christians working in theatre.

Instead of pre-conceiving codes, as Walter and Myrick suggest, other grounded theory researchers encourage waiting to find codes once you have original interview data. Charmaz is a well-known grounded theory researcher who believes the interview data should be used to begin coding, and she sees this as complimenting the first step of the process: breaking apart the data (Charmaz, Constructing 43). In her definition of coding, Charmaz emphasizes the preeminence of the data: “Coding means naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data” (43).
Open Coding

Whether using preconceived start codes or original interview data, the first phase in the grounded theory process is called open coding. Walter and Myrick say this occurs when “analysts immerse themselves in the data through line-by-line analysis” and code it many ways, essentially allowing the data to run “open” (Walter and Myrick 52). Categories are created from comparing codes, which represent and encapsulate characteristics of those codes (Hutchinson 197). In my study, for example, the category of “distasteful associations” aptly described codes within it. Open coding, also called “initial” coding by Charmaz, aims at producing “as many potentially relevant categories as possible” (Strauss and Corbin 181). All grounded theory researchers begin with this step, whether they employ start codes or initially pull the codes from the data.

In vivo codes are words and phrases that come from informants or technical literature which can become names for categories (Strauss and Corbin 68). This preserves “participants’ meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself” (Charmaz Constructing 55). Some in vivo codes from participants in my study were: “live” (characteristic of theatre), “gratuitous” (elements of theatre), and “cheesy” (church drama).

Properties—“the characteristics or attributes of a category”—also become visible during open coding (Strauss and Corbin 69). Properties define and constitute categories, and each category should have several properties (Strauss and Corbin 70). Some properties of categories that materialized in my study were: intellectually stimulating, quality concerns, and lack of awareness. Corbin and Strauss say that the purpose for such necessary detail (properties so richly dimensionalized) is because the final integrated grounded theory needs to tightly relate categories and subcategories to each other in an overall paradigm (Corbin and Strauss 18).

Since grounded theory data are collected from observations and interviews, which in turn become the sources for subsequent interviews in a grounded approach, analysis begins right away instead of after-
the-fact, and all the data is immediately interrelated (Corbin and Strauss 6). This is a considerable strength of grounded theory because early analysis of data collection allows for a higher probability of discovering relevant insights as soon as they surface, besides including sufficient time and capability to investigate those insights. For example, early in my interview process a gender-based perception of theatre surfaced, a perception that I was able to investigate further with the remaining participants. This was one of the themes that emerged early, with no predetermination from the researcher (Walker and Myrick 50).

**Memos**

Part of the practice of grounded theory is that the researcher maintains memos throughout the process. Like coding, memoing begins right away and continues throughout the entire process. Memos contain the researcher’s observations, questions, and comments which can be woven in to the interview questions. These memos are instrumental in checking emerging ideas with the participants (Corbin and Strauss 10). A memo from my study that proved valuable early in the interviewing stated, “The live aspect seems to be the most favorite thing for people.” The memo allowed me to write a quick note about my impressions from participants during interviews that turned out to be a strong subcategory in the overall substantive theory. And a memo from December 1, 2011 stated, “Several times interviewees said they didn’t think the form of theatre, theatre itself, was evil or inherently a bad thing.” This memo helped me consciously notate a trend I was experiencing during interviews.

**Axial Coding**

Axial (also called focused) coding follows open coding. This is when emerging categories are compared to each other in an effort to find recurrent ideas among participants. These categories should fit, be relevant to, and “crystallize participants’ experience” (Charmaz, *Constructing* 54). In axial coding the researcher looks for relationships among categories and subcategories, like fitting pieces of a puzzle together, and each piece needs to earn its fit into the larger picture of an overall theory (Strauss and Corbin 211). When recurring ideas are discovered during axial coding, they are taken into subsequent
interviews to test their validity with other participants. Any possible relationships between categories proposed during axial coding are considered provisional until “verified repeatedly” with incoming data, and “hypotheses that do not hold up when compared with actual data must be revised or discarded” (Corbin and Strauss 13). During coding researchers are looking for patterns that they can then test so that anomalies are not assumed to be representative (Hutchinson 200). Strauss and Corbin address this by saying, “Only that which is repeatedly found to stand up against reality will be built into the theory” (187). I found my hypothesis that church leaders did not support drama in their Sunday morning service was not true according to the data and so it was discarded.

While carrying out the process of grounded theory, there may be overlap between open and axial coding. Unlike quantitative methods where each phase of the study is sequential and clearly defined, grounded theory’s integrative nature recognizes a crossover of steps may aid in new discoveries. And perhaps because of this crossover, the resulting theory may be richer and more tightly integrated. In fact, Strauss and Corbin warn against practicing open and axial coding as separate analytic processes because they recognize “when the researcher is actually engaged in analysis he or she alternates between the two modes” naturally (Strauss and Corbin 98).

Selective Coding

This is the last phase of the analysis process. Poorly developed categories, which contain few properties, vividly appear during this step. Researchers can return to the field or their notes to obtain further data to provide necessary “conceptual density” to the categories or the categories must be let go (Corbin and Strauss 14). A theoretical memo is usually written during this phase which contains a “descriptive rendition of what the research is all about” (Strauss and Corbin 218). Researchers are selecting and integrating the data and categories to decide on a core category. The core category integrates and unifies all of the categories around a central theme (Walker and Myrick 58). In my study the core category was “reticent appreciation.”
The core category is then used to create a “substantive theory.” Hutchinson explains: “Substantive theories are generated for a specific, circumscribed, and empirical area of inquiry” (Hutchinson 181). Since my study applied to a specific group in a certain location, I was able to develop a substantive theory from my study, as described in Chapter 6. Sometimes a substantive theory can be used to build a formal theory but that was not the case with my study. A formal theory “emerges from a study of a phenomenon examined under many different types of situations” (Corbin and Strauss 174).

Saturation

Mining data from readings and interviews, checking emergent themes with participants until categories recur enough that there is “saturation,” provides strength to discovered themes. Saturation is what grounds the theory because results come from “the empirical data themselves” (Hutchinson 181). Saturation ensures trustworthiness and reduces bias of the researcher, both of which are areas of concern for qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba 290). In grounded theory, themes that a researcher discovers in later interviews will cause examination of earlier interviews to see if the same themes also appeared there. If so, saturation is occurring. The data from earlier interviews or memos is just as valid as later data: “Since sensitivity increases with time, an interesting and important feature of grounded theory research is that one can sample from previously collected data, as well as from data yet to be gathered. Later, when developing new insights, an investigator can legitimately return to the old materials, and recode them in light of additional knowledge” (Strauss and Corbin 181). I experienced this several times during this study. One example of this occurred when gendered perceptions of theatre emerged in interviews and upon examination of previous interview data, similar perceptions were discovered there too.

Research Questions

“In grounded theory, data analysis has a well-defined process that begins with basic description and moves to conceptual ordering and then on to theorizing” (Walker and Myrick 49). Through theoretical sensitivity, a topic of interest is generated and a statement about the phenomenon to be studied
is developed. The intersection of Christianity and theatre was the topic of interest for this study. Personal observation of a dialectic tension between Protestant Christians and theatre inspired this investigation. Working from the topic and statement, a beginning research question is then developed. For a grounded theory study the research question should be narrow enough to help the researcher identify where she wants to focus and what she wants to learn about the subject, but broad enough to explore possibilities that emerge when studying the subject (Strauss and Corbin 38). For this study, the beginning research question was: does anti-theatrical prejudice exist for contemporary Protestant Christians? And related to this I wondered if it did exist, why did it exist and what did it include? Several research questions were then developed which shaped the focus of the study and the interview questions. The final research questions used in this study were:

RQ1: What are Protestant Christians’ attitudes and beliefs about theatre?

RQ2: If Christians are not attending theatre, why not?

RQ3: What is the source of their attitudes and beliefs?

**Strengths or Benefits of Grounded Theory**

Reducing Researcher Bias

Since grounded theory’s purpose is “to build theory that is faithful to and illuminates the area under study,” it is heavily invested in providing rigor necessary to accurately depict the phenomenon under study from the participants’ perspective (Strauss and Corbin 24). Common criticism of qualitative methods, such as grounded theory, is that a researcher can impose an unintended bias that skews results. Grounded theory combats this with its emphasis on checking researcher interpretations by returning to participants with discoveries found in the data to check whether the researcher’s interpretations match participants’ perspectives. Lincoln and Guba call this process member checking; believing the members of the culture being studied are the most qualified to determine whether the researcher’s interpretation of their culture represents their reality or not (Lincoln and Guba 314). This practice addresses the neutrality
and credibility that all researchers desire and need to especially address when they conduct qualitative studies. Riessman calls this practice correspondence and points out its necessity: “It is important that we find out what participants think of our work, and their responses can often be a source of theoretical insight” (Riessman 66). This study utilized member checking as themes were discovered in readings and in the first few interviews, and brought into subsequent interviews for participants’ comments.

**Peer Evaluation**

Another unique strength of grounded theory is the encouraged practice of peer evaluation (sometimes called peer debriefing). Lincoln and Guba explain this as a process whereby the researcher requests a qualified colleague to assess the research process (308). It is a debriefing tool that also helps guard against researcher bias. The peer colleague is not involved in the study and is not in an authoritative position relative to the researcher. The peer serves as a discussion partner for ideas that surface during the study, a sounding board to help clarify connections or findings when the researcher may become overwhelmed, as well as being an advisor for any relevant matters that pertain to the study (Lincoln and Guba 308). I found this recommendation helpful as I met with a colleague throughout the process of my study to discuss preparations, emerging themes, concerns, organization, and the written report.

**Verification/Validation**

Grounded theory’s principle of constant data comparisons addresses the concern of verification (sometimes called validation) in qualitative studies. Riessman explains that verification for qualitative studies “cannot be reduced to a set of formal rules or standardized technical procedures” (Riessman 68). But grounded theory’s particular process, “if completed properly, checks or verifies the accuracy of the work through the comparison itself. Glaser has contended, if you use constant comparison faithfully, verification inheres within it” (Walker and Myrick 57).

Relying on constant comparison is not enough to prove verification for Riessman. She sees validation as “the process through which we make claims for the trustworthiness of our interpretations”
and deems it a critical issue (Riessman 65). She believes persuasiveness and correspondence—embedded in to the grounded theory method—as providing two forms of verification. Persuasiveness is strongest when “theoretical claims are supported with evidence from informants’ accounts,” and correspondence means results are shared with participants to check if investigator interpretations are adequate representations of what they meant (Riessman 65, 66). Grounded theory requires both of these practices. Charmaz believes relying on the data to reveal participants’ views and verify results is particularly one of grounded theory’s greatest strengths (Charmaz 47). In my study, I followed all of these suggestions for verification. Accordingly my analysis used extensive quotations from interviews, and emergent themes were consistently offered to participants for their comment.

Reducing Participant Bias

The built-in methodology of grounded theory also helps to reduce participant bias, addressing reliability and validity, which are additional areas of concern for qualitative studies. Qualitative researchers are aware of the allegation against qualitative studies such as grounded theory that participants may “lie, distort the truth, or withhold vital information,” which could lead to biased data (Hutchinson 189). In reference to this, Hutchinson points out that in grounded theory, “The researcher continually formulates hypotheses and rejects them if they do not seem accurate. Data are compared and contrasted again and again, thus providing a check on their validity. Distortions or lies generated by the participants will gradually be revealed” (189). This is a unique strength of grounded theory.

Generalizability and Replicability

A substantive theory has potential transferability. It can reach beyond its studied population and become relevant to other people groups, but grounded theory studies do not seek this goal (Hutchinson 189). Rather than seek to generalize results to a large population, as quantitative studies often do, grounded theory seeks to specify, applying the derived theory only to the situation or group studied (Strauss and Corbin 191). Since grounded theory embraces the contribution and interaction of researchers
with data in its creative process, it is very unlikely that a different researcher would construct a similar theory (Hutchinson 190). This does not cause concern for grounded theory researchers, nor do they view it as a detriment of the theory. Hutchinson argues: “The question of replicability is not especially relevant, because the point of theory generation is to offer a new perspective on a given situation and good and useful ways of looking at a certain world” (190). Quantitative researchers may see this as a weakness since they often seek to discover a general theory they can apply to a wider group beyond their immediate sample. However, grounded theory researchers deliberately seek to understand the people or social phenomenon they are studying, not necessarily the culture at large. Pertaining to my study, I sought to understand how American Protestant Christians viewed theatre, not Americans in general or Christians worldwide.

**Participants**

As in any large community, there exists a wide range of opinions within Protestant Christianity about many things. In an effort to capture a reliable cross-reference sample, and to strengthen the validity of my study, I intentionally sought a variety of ages, occupations, and life experience in the people for my research. Twenty-nine Protestant Christians drawn from three different groups participated in the study. The interviews took place throughout Southern California and members of all three groups resided in San Diego, Los Angeles, or Orange counties.

The first group consisted of ten, eighteen-to twenty-year-old college students at a mid-sized Christian university (Biola) which belongs to the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). Biola University was founded in downtown Los Angeles in 1908, and originally called the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (BIOLA). Since its founding, its mission has been to provide: “biblically centered education, scholarship and service—equipping men and women in mind and character to impact the world for the Lord Jesus Christ” (biola.edu/about/mission). All classes are taught from this biblical perspective and all accepted students must self-identify as Christians. Although this university does not officially claim any denominational affiliation, they state that their foundational perspective remains “an
evangelical Protestant framework” (biola.edu/about/history). Due to the youth and perceived nominal life experience of students, I was interested to see if this group would reflect parental or common cultural perspectives about theatre rather than individuated opinions.

The second group in the study consisted of adult leaders at Protestant Christian churches in Southern California. Their respective churches were housed under the Protestant umbrella, including: Methodist, Lutheran, non-denominational, Baptist, Congregational, and Presbyterian. I estimated that this group would probably be more self-aware and able to articulate their opinions about theatre than would the college students. Because church leaders are opinion makers in Protestant churches and I believe pastoral attitudes and sermons make an impact on Protestants, I believe their participation in the study was vital. In addition, Wuthnow found that many Christians have heard a sermon preached about the dangers of contemporary art; and nearly half of them communicated disapproval of the arts (Wuthnow 222). This suggests “pastors may be a significant source of the negative sentiments” that some Christians have toward the arts (222). Wuthnow further explored this by interviewing sixty randomly selected pastors in the study. He found most of the conservative pastors identified with the negative attitudes of the previously mentioned parishioners (Wuthnow 223).

The third group in the study consisted of theatre practitioners who were mostly drawn from a professional Christian theatre group called Actors Co-op. Actors Co-op has two 99-seat Equity-approved theaters, and is located on the campus of Hollywood Presbyterian Church. Some of the actors in this company are Catholics but most are Protestants who are also members of Hollywood Presbyterian Church. This company has been functioning as an award-winning, non-profit professional theatre company since 1987. Admittance into the company is by invitation only. Their Mission Statement asserts they are: “a company of Christian actors driven by passion for the Lord Jesus Christ. We are dedicated to pursuing the highest standards of theatrical excellence and to building up our members spiritually, personally and professionally in order to be an outreach of Christ’s hope” (actorscoop.org). I thought it would be useful to include people who have chosen a career in theatre since they could give first-hand
experiences and opinions about being involved in theatre as Christians. As insiders, I wondered if their perspectives would be similar to or different from those of the other groups. I also wanted to learn if these theatre professionals had experienced any anti-theatrical prejudice from other Christians because of their vocation. The criteria that participants should self-identify as a Protestant Christian was made clear to everyone.

**Design and Procedures**

My proposed study was approved by the IRB at Wayne State University. Accordingly, I took steps to minimize the risk to all participants by protecting their identity, securing private conference rooms for interviews, keeping confidential records, and assigning codes to participants. In addition, I reminded them that their participation was voluntary and that they could discontinue their involvement at any time. Each participant was given a copy of the signed consent form that included my contact information and details about the study.

Student recruitment began when three colleagues announced my study in the various communication classes they teach, and handed out the Informed Consent Form to their students for consideration. No extra credit or class credit to participate in the study was given by the instructors. I only asked professors who did not teach theatre classes to help recruit students since I wanted an average person’s perspective from this group. Students were asked to read through the consent form, sign it if they were interested in participating in the study, and place the signed form in my mailbox. Then, as stated on the consent form, I contacted them to schedule an interview.

Several sources were utilized as guides in preparing for the interviews. Bradburn, Sudman, and Wansink advise a mock interview to test the questions, which can “weed out ambiguities” and thus help the researcher “reformulate questions as clearly as possible—to ask about what we want to know, not something else” (Bradburn, Sudman, and Wansink 4). I conducted an interview with a grounded theory expert who served as my interviewee, and then I reviewed my questions and handling of the interview
with him (Bradburn, Sudman, and Wansink 319). I found this experience very valuable in preparing me for upcoming interviews. This pilot exercise also showed how long my interviews would take and which questions should be prioritized in case all the prepared questions could not be covered in the allotted time (Bradburn, Sudman, and Wansink 320).

In designing the type and sequence of questions for the interviews, I appreciated Bradburn, Sudman, and Wansink’s recommendation to define my goals, write questions that would get at the information needed, and avoid peripheral “wouldn’t it be interesting to know” questions that would exhaust precious time (20, 323). I found that the interviews took the full scheduled hour and that keeping the high priority questions in mind helped in staying within the allotted time.

Several professional interviewers recommend starting with general questions and then moving to more specific ones (Hutchinson 188; Bradburn, Sudman, and Wansink 147; Holstein and Gubrium 28; Charmaz, *Constructing* 26). Following this recommendation, I organized the general, open-ended questions first, such as “in general, how do you feel about theatre?” More specific questions, such as what the interviewees thought were positives or negatives about theatre, were asked later on, as the interview progressed (see Appendix B, the interview script). Since grounded theory seeks to explore a topic in depth and “obtain quotable material,” which is the purpose of open-ended questions, I was careful in constructing the questions (Bradburn, Sudman, and Wansink 152). Open-ended questions are also “an invaluable tool when you want to go deeply into a particular topic, and it is an absolutely essential tool when you are beginning work in an area and need to explore all aspects of an opinion area” (Bradburn, Sudman, and Wansink 154). This suited my intention and methodology well.

While open-ended questions yielded rich data, I also discovered that participants struggled with an opening question that was so broad. I noticed this problem after the first few interviews, and so I rearranged certain questions, placing one or two pertaining to demographics before the first open-ended question was introduced. These concrete questions, such as “how many years have you been a pastor,”
seemed to help participants feel more comfortable and fortify their self-confidence before heading into the more abstract open-ended questions. Bradburn, Sudman, and Wansink discuss the sometime need for this exception to the general rule, especially if a demographic question is needed in the beginning to initially screen participants (262). The previously mentioned necessity to include only Protestants in my study motivated me to ask this demographic question first. Bradburn, Sudman, and Wansink offer a good example that met my interests so I began by asking: “What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, some other religion, or no religion?” (272). All participants identified themselves as Protestants, confirming I had the appropriate sample for my study.

Great care, attention to detail, and time went into preparing for every interview. In addition to formulating the interview questions, personal aspects must also be considered when preparing and conducting interviews. Holstein and Gubrium remind interviewers that richer, more authentic data is given when interviewees are comfortable with the interviewer and enjoy the interview (Holstein and Gubrium 11). Interviewers are encouraged to do things that will make interviewees comfortable, such as dressing like their subjects and finding shared interests or biographical experiences to help facilitate rapport with them (Hammersley and Atkinson 141; Holstein and Gubrium 77). I was intentional about dressing casually for the actor and student interviews but more professionally for church leader and educator-practitioner interviews. Since I also work in the field of theatre I intentionally inserted short comments or past experiences early on in the interviews when appropriate, which helped establish rapport.

Rapport is more likely to occur when strengthened by likability. Hammersley and Atkinson offer the following helpful ways to facilitate likability and a good experience for the interviewee: establish a friendly tone and nature in the first few minutes of the interview (142), show signs of listening and accepting the interviewee during the interview (143), avoid making questions sound threatening (332), group similar questions together (328), and use words that are easy to understand or make every effort to clarify confusing terms (37).
I reminded myself of these goals before every interview and applied their suggestions by: ensuring that I made an effort to be warm and friendly when meeting the interviewee and when beginning the interview, giving the interviewee my full attention during the interview (including smiling where appropriate and using facial expressions that conveyed my interest), checking myself before asking questions to make sure they would not sound threatening or judgmental, providing smooth transitions from one question to another, and clarifying terms used if the interviewee seemed lost or confused about what I asked. I navigated allowing participants to speak freely about my topic (in order to gain rich data and allow for emerging ideas), while also directing the conversation in order to center the discussion on the research topic (Charmaz, *Constructing* 26). I did this because the purpose of interviews is to gather relevant information about a research topic and find data to guide the next set of interviews (Strauss and Corbin 77; Holstein and Gubrium 56). I incorporated Charmaz’s practice of saying “tell me about” or “could you describe further” (Charmaz, *Constructing* 33), and Bradburn, Sudman, and Wansink’s use of asking longer questions (74) to steer conversation towards specific topics of interest for my study.

Hammersley and Atkinson say that interviewing people in their own environment allows them “to organize the context the way they wish” and relax more than they would in unfamiliar territory, thus leading to a richer, more forthcoming interview (Hammersley and Atkinson 150). In addition, Holstein and Gubrium point out these locations should be private to encourage respondents to be more candid than they might be if others are present (Holstein and Gubrium 11). I followed these recommendations this way: all the church leaders chose to have the interview conducted at their offices or conference rooms, all the interviews with Actors Co-op took place in a small conference room on their property, the two interviews with other practitioners took place in conference rooms at their place of employment, and the student interviews were conducted in a small conference room on their campus. For all off campus interviews I followed Creswell’s guidance: I explained the need for a quiet space so that the recording of the interview would be as clear as possible, and requested that the space be private to protect people’s
identity and be distraction-free so we would not be interrupted (Creswell 124). All the participants understood this and all but one complied with my requests.

In accordance with the inductive discovery process of grounded theory, I only scheduled a few interviews each week so that I could analyze that data for emerging ideas that could be tested in the next few interviews. As Corbin and Strauss observe, “analysis is necessary from the start because it is used to direct the next interview and observations” (Corbin and Strauss 6). Initially, I scheduled three student interviews, had them transcribed, and allowed my findings to direct the next few interviews. This process continued for several weeks until all ten of the student interviews had been completed.

Toward the end of the student interviews, I contacted a variety of colleagues and friends—some at my current place of employment and some at different universities in Southern California—and asked them for suggestions of Protestant church leaders who might be able to participate in my study. Names and email or phone numbers were gathered, and I started contacting these people. I explained my study and faxed or emailed my consent form to potential participants so they had all the information to make an informed choice about their participation. Many of them were enthusiastic to participate, and so I scheduled a few initial interviews with them. I included emerging themes from the student group in the interviews with this group to test their viability. Similar to the process employed with the student group, I analyzed data from the first few interviews before scheduling and conducting the next two or three interviews. Ten initial interviews were conducted with this group.

For the third group, Christian theatre practitioners, I obtained permission and was offered cooperation from the governing board of Actors Co-op to recruit their members. The board members invited me to their monthly company meeting to discuss my study with their members and see if they would be able to participate. I spoke to the group, answered questions, distributed copies of the consent form, and asked them to contact me if they would like to be interviewed. Since some of the members of Actors Co-op were not Protestants, I emphasized the parameters of my study and this disallowed several
who wanted to volunteer from doing so. Seven of their members were interviewed over the course of several weeks, again allowing for time to analyze data and bring emerging themes into subsequent interviews. Since my goal was to have ten people in each group of my study, two other interviews were conducted with Protestant Christian theatre practitioners who work in theatre but were not connected with Actors Co-op. The intended tenth interview did not take place due to scheduling difficulties and the potential participant withdrawing his interest to be part of the study. Nine interviews were conducted with the theatre practitioners, including actors, directors, producers, and educators.

As a matter of practice all interviews were scheduled for an hour but almost all of them were longer, and would have gone even longer had I not concluded them. It seems there is much to discuss about this topic. As is standard practice in grounded theory, there were a few follow up interviews if I found some information was missing or unclear from the first round of interviews. Most times, if I was uncertain about a participant’s meaning during an interview, I immediately asked for clarification, which reduced the need for follow up interviews. The few necessary follow-up interviews were conducted via email.

During the initial interviews, core questions remained the same, but after themes began to emerge, other questions often replaced them. In accordance with grounded theory practice, as emerging ideas and patterns were discovered in the data, subsequent interviews explored those ideas to determine if they became saturated enough to become a category. Categories were then explored and compared in an effort to find a core category that would be broad enough to encompass all the data and categories (Strauss and Corbin 120). The core category became the basis to form a substantive theory about the research topic. All participants expressed enthusiasm for the topic; many of them thanked me for leading them to think more deeply about the topic, and all of them let me know they were willing to talk further.
This chapter has detailed the justification for the methodology chosen for this study, the description of participants in it, and steps taken in the design and implementation of it. The next chapter will report the analysis and results of the literature and interview data.
CHAPTER 6: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

As seen in Chapters 2 - 4, historical records strongly reveal a persistent anti-theatrical prejudice from Protestant Christians toward theatre for over fifteen hundred years. The literature provides sufficient understanding of past attitudes Protestants have held about theatre, and their reasons for those attitudes. The literature also provided a starting point for interview topics and served as a frame of reference to compare and contrast with interview data. In this chapter, I examine the results of the interviews to find out what contemporary Protestants think about theatre. I also thought it might be useful to compare these results with the opinions of previous scholars. Also in this chapter, portions of actual data are used to “provide useful explanatory material” to help the reader “form a judgment about how well the theory is grounded in the data” (Creswell 179). The three major research questions of this study were: (1) what are modern-day Protestant Christian attitudes and beliefs about theatre; (2) do Christians attend/support theatre, and if not, why not; and (3) what is the source of these attitudes and beliefs?

Data were collected and analyzed with the assistance of NVivo 9, a proprietary software program for qualitative studies. Twenty-eight nodes or categories of prospective interest to this study were generated. The categories revealed broad and specific information that contributed to the development of a theory that explains the viewpoint and attendance habits of contemporary Protestants in regards to theatre. Axial (selective) coding produced four central themes (or main categories) that contributed to an overall theory of “reticent appreciation” that explains Protestants’ current stance towards theatre. As shown on the chart below (Figure 4), the four central categories that emerged from the data were: Perceived Positive Qualities, Distasteful Associations, Drama in Church, and Practical Impediments. Each of these categories will be discussed in this chapter, but first I discuss the proposed theory that emerged from data analysis.
This study revealed that contemporary Christians do not entertain any apparent anti-theatrical prejudice, but they are cautious and suspicious about theatre and equally maintain caution and suspicion towards it. They especially love the live aspect of theatre, but recognize and believe this can also be a drawback due to its uncontrollable nature. Messages in a play were found to be very important to Christians; first that there is a point to the play, and second, that the message reflects their understanding of truth in the world. Drama used inside a church engendered some difference of opinion, but overall, participants saw it as a good device to assist a pastor’s message. The central understanding of this study is: while contemporary Protestant Christians do not seem to harbor anti-theatrical prejudice as found in
previous eras, they remain suspicious of certain aspects and associations with theatre. The end result is they rarely make the effort to attend.

**Perceived Positive Qualities**

As an opening question, participants were asked how they felt about theatre in general. Interview experts advise beginning a qualitative interview with an open-ended question to quickly establish freedom that will encourage elaboration which leads to rich description and data (Bradburn, Sudman, and Wansink 154, Hutchinson 188). The responses were resoundingly positive and enthusiastic, ranging from “wonderful” (L2) to “it’s pretty great” (S5) to “I love it” (P4). These and other aspects that came up during the first part of the interviews were positive associations with theatre, and led to the overall category entitled *Perceived Positive Qualities*.

Participants have a positive perception of theatre often due to favorable formative experiences. Either a caregiver such as a parent or grandparent took the person to the theatre, or the participant was involved in a school play that created a positive predisposition towards theatre. Most church leaders and actors reported that their caregivers were not interested in theatre and did not take them to it; they were exposed to theatre through school field trips or personal participation in plays at school. When asked if his parents were influential in him becoming an actor or took him to theatre as a child, a veteran actor replied, “No. I got taken to every other thing” (P1). However, all student participants said their parents took them to see plays when they were children and supported their interest in it. Perhaps perception has changed in the last twenty years among Christian parents. A student summed it up by saying her parents were “the ones that got me all interested in it in the first place” (S2). Participants’ positive perception of theatre conflicts with Plato’s, Roman, and Puritan attitudes, especially the fundamental belief that theatre is deceptive and/or sustained by Satan. Results from this study show theatre has an overall positive place in contemporary Christians’ minds, not a negative place. Participants’ positive early experiences with theatre support Plato’s belief about the formative nature theatre can have in people’s lives.
A positive association participants had with theatre was its *Live* characteristic. A consistent and enthusiastic response from participants about how they loved the live quality of theatre caused it to become the strongest subcategory under *Perceived Positive Qualities*. Participants primarily explained they liked theatre’s live quality because it is exciting and they enjoy the energy they feel coming from the stage when experiencing live theatre (L6). They described taking pleasure from and in this art form, validating it as a way to meet their need for entertainment. Seeking pleasure at the theatre was something Plato wanted kept to a minimum, and a reason why some Roman and Medieval leaders, early Church Fathers, and Puritans opposed theatre. Today’s Christians did not see taking pleasure in this art form as sinful, nor did any think they should avoid it for religious reasons.

A participant defined his delight of theatre’s excitement and “liveness” this way, “they’ve got one shot and we’re in some way present for this story,” including the risk that the actors may “mess up” (L7). In her response, a practitioner favored the uniqueness of it, “there’s nothing quite like it. So I think that’s what makes it exciting, because you cannot edit a live theater performance” (P4). Speaking from a performance standpoint, actors enjoy live theatre’s immediacy because they instantly know whether they have “hit home” in connecting with the audience (P6). Non-performers in this study commented how they liked the connection they felt with the actors due to “live interaction” in theatre, “the actors are right there and it’s almost like they’re acting with you as an audience and your reaction almost fuels the production” (S6). A student summed it up this way, “you almost feel like you’re involved with it . . . it just feels more real” (S7). Participants also mentioned they enjoyed feeling the immediacy of being in connection with other *audience* members and with the performers when attending live theatre. The strong emotional connection described here is what was of concern to Plato, Tatian, Tertullian, Medieval critics and others. Their worry that the emotional connection theatre engenders is dangerous or somehow incapacitates reason was not stated as a concern during interviews with present-day Protestants. Unlike Plato, today’s Christians viewed the persuasive power of people’s emotions in a positive light.
Intellectually Stimulating

A second subcategory that emerged strongly in participants’ positive associations with theatre is that it is *Intellectually Stimulating*. Theatre “makes you think” (L10). Relating movies to theatre in this aspect, a participant remarked, “I picture going to a play for a message more than I do for a movie, and I’m not sure why that is” (L7). Some participants related this to the fact that because theatre is live and has immediacy, the audience is confronted with ideas and character behaviors that demand direct attention. For example, a church leader said, “it’s more in your face, so to speak, in theater than it is in a movie. And so you think about it more” (L5).

Many participants stated that theatre’s live characteristic draws them in to the palpable emotions of the characters which then causes them to think about the issues presented in the play. One practitioner explained, “The feeling actually makes you want to reflect on okay, what is this coming from? Why do I feel this way? What does this make me think about?” (P4). A participant clarifies that the learning theatre offers is not about information, it is about life; “I actually learn things at theater. Not so much about facts and such but about the human condition and the way people come at different problems and questions that they face in life” (L2). Contemporary Protestants’ welcoming and valuing of theatre’s characteristic to get them to think runs contrary to previous arguments from Plato et al. about theatre promoting irrationality or emotional dominance. The desire of contemporary Christians to funnel the emotional appeal of theatre into intellectual pursuits would undoubtedly please Plato, Tatian, Tertullian, Augustine, Chrysostom, Medieval and Renaissance leaders, and contemporary church leaders. Historically, the mind has consistently been preferred over the body in church doctrine and teachings.

The positive association that theatre requires thinking unexpectedly revealed a related dimension. Participants that spoke of how they appreciated being intellectually challenged by plays also spoke about how they sometimes felt it took more “work” than other forms of entertainment. Respondents remarked that in their experience plays require more focus than other forms of entertainment, such as movies,
because in theatre there is “a message that you have to uncover whereas movies are just like, oh, ok” (S5). Interviewees perceived movie theatres as a place to “veg out,” but did not associate that with theatre. A pastor explained:

In a movie theater I sort of take a little mental vacation and I’m just checked out for a couple of hours. But at the theater I’m sort of working it, if that makes sense. I’m working it, I’m invested [. . .] in the theater it’s live and so if you miss something you’ve missed it, whereas in the movie, if I miss it I go back and see it again. Live stuff only happens once, and it’s just the moment, right there . . . greater expectation, higher energy. It’s not as relaxing to me as seeing a movie, not nearly as relaxing. In fact I don’t think it’s relaxing at all, it wears me out . . . I wouldn’t call it leisure activity. I put it in the same category as going and visiting a foreign country or something, it’s a unique moment in time to experience. So it takes more personal investment. (L4)

Participants reported that this feature sometimes deterred them from going to shows when they did not want to put forth the intellectual effort they perceived theatre required. This perception did not come up in the literature as a deterrent to theatre attendance. Rather, it seems the deterrent was previously just the opposite, that is, theatre was seen by Christian leaders as a mindless influence.

**Redemptive Message**

Theatre entailing intellectual effort is associated with the third subcategory of perceived qualities that emerged in this study, called *Redemptive Message*. Interestingly, all of the twenty-nine participants placed high importance on a play having a message. The general opinion was, “the message doesn’t have to be explicitly stated, but it’s gotta have a message” (L3). If a message could not be found, respondents were disappointed: “Like Jersey Boys. Yeah, it’s cute and whatever, it has nice music, but I walked way a little empty, kind of thinking, there has to be some moral here, there has to be some bottom line deal”
Revealing the strength of this association another participant said, “everything’s about the message” (L10).

Perhaps this is an aftereffect of the Puritan and late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century emphasis on the importance of words and messages through sermons. The message (also called idea) of the play was very important to Plato; and whatever the message was, it had to be good for the state. Aristotle would agree with contemporary Christians that message is very important, due to his belief that theatre was a disseminator of knowledge. Roman and Puritan Christians showed their attention to the importance of message by either criticizing plays for not having a message, or for promoting lascivious messages they felt were damaging to their congregations. For Medieval Christians, every art form had to have a Christ-honoring message, and since the dramas were often taken from Scripture, such messages were embedded.

A dimension of the importance of messages was the specific type of message Protestants preferred. The majority of participants not only favored plays that had an intentional message, but more so a Redemptive Message that reflected their sense and understanding of truth in the world. Redemptive messages were explained as, “messages about the brokenness, the fallen-ness of humanity” (L7). In some way redemption needed to be shown by the end of the play, preferably in a character. When asked to explain how this would appear, participants mentioned the following: showing justice (bad guys being caught or suffering if they are not caught); someone sacrificing himself for someone else in some way, ending with hope that things will get better; and showing characters as better off when learning from their mistakes or miserable if they did not. These redemptive messages reflect and support biblical teaching and how Christians see God’s truth being acted out in the world.

Most but not all participants equated redemptive messages with happy or positive endings. The two respondents who did not have need of a happy ending but still preferred a redemptive message, found
redemption in the challenge of a play’s message: “I think any message that makes you look inside yourself, and if anything speaks to you or makes you question anything, I think that’s always good” (P4).

Plato’s penchant to show bad characters as unhappy and good characters as happy supports contemporary Christian preferences, especially in terms of redemptive messages. Tatian, Tertullian, the early Church Fathers, Puritans, and nineteenth century American Protestants focused their criticism on attending theatres and what was being shown onstage more than redemptive messages. But due to their belief in Christ’s redemptive act of sacrifice on the cross, it seems likely they would value redemptive messages. Christian emphasis on redemption may be a contributing factor in contemporary Protestants’ perception of theatre as an effective instrument in the work of spiritual conversion. Martin Luther and American Protestants of the twentieth century embraced theatre as a vehicle to show and promote redemptive messages to Christians and non-Christians alike. Messages, particularly redemptive ones, were very important to Christians during the Middle Ages, a feature that is markedly evident in the morality plays.

There was a general sense from study participants that a play is intentionally chosen for its message. A church leader remarked, “I can’t imagine anybody, a producer, a director, whatever, putting all that energy into a show that absolutely had no impact on people’s lives” (L6). While they highly value messages in plays, some suspicion about this was also expressed, “I always come out of a film, even a live play, asking myself what was really the agenda there. And it wasn’t just to pass my time” (L6).

This suspicion could be deeply grounded in civic leaders’ early recognition of the power of messages in art, historically used by them to support their own agendas. Plato advocated intentional messages in his regulations; plays should inspire courage and honorable behavior in citizens. During the early Reformation, Protestants wrote or chose plays with messages that criticized the shortcomings of traditional Catholicism. It seems the Puritans believed in message intentionality of plays in a roundabout way: they were against the claim that a play’s message could influence people as much (or more) as a
sermon could do. In order to argue this, they would first have to accept that there was a message in a play, it was not just for carnal entertainment, and that the message was intentional (as it is in a sermon). Therefore, they inadvertently reinforced that plays had intentional messages, which is similar to what Plato and others believed.

The power of intentional messages can be seen in the action of London officials who closed London theatres altogether during the seventeenth century, primarily due to fear of anti-establishment socio-political messages found in many of the plays at that time. Protestants recognized the power drama could have spreading intentional messages, so from the mid-nineteenth century into the twentieth century they used plays primarily as vehicles to spread their desired messages. Like Plato, Augustine, and Luther, modern-day Christians see theatre as utilitarian, a means to build a moral culture. Besides a few lone voices like Francis Schaeffer, Protestants have not historically supported art for art’s sake; plays must serve some other, more useful, end. Even if the show is just for entertainment, there should still be a beneficial message in it.

An underlying distrust and disappointment about messages that do not reflect Christian truth emerged as another dimension of the Redemptive Message subcategory. For instance, a participant remarked, “If the world holds up that money is ultimately the best value, I would have a problem with that” (L10). The perspective of Protestant Christians is that everything is looked at through a Christian perspective/worldview. A respondent clarifies, “the truth is found in Scripture, it’s all in a sense derived from Scripture, and the Bible is my grid” (L10).

Many participants said that they viewed a play’s message through “the grid” of their Christianity. Several participants had experienced messages in plays that they did not agree with, or that did not resonate as truth, and they called this feeling “pushing the envelope.” There was caution and guardedness evident among the interviewees when discussing this, almost like they did not want to hurt someone’s feelings. However, it was clear in the interviews that when a play’s themes or content seek to present
something as true when God (through scripture) says it is not, “it's a bit tough” for Christians to enjoy (L1). This “mockery of God” (L1) produces distrust that results in reluctance to attend shows; “the modern theater writers are all about unconventional and pushing the envelope and actually trying to change my position as a viewer, so I don’t tend to visit the theater as much as I used to because of what I’m going to be exposed to” (L10). Contemporary Christians do not dismiss a show because they do not agree with its message—they like to be intellectually stimulated—but they are disappointed when they feel truth is misrepresented. Here there are underlying traces of Plato’s conviction that theatre is deceptive and struggles to show truth. It is possible what is showing up here is Tertullian’s historic concern that what is shown on stage will be perceived as objectively true. Perhaps the legacy of Northbrooke, Tertullian, and Augustine’s belief that evil powers use theatre to confuse and corrupt people is another underlying cause of contemporary Christians’ concern about misrepresenting scriptural truth in theatre.

Contemporary Christians are especially suspicious of moral messages represented on stage. Their experiences have told them that “theater celebrates the things that aren’t of – that aren’t righteous,” that theatre champions behaviors that go against Christian beliefs and promotes messages that support aberrant behaviors (L6). A participant disclosed that he believed this was not an exception, but more of a rule when he said, “there’s plenty of examples of this. For example, a show that makes you very sympathetic to adultery where the wife is portrayed as boring and dull, and by the end of it you actually resent her and you like the other woman, and you justify it” (L6).19 A theatre practitioner, who by trade communicates messages, expressed his disappointment about the moral messages being promoted in the theatre, especially in the last twenty years: “We don’t really know who’s bad and who’s good at the end [of movies or plays] because the cops are dirty and the bad guys are altruistic. Sometimes that rubs me the wrong way” (P1). Lastly, a church leader articulated his underlying distrust and disappointment about these messages this way:

19 He was particularly thinking about a production he had seen of The Baker’s Wife.
I think theater used to be more family oriented; you could bring the family and go. Now it’s something I have to guard against all the time. You know, I’ve got to be on guard and make sure there’s nothing crazy going on because I don’t want to tell my twelve-year-old that it’s okay to sleep with people that aren’t your husband. And I don’t want to tell her it’s okay to do this and do that and I don’t want to tell her those words are okay. And if you go and see them on stage it’s the same thing, you’re paying them money, you’re voting with your wallet; that I liked what you said, liked what you did. (L4)

Affectively Powerful

Protestants expressed such strong concern about the messages being conveyed through theatre because they believe it is a very powerful medium of communication. A participant said, “When I go, what I most appreciate is the power that it has to convey a message [. . .] I think there’s power, incredible power there” (L8). Eighteen of the twenty-nine participants mentioned this specific issue during interviews, and all of the other participants supported it indirectly. Therefore, the fourth subcategory to strongly emerge as a positively perceived quality of theatre was entitled Affectively Powerful. When participants expressed this sentiment, they primarily were discussing the powerful intellectual impact theatre can have, but it was not completely separated from theatre’s ability to also be emotionally powerful. Christians were excited about theatre’s ability to express messages that would challenge individuals and communities to improve themselves. They indicated these messages could be strong enough to change people’s perspectives or even actual behavior. A church leader said, “you can make life happen on the stage which can be, if done well, an extremely powerful way to communicate . . . it has the power to do things in me that maybe no other art form can” (L3). A practitioner said he gets excited about “the power in telling stories to change people’s hearts and to change communities, and the power of art overall to lift people above their basest instincts and appetites” (P1).
Many in the study commented that sometimes drama can even impact listeners in a more engaging way than sermons can. This is a markedly different perspective from that of the early Church Fathers and Puritans who argued vehemently against this view. In referring to this, a pastor said, “I believe that you can portray certain scriptural truths in a way that might touch a person differently than if the words were just read in a sermon, or spoken in a sermon” (L5). This supports (but does not quite go so far as) late-twentieth century theologian Jeremy Begbie’s contention that art is of equal weight and has as much impact as a sermon does. This perspective appeared in the 2003 Wuthnow study, whose results showed that people highly valued the arts and were not convinced sermons alone would best help them know God.

People in my study identified the immediacy of theatre and live presence of actors as unique components that engender empathy from an audience. They believed empathy causes the audience to drop some of their defenses and more readily receive the message of the play. Therefore, they see theatre as an influential medium because it can cause people to receive and reflect on a message they might not otherwise consider. The power of empathy, especially coupled with destructive messages, is the emotionally persuasive aspect of theatre that concerned Plato, et al. Interestingly, most participants in my study compared theatre to movies in this respect (with no prompting from the interviewer). Several of them said something similar to this respondent, “Film and television can do many of the same things, but there’s still something about the live presence of the actor that creates a different kind of relationship with the audience, and so it can be a very powerful art form, both for entertainment and for instruction” (P8).

As participants in this study have stated (and the literature attests), theatre’s affective power has been recognized throughout recorded time. Protestants today would agree with twentieth century poet and journalist Max Harris’ appreciation of theatre as a wonderful sensory medium, but they do not celebrate that fact in the same way he did. Protestants in this study seem to join Plato in being suspicious about validating the emotional appeal of theatre, as evidenced by their preference for messages and to be intellectually stimulated when they attend theatre. Theatre’s affective (emotional) power is a basic reason
why there has been such long-lasting controversy about it; if it were not so influential, it would not sustain such interest.

A related dimension surfaced about Christians’ positive enthusiasm for theatre’s power to affect people. There was an unease about this power. Reason for this unease was articulated this way, “Maybe because it reaches so many people. If you’re a plumber down in a little place on the corner you’re not going to be as impactful […] it’s not as influential as something [like theatre] that spans the world” (P2). Because of theatre’s ability to impact people and promote messages, Christians expressed concern about how people are affected and what messages are being communicated. Several people in the study said theatre can be used “for good or ill.” Plato and Augustine first articulated this idea, and it is still held by many Protestant Christians. The feeling is that theatre is a powerful tool that can be wielded by people sympathetic or unsympathetic to Christian beliefs. A college professor described it this way:

Like any powerful tool it can be used for bad purposes, for sinful purposes. Just like financial planning and day trading can be an enormous economic benefit to the world, and it can also bring down the American economy, as it has done in the last five years, right? It doesn’t mean that certain kinds of economics are inherently sinful; it just means that the human capacity to take certain kinds of things and bend them to sinful ends is vast. (P8)

Drama itself is not considered a negative entity by respondents, but how it is used can be. This point of view is contrary to how Tatian, Tertullian, early Church Fathers, and the Puritans saw it.

But it was also evident in the interviews that, like Augustine, contemporary Protestants have a sense that theatre can be subversive or devious, “every once in a while, just very subtly, you see this thing going on and you – what I’m saying is it can be a powerful tool to take you one direction or the other. And I think you need to be aware of what’s going on” (L6). A specific reason for this apprehension was expressed this way: “Theater has often appealed to the lifestyles that we’ve always been against” (L6).
This was explained as showing adulterous, materialistic, or homosexual lifestyles onstage in a positive way, as something to emulate or celebrate. This uneasiness can result in reduction of desire to attend theatre: “My faith has taught me to live and to kind of censor what I see and watch. It just keeps me away from certain shows [. . .] for some reason I feel like theater images stick in your head more powerfully than movies, I feel like it sticks with you better” (S8). Connecting this with the previous subcategory that theatre makes you think, what theatre makes you think about matters to Christians a great deal and needs to reflect truth in a way consistent with their worldview and faith (even if that means showing negative repercussions of characters who reject that view).

**Distasteful Associations**

While much of the conversation in the interviews contained positive perceptions and associations people had of theatre, enough *Distasteful Associations* surfaced to form a second major category. An interesting dimension to this category is that even though distasteful associations exist, Christians did not expect theatre to be tame or unchallenging. In fact, their expectations were that it would challenge or confront people and ideas; further, this was not necessarily seen as a negative thing. A respondent expressed the sentiment like this:

> Theater is usually kind of a vanguard in terms of culture, usually a little bit ahead of it, kind of pushing it in a certain direction. Few people in theater want to just sort of play it safe. They always want to push it a little bit; it’s the nature of creativity. That’s the nature of art, I would think, is to always kind of push expression in a new kind of groundbreaking way. I can’t imagine an artist saying I just want to play it safe, I want to do the status quo, I want to just do exactly what’s safe. We would look at them and subconsciously or even just flat out say you’re not really much of an artist . . . It can push things and make you think. I think every artist wants to have their work in somebody’s mind far beyond just this experience of seeing it. (L6)
Gendered Perceptions

The first subcategory of Distasteful Associations to emerge was respondents’ Gendered Perceptions about theatre; that it was for women and gay men. This was an unforeseen finding that appeared in the first interview and was solidified when it was explored in subsequent interviews. As the interviewer, I did not initially notice this perception until after conducting a few interviews for the study. As is encouraged in grounded theory, when I noticed this underlying association I went back to the first few transcripts and discovered this was indeed expressed from the start. The perception is that theatre employs the “effeminate traits” of singing, dancing, and expressing emotions, which American culture tends to associate with women and gay men (P6). A male respondent said, “the average guy’s thinking ‘drama’s a little touchy feely for me,’ that’d be a phrase that a guy would use, right? Drama’s a little touchy-feely” (L7). Another employed a gendered perception when explaining his impression of theatre, “It’s relational, it’s conversational, it doesn’t tend to be action based, so you’ve just written off a lot of men [. . .] Guys don’t relate to relational” (L10). A distinction was made between “men” and gay men. Liking theatre itself or attending theatre was perceived as incongruent with masculinity. This association did not appear in the literature until mid-twentieth century. Even in early America, the Bowery b’hoys—a faithful audience if there ever was one—were anything but effeminate (Butsch 47).

The subcategory of gendered perceptions not only includes the distasteful association that theatre is for gay men as audience members, but that gay men are also the performers. This association did not exist during the Greek or Medieval eras, but was evident in Puritanical criticisms post-Renaissance. Twenty-five of the twenty-nine participants in this study presumed this association with theatre. Interestingly enough, they did not have the same association with male film actors, even though some actors who are known to be gay perform in both mediums. The general opinion of such respondents was, 

\[\text{\textsuperscript{20} The Bowery b’hoys were a group of unmarried, rowdy young men who lived in boarding houses and spent their evenings at The Bowery Theater or in saloons during the 1840s in New York City. They are credited with being the first example of American working-class youth culture, and theatre attendance was habitual for them. They later became the subject of novels, plays, and movies.}\]
“there is a lifestyle that’s associated with theater, in terms of percentages of men, a higher population of people who are – not secretly gay, but outwardly gay” (L6). And “the girly guys” especially do musicals (P9). This makes Christian men and women uncomfortable. There may be an underlying remnant of Plato’s mimetic argument shown here, that is, seeing people act out a gay lifestyle might lead audience members to behave that way in their personal lives.

As previously stated, a gay lifestyle is contrary to most Christian teachings, so many Protestant Christians do not want to see this depicted onstage as if it were acceptable, much less endorsed. Respondents made a distinction between just including homosexual characters in a play and seeing them act out their lifestyle in front of them while they are a captive audience. Contemporary Protestants are not opposed to having homosexual characters in a play. A borderline seems to exist in these Christian consciences about ways of handling homosexual issues and characters on stage. What they find distasteful is when a play actually shows homosexual acts or badgers audiences to change their negative viewpoint about this issue. One pastor summarized participants’ general opinion as, “when the content is over the top in that area, that’s where it’s like, I don’t need to be participating in that. I don’t need to see it. I don’t need to hear it [. . .] I can find more wholesome things to participate in than that, and so why wouldn’t I?” (L1) Perhaps surprisingly, this was also true for some participants among the practitioner group. As one performer (who also had a gay son) said, “Yeah, stories about gay people, they are very real. But if it gets into too many sloppy open-mouth kissing and I’m going ‘oh boy,’ I’m out the door” (P7).

The result from expectations and experiences of shows that crossed this line is that many participants have limited their theatrical attendance or have chosen other forms of entertainment in which they do not expect to encounter this type of content. Participants made comments like, “I really don’t want to see any of those shows!  I don’t want it!  I don’t want that image in my head!” (L4) Others specifically vowed that if a show has a “pro-gay lifestyle agenda, I’m probably not going to go there” (L6). These results offer answers to the third question in this study, reasons why Christians may not be attending theatre.
Besides theatre allegedly being primarily for gay men, the other gendered perception that emerged strongly in interviews was that theatre is a *Women’s Thing*. Male and female participants declared that women compel men to go see shows or that women see shows together while their husbands/boyfriends do something else such as watch or play sports. Even one of the actors stated that her husband “would not go if it were not for me” (P6). Previous associations about women and theatre were mostly the opposite of this perception. Women were not allowed to perform for many centuries, and discouraged from attending shows or even talking to actors. Men seemed to be the driving force in terms of audience makeup in Greece, Rome, Europe, and even America until the 1830s. This is an interesting reversal of norms.

Unless they had children who were in shows, most of the men interviewed in my study said they went to theatre only one to three times a year, while their wives attended more often (L8). Many of the male respondents reported that their wives talked them into going to shows, but readily admitted that they really enjoyed it when they went. However, they still entertain the notion that theatre is not “manly,” so they do not go unless they are with their wives or girlfriends, believing “that’s not my world” (L7). Male participants pointed out that men liked to snack while watching events, creating an interesting dimension to this subcategory. They did not associate this practice with theatre, but said they might attend theatre more if they could eat while watching a show. When describing this, a participant stated, “Look, if they could sell tacos in the theater, yeah, we’re all set. I think you could double your attendance!” (L4). This struck me as an attempt to apply a perceived manly behavior to theatre going in an effort to reduce a distasteful association.

When asked why they think theatre has gendered perceptions, a few respondents said they did not know, while most attributed it to society. One respondent said the “stereotype” he heard growing up was that theatre was for “effeminate gay men and straight women” (L6). A pastor offered, “I think that’s just society, the way that we’ve stamped things. But I don’t know, I think the more intellectual you are and the more advanced in your education level you get, the more open you are to theater” (L6). The implication is
that more educated people do not just buy into cultural norms. A director and educator described it this way:

Yeah, for the last fifty, sixty years in American culture the professional theater world has signaled that this is a place where it’s okay. Where we’re not going to throw you out the door the second you walk in and tell us that you’re gay. We’ll accept it because we want to acknowledge your gifts and we see what you can bring to this. And it becomes this kind of self-perpetuating, maybe stereotype is too strong a word, but there is this kind of image that then becomes strengthened by popular culture. ‘Oh, okay that’s where the gay people go, great.’ So then gay people grow up and go, ‘oh, I’ll go to the theater where they are, that’s what they’re telling me.’ It wasn’t this way in Shakespeare’s day, it wasn’t this way in the day of the Greeks. It’s not inherent in the nature of theater that it’s for women and gay men, it’s that our culture has said these are certain forms of entertainment that are appropriate for women and that are a safe place and an acceptable place for men to explore their homosexuality, and these are other forms of popular culture and entertainment that are appropriate for men to go to. Straight men. (P8)

Interestingly, a related discovery was that quite a few participants knew of people working in the theatre who were assumed gay, but actually were not. Several in the student group had friends or knew about classmates who did theatre in high school who were encouraged to be gay, sometimes by their directors, even if they were uncertain if they were gay. A student spoke of her own experience in a certain show, “There were like twenty guys in this show and out of all of them one was gay. But nobody believed half of the guys, like half of the guys got teased all the time that they were gay and it’s like, no, actually they have girlfriends and they’re not” (S7). Frustration about this fiction was noticeable:

I feel like a lot of my friends from high school who are now doing theater as they get older are starting to come out as gay, and I don’t know how much of that is really them
feeling like they’re gay or them feeling like ‘I’m a theater person, I’m out there and dramatic, I should be gay.’ And that’s where I feel like the gay issue is a problem with theater. I feel like theater pushes a lot of young men to be gay because they’re not out throwing a football or they’re not out doing something that’s masculine and therefore, they are gay. And that bothers me [. . .] I feel like they are being pushed to that. And I don’t feel like society is well in touch with emotion, there’s very distinct, “this is what a man should do, this is what a woman should do,” and if someone wants to do something in the in between, well then you’re just gay, and it’s not true. (S9)

This sentiment was not just held by the younger generation represented by students in this study. A pastor testified, “I know when I was doing some theater in my college years there was an issue of people assuming different people were gay when they weren’t” (L9). And many of the practitioners spoke of their current experience with this issue. Many of the Christian practitioners in the study work with people in theatre who are gay, but they commented that this has changed in the last few years, and they are encountering more heterosexual colleagues. An actor said, “I think – I mean it’s still very prevalent but I don’t think – I feel like it was kind of trendy in a way to be in theater and be gay – whether or not you actually were” (P6). In actuality this has changed, but society’s notion of male theatre actors being gay still seems to be prevalent, especially in the eyes of laymen and non-practitioners.

Gratuitous Offensiveness

Besides gendered perceptions, Gratuitous Offensiveness was another significant subcategory that became apparent as a distasteful association Protestants have with theatre. Gratuitous was a descriptive word used by enough respondents to become an *in vivo* code. They defined gratuitous as something that does not serve the story or is not necessary for telling the story. Unlike previous historical perspectives, contemporary Protestants do not condemn the whole enterprise of theatre as offensive; they make distinctions among what they feel are its potentially gratuitous aspects and separate what they do and do
not like. For the most part, respondents believe in “the good effect that art has on culture and the place that theater artists have in that, the power in telling stories to change people’s hearts and to change communities” (P1). So, contemporary Christians felt disappointed when theatre was not used for good purposes; they especially disliked shows that tried to shock or be “risqué” just to sell tickets (L2. P5). This was a common criticism about theatre from Christian leaders of the classical Roman period, the early Church Fathers, and twentieth century American Protestants. Such displays were not an issue during the medieval era until the plays moved out of church control. About this form of gratuitousness, a pastor said:

> Sex sells [. . .] Joe Schmo in the fifth row, his wife dragged him there, but if some pretty girl will show him some cleavage maybe he’ll hang out and watch the show, you know? It’s kind of how it works, I think. He’d rather be sitting at home on the couch, popping a beer and watching sports, but in order to get him there, they’ve got to have some things that would appeal to him. I think they’re baser [than shows used to be]. (L4)

All of the respondents spoke of internal boundaries they had about what they consider gratuitous and what is not. Many, but not all of the respondents could concretely identify what those boundary lines were, but they all spoke about how they would feel when those hazy lines were crossed. A church leader clarified that for him a line is crossed “when I can no longer focus on what else is going on. For me there isn’t one kind of bright line moment where I go at exactly this point ‘it’s too much.’ Unfortunately sometimes you only realize it when you cross it” (P8). When discussing his frustration about these types of shows, a director provided a recent experience seeing *Beached* as an illustration: “The girls were put in bikinis and the language that was used was just gratuitous. It’s just – it doesn’t teach us. It’s just for sensation. Nudity on stage just to draw a crowd, to say ‘ooh, they’ve got a nude scene in that,’ you know? I hate that” (P9).

*Nudity* was one of the boundary lines, specifically mentioned enough in interviews to emerge as a subcategory of *Gratuitous Offensiveness*. Almost all in this study stated they felt nudity was never
necessary (or wanted). When talking about nudity in plays, a church leader queried, “personally I feel like that might be a little over the line because what is it for?” (L9). A pastor mentioned how the nudity in *The Full Monty* made him “uncomfortable,” but even worse was it embarrassed him and made him “feel bad” in front of the Christian friends (who were offended) that he had invited to see the show (L1). The consistent belief was that nudity was gratuitous, used just to draw interest. A participant referenced an experience he had at a nearby community theater, The Curtis Theater, in regard to this, “I went to one where they had nudity in the show, [and] I just didn’t think it really made one difference or the other. I think it was probably just a marketing thing to create controversy, to create a stir to get some press out of it” (L6). Respondents did not respect this kind of marketing ploy. As for doing nudity, almost all of the practitioners said they would not feel comfortable in a role that required them to perform nude but they could watch it as an audience member if it served the purpose of the story. The Christian theatre company interviewed in this study did allow limited nudity in their production of *Wit* and all of the members interviewed saw the show, and all but one said it served the story and did not offend them. The one actor interviewed who would consider doing nudity if it served the story still expressed reservations, “as a person of faith, I would be very careful. But I wouldn’t say unequivocally no. I would be very careful with what I endorsed or did” in regard to nudity (P1).

Similarly, *Sex on Stage* was another emergent dimension of *Gratuitous Offensiveness* for all three groups interviewed. This was also an area where Christians thought shows “crossed the line.” Similar to nudity, it was seen as a tactic to get publicity. Participants found “risqué or overtly sexual” shows, such as *Rent* and *Spring Awakening*, to be distasteful and disappointing (P4). In fact, participants reported this got in the way of them enjoying the story. A practitioner noted, “I have yet to see something that uses that [sex on stage] as a tool to really move me as an audience member, make me think about whatever it is
that– whatever the point of the story is” (P4). Both heterosexual and homosexual sex displayed on stage was distasteful, especially if the characters were not married.21

Respondents were clear that they did not mind seeing moderate displays of affection on stage. It is the way sex on stage is presented that can be problematic for Protestants. The general sense was that sexual encounters alluded to or happening offstage were tolerable. However, seeing the sexual scenes happening “explicitly on stage” right in front of them made Christians uncomfortable (S5). In clarifying the difference between what was acceptable and what was bothersome, some typical responses included, “I don’t mind romance, I love romance. I love seeing people kissing and embracing and so on, but when it gets to a different level . . . I just think that those kinds of moments are private moments in people’s lives” (P2). A student explained, “You don’t want to see two people on stage having sex, they can put a blanket over it, and you can imagine . . .] sometimes for a plot, sexual immorality has to be done but do it tastefully instead of so explicit because I don’t need to see that stuff on stage” (S4).22 Another added this criticism for their dislike, “that’s taking something that should be private and intimate and reserved for marriage and making it cheap entertainment” (P8). Male participants especially commented that viewing overt sexual displays were disturbing to them.

Like in the other subcategories of Gratuitous Offensiveness, some kind of internal alarm goes off when respondents sense the intent of showing sex onstage is to titillate the audience rather than serve the story. Participants saw the way the sex scenes were done as a deliberate choice, and did not appreciate some of the gratuitous choices they had been asked to endure in certain shows they had attended. Recalling seeing Stage Beauty, which had onstage sex scenes, a respondent said: “They could have been done in a subtle way and everybody would have understood exactly what was taking place. And they decided to make it less subtle [. . .] And while that storyline could have been interesting, it seemed it was

21 Participants specifically mentioned Spring Awakening, Rent, Sex Boy, Avenue Q, and The Butcher’s Wife in regard to this.
22 This student mentioned Gypsy and Chicago a few times during the interview, although she did not specifically state which, if either of these, she was referring to when she made this statement.
much more about being shocking with the explicit nature of things” (L1). This type of display can be enough to keep Protestants from attending shows that they think will contain this element:

When I have to expose my mind and my eyes or my ears or whatever to not just a message but the blatant display of that kind of provocative, sinful, anti-God kind of behavior, then it – potentially – is more detrimental to me spiritually – places I don’t need to go. I don’t need to see something with nudity in it. Just not – why would that be healthy for me as a man? I don’t care if it’s a great play or movie with the best actors and the greatest themes, do I really need – is my life going to be damaged because I don’t see it? Probably not. Is my spiritual walk going to be harmed even a little bit if I do see it? Probably. Even if in a small measure. Well, for me that’s an easy choice to make. (L1)

The third subcategory of Gratuitous Offensiveness to emerge in this study was Foul Language. A strong majority in all three groups commented how distasteful this was to them. Similar to the other subcategories, respondents said excessive profanity prevented them from enjoying the story because it felt gratuitous; they believe it is mostly used to shock the audience. While such language was not appreciated overall, profanity used specifically to develop the story or establish character was not problematic. Respondents felt a line was being crossed when there was a barrage of such language, even when it was supposed to establish character. A practitioner remarked, “It gets in the way and it gets laborious after a while. Sometimes it’s a way people talk, I know that people do talk like that but I don’t think that much” (P2).

Since the practitioners were all experienced performers who have to deal with modern plays that often contain profanity, it was surprising to hear their strong opposition to it. Frustration about this matter was sometimes expressed as another reason to avoid theatre going, “sometimes you watch things and it’s the F-word or whatever, it’s over and over again, it’s like okay, what’s the point of this? It’s like the

23 Participants specifically mentioned Assassins, Burn This, Rent, Sex Boy, and The Boys Next Door.
director wanted to shock me, the viewer. I don’t need that, how is that helping me? If there’s the F-word every three seconds, I don’t want that, why would I pay forty dollars for that? I’m not going to put up with that” (L10).  

There was a sense during the interviews—and quotes represented here in the Gratuitous Offensiveness category—that showing evil actions, choices, behaviors, or characters went beyond just irritating because it directly touches on Christian morality. The concern reiterates Plato’s apprehension about imitation; that seeing things onstage will influence spectators or their families in negative ways. This concern is also tied to their Christian faith; seeing aberrant behaviors, decisions, etc. would “normalize” them, an attitude their faith prohibits.

Plato’s associated argument about the potential harm to actors playing negative characters (in relation to the possible dangers of imitation), came up during interviews. Protestants adhere to the belief that you can become what you imitate. This belief is foundational in their faith; Christians are encouraged to imitate Christ in order to become like Him (1 Corinthians 11:1). Despite this belief, however, Protestants in this study were not against actors playing “bad guys” as such. Like Augustine, and contrary to Plato et al., respondents had no objections to actors playing such roles onstage, and understood that to work in theatre as a career it would be difficult to only play positive characters. There was no single standard that the actors in the study adhered to about the types of characters they would play; each actor had a different point of view about what roles he or she would consider appropriate.

Participants recognized the power imitation can exert, but unlike Tatian, Tertullian, and Puritans they did not equate actors playing a character with actors actually becoming those characters in their personal lives. Nor do today’s Protestants consider portraying a murder equivalent to committing one. Also contrary to historical attitudes, contemporary Protestants do not believe spectators participate in evil

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24 This respondent referenced South Coast Repertory Theater and theaters in Los Angeles but could not remember specific titles of plays when discussing this; this was his impression of mostly plays, he called musicals “more playful and less substantial” (page 4 of the transcript).
by seeing it take place on stage. But they do not like to see what they consider to be too much evil either. Also unlike historical Christian leaders, no one in this study felt they or anyone else should dictate what roles actors chose to perform. Their perspective was that such choices were between the individual and his or her conscience, that is, no different than similar choices Christians face in other fields. The actors in this study seemed most aware of the affects that playing a character can have on a person. In a sense, a few of the actors validated Plato’s concern because they have developed strategies to leave their characters at the theatre when they go home in order to resume their normal lives. Although the actors admitted some roles affected them more than others, such strategies were presented more as a precautionary measure than a routine necessity.

An interesting and surprising dimension to the “Offensive” subcategory was that several members in each group freely stated they thought they might be more tolerant than other Christians about what they found offensive. A student said though she did have boundary lines for what she felt was appropriate viewing, “I’m more lenient maybe than other Christians” (S10). There is a perception that there is some kind of a group standard yet these individuals view themselves as separate from the group in this respect.

**Drama in Church**

Besides Perceived Positive Qualities and Distasteful Associations, Drama in Church emerged as a strong third major category in this study. In the literature, there is a good deal of evidence from different historical periods that Christians were suspicious of drama itself, not just theatre. The very act of impersonating another was condemned. Bringing drama inside the church during the Middle Ages and the 1920s and 60s in America but banning it at other times led me to wonder how contemporary Christians viewed this practice. When asked what they thought about drama in church, strong support was expressed in all three groups and much discussion ensued. In fact, numerically this category had the most references of any category or subcategory of the study.

25 This primarily refers to Aimee Semple McPherson’s efforts.
Church pastors and leaders were especially enthusiastic about the idea of employing drama in church, an opinion that surprised me. Most churches I am familiar with do not incorporate drama in their Sunday services, so I presumed leaders were opposed to it. However, none in the leader group were opposed to drama itself or having it performed in church. Their enthusiasm came from their belief that drama has the ability to influence people, a feature which they said was the stated goal of everything found in their church services. They agree with Augustine that theatre itself is not evil and can be employed for spiritual ends, even in church. Christian leaders in the study supported the use of drama in services because “you can portray certain scriptural truths in a way that might touch a person differently than if the words were just read in a sermon, or spoken in a sermon” (L5). This coincides with the medieval and twentieth century viewpoint of the impact and pedagogical value that art can have. At the same time, the church leaders seem to share the medieval and Puritan belief that only the sermon can move people to live truly moral lives. Their perspective is that drama is a good preparation to the main event, but words, or sermons, are still preeminent.

Nevertheless, Protestant leaders in the study recognize church drama’s potential to effectively communicate to today’s visually-oriented generations, making church a place where young people especially would value coming to regularly. Contemporary Protestants, including church leaders, welcome the use of drama during services just as medieval and twentieth century American Christians did. And they do not regard drama or theatre as a competitor to church attendance as the early Church Fathers and Puritans did. Perhaps that is due to cultural change where church services are offered several times during weekends and do not usually conflict with theatrical performance times, unlike in the past when they coincided. Congregants no longer have to choose between the two, thus removing a primary complaint the early Church Fathers and Puritans had. Historical leaders felt so negatively about drama overall, perhaps because theatres were full and church services empty on Sundays, and would not welcome its use in their services as medieval and contemporary leaders do today.
**Appropriateness**

Despite enthusiasm for drama in church, responses in all three groups of the study indicated there are different opinions about when and how theatre should be used in church. Therefore, *Appropriateness* surfaced as a subcategory of *Drama in Church*. Participants defined the use of drama in church to mean a short dramatic religious sketch used during a church service. Often this sketch would be just one of the components of the worship service, usually done before the sermon. There was agreement that a dramatic sketch used in church needs to support the sermon or just “ask a question and let the sermon answer it” (L6). Pastors in particular saw this practice as a decided benefit to their preaching because “the better the pre-sermon element is, the further in the subject I get to go, because they already are on it” (L8). Doing drama in church just for its own sake was not an acceptable justification. As one pastor said, “I have little interest in art for art’s sake. In a general sense that’s probably fine, but in the church it has to be about moving people, it has to be about getting them to take a next step, everything has to be about that for me” (L8).

A few participants in the student and practitioner groups viewed drama done in a regular church service either as a distraction or inappropriate. One said, “quite honestly I don’t know if that is the place for that, that’s not why I go there. I go there for my teaching and my prayer” (P4). Another practitioner said when he goes to church, “it’s time for me to worship and hear that sermon. I’m just extremely traditional when it comes to the worship service” (P9). Traditional was explained to mean no drama or other art other than music was employed during services.

A pastor who did not agree that drama during a service was appropriate stated that he takes his instructions from “regulative principles” in the Bible when planning his church service (L1). He clarified that regulative principles included: reading Scripture, praying, preaching, and singing songs. He loves drama, worked in theatre for a few years as an adult, and is happy to make his church available for
dramatic productions, but only outside regular worship service times. He explained his preferences this way,

The Gospel preached is the best way and the most effective way that God has chosen to reveal himself redemptively. It’s not the only way, but it’s the most effective. I don’t learn much theology through these things [sketches]. I learn most of my theology through the word of God, the preached, taught word of God. (L1)

He and the other respondents previously mentioned did support drama in church, just not during the regular Sunday worship services. Drama done during special church events held in the evenings or for special holiday services was acceptable, and it was also acceptable if these extracurricular dramatic performances occupied the entire evening (minimal or no sermon).

When respondents were asked why they made such distinctions, it seemed that tradition and social norms played a key role in forming their opinions. A participant stated, “I’m not sure why I have a problem with it in church, I don’t know when you think of church, you think of the preacher talking on Sundays, reading the bible, singing hymns” (S3). A student credited her dislike of drama used during a regular church service to her upbringing, “during service, I don’t know. I guess that’s just not one of my – maybe because I didn’t grow up with it” (S4). Another respondent said her distinction came from her own experience, “I grew up doing theater in my church and singing, so I think it’s okay for children. I never saw adults do it so I actually don't think adults are fit to do it . . . it was always children, so we never questioned the way things were done. Just a culture of the church and just don't question traditionalism” (S6). As to why there seems to be such variance among Protestants about what is appropriate in a church service, a practitioner explained:

All Christian worship in my view is culturally conditioned. There’s very little in the New Testament about how Christians are supposed to worship. We know that they read Scripture, prayed, preached, sang songs and hymns and spiritual songs, but that’s pretty
much it unless there’s something I’ve missed. But every kind of worship that Christians have developed over the last two thousand years has a set of expectations with it, and we’re all socialized into one or another form of worship. We may choose to at some point in our lives leave a form of worship that we find frustrating or unfulfilling or that we later come to believe is in error as we’ve studied the Bible, and we move to another church. And with that comes a different worship style, and then we get socialized into that worship style. (P8)

Quality Concerns

In further discussion of these distinctions and of drama used in church overall, a core subcategory emerged; participants had Quality Concerns about it. Participants said they had experienced the powerful impact drama can have on people when it is done well as part of the service. This is why the majority supported it. However, all the Christians interviewed said that they had often seen church drama done poorly, which caused them some apprehension about its use in general. There was a largely negative association between high quality and church drama. An actor offered this explanation for why church drama has a negative label, “We wouldn’t turn the church choir over to a layperson because they volunteered to do it. But for a lot of years those were the people that were doing church drama” (P1). Thus, the training, quality, and professionalism of people doing the dramas were quite low.

Participants so often associated the word “cheesy” with drama done in church that it became a clear in vivo code. When asked to explain what he meant by that word a respondent replied, “it means something that comes across as inauthentic. Bad acting, bad script, something that just isn’t done well, and that comes across as inauthentic. Or that comes across as overly sentimental” (L7). A bad script is one with “unrealistic dialogue” or “the message is very blatant,” (S8) “a little like hitting you on the head” and feels unnatural in the short amount of time allotted for the sketch. Short dramatic enactments from the Bible were also criticized, but usually because of poor acting and poor costuming. Students
especially talked about how “cheesy” and laughable most of the sketches they had seen were. Participants commented that although people acting in the sketches probably had good intentions, they felt embarrassed for the adults because they were not very good at it. More allowance was given to the children’s acting in the sketches.

Poor acting and poor writing of church dramas made the practitioners especially uncomfortable. These were revealed as a principal reason from the practitioners who did not like drama performed in Sunday services. Untrained priests and laymen acted in much of the medieval dramas, so, conceivably, the acting was of less than professional quality there as well, but the focus was on the stories being told, which perhaps accounts for the absence of criticism about this subject at that time. Also during the medieval era, performing certain stories or characters from Scripture, such as Jesus’ miracles or the devil, were considered blasphemous. Protestants today have no such criticisms or restrictions for today’s church dramas.

Since all but one of the church leaders were supportive of drama in worship services, it was initially surprising that very few of them actually were taking advantage of it. Further questioning showed that this was due to concerns of quality. When discussing drama in church, Quality Concerns were often expressed. A pastor said,

I don’t really have any qualms about it being appropriate for a service. To me it’s the quality of whatever we do in the service [. . .] there are enough reasons for people to not want to go to church other than it being poorly done. So don’t give them just another reason to not want to come, because – especially if they have some theater background or some experiences and they go wow, that was really bad. It’s sort of like a musician going to church and hearing somebody really slaughter a song. (L2)

Pastors in particular voiced their conviction that everything done in a church service should be done well—as an honor to God—who “deserves our best” (L5). Pastors were not in favor of allowing
church members to participate in the service, be it singing or acting, just because they desired to do so. All felt that contributors to the service needed to be gifted by God in whatever skills they offered for services. Pastors said they were not using drama in their services because they did not have a trained director to supervise the necessary work. Their perspective was, “God draws the people to the church that he wants – that have the gifts and abilities to do certain ministries [. . .] It’s been hard to find good people that really are good at it [drama]” (L5).

These pastors said they would use drama quite regularly if a director or leader with training in this area approached them with the desire to establish a drama program at their church. Enthusiasm for the potential impact church drama can have is still apparent in Protestant Christians, but pastors’ experience with its poor quality in the past has resulted in their reticence towards it. However, hope and willingness to use this format was still expressed, “there’s such great ways to present the gospel and the various aspects of the gospel through theatre. Whether that’s presenting sin or presenting stories of redemption or just truth about the way life is, and being able to present that is a great thing that God has given us that’s been around for centuries” (L7). This utilitarian perspective was also evident in both medieval and early twentieth century American Christians.26

Practical Impediments

The last important category generated from the interviews was Practical Impediments to attending theatre. As explained, distasteful associations resulted from moral sensibilities but there were other reasons that prevented Christians from attending theatre regularly.

Lack of Awareness

The first of these to emerge strongly was Lack of Awareness. Participants said they were very familiar with current or upcoming movies and sporting events because they had seen repeated

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26 See Chapter Four for arguments against this utilitarian perspective, especially in late-twentieth century America, particularly from Francis Schaeffer.
advertisements about them. However, very few respondents reported seeing advertisements for plays. When they did see an advertisement or poster for a play, it was negligible, “y’know, you see a bulletin for a play once and then you see every two seconds a new commercial for this movie, and the more you see it you’re kind of like ‘oh, I really want to see that’” (S10). Posters and flyers were not deemed effective because they did not tell enough of what the play was about. Participants reported that this lack of concrete information, seen essentially as a lack of providing understanding or motivation, led them to ignore it.

Billboards, television commercials, and previews in movie theaters were primarily where respondents obtained their information about entertainment opportunities. Students especially said they were not aware of plays or even theatres in their area. While they readily looked online for movie theaters and showing times in their area, they did not use the same resource to find out about plays or theatres. Participants made it clear that marketing and advertising were undersupplied for theatre and contributed to their lack of attendance at plays. They also said if these aspects would improve it would likely influence their decision to attend plays more often, “if I saw something advertised, that would prompt me, if it was put in front of me in the right context that would influence it” (L7). This was not really referenced as a historical argument against theatre attendance, but most likely that was because previous generations were not as saturated with ubiquitous advertising as today’s generations are. In addition, going to theatre was woven into the social fabric of Greek, Roman, Medieval, Renaissance, and twentieth century American societies.

Besides insufficient advertising, not wanting to gamble on something new was another reason for Lack of Awareness among participants. Respondents reported that they would rarely go to see a play or musical if they were not at least somewhat familiar with its content. In order for them to go, they want to have heard about the play, be familiar with what the play is about, or have a friend recommend it. Having actually seen the play before or knowing something of what it was about was pivotal in making the decision to attend, “I don’t think I ever would go – I don’t think I’ve ever gone anywhere where I didn’t
know what I was going – know what I was getting into” (L6). And getting a positive recommendation from friends was enough to inspire participants to attend. These reasons added up to this general position, “if it’s more guaranteed that I am going to know that it’s worthwhile, then I go and see it” (S5). Also, a large percentage of respondents said they were more likely to see a show if they knew someone who was involved with it. This was true even if they were not themselves familiar with the show.

**Peer Disinterest**

Friend or peer recommendations are influential enough to incite people to see shows, but peer influence can work in another way as well. An influential motive in whether people went to see shows was if their friends wanted to go. A respondent said, “it’s not something that even comes up as something that I would think of doing, if someone were to invite me to something, I’d be interested. I need someone to pull me along and I’m totally gung ho for it” (L7). Friends proved to be a strong factor in determining what participants did with their leisure time. If their friends did not want to see a show, participants noted that they usually did not wish to go either, “it’s like peer pressure just in the sense that if my friends aren’t going, why would I go to this?” (S1). In fact, discussions during interviews showed that friends’ disinterest led respondents to question the value of their own interest, “they don’t have an interest in it so I don’t want to have an interest in it” (S1). Therefore, **Peer Disinterest** surfaced as a concrete, practical impediment for Christians’ lack of attendance at theatres.

When asked if they talked about theatre with their friends as they do about other activities, almost all participants said they did not. And though they never discussed shows or theatre, participants also assumed their friends did not like theatre. When asked if they had ever brought up going to a play or musical as they have going to a movie or other event, participants said they had not. When asked why they had not, they said they did not know. Although the tactic did not work, early Church Fathers and Puritan leaders seem to have been aware of peer influence when they tried to persuade their followers to
choose church over theatre, hoping such persuasions would develop into social practice. Perhaps peer influence is functioning stronger and is even more compelling or powerful today.

**Accessibility**

Besides peer disinterest, the third strongest subcategory of *Practical Impediments* to emerge in interviews was *Accessibility*. Accessibility refers to something easily available, related to expense or time. One participant stated, “I wouldn’t say that I am a theatergoer. Given opportunity – my wife and I do like to go. What keeps us from going to well-known productions is cost” (L2). All three groups in this study cited tight budgets and the perceived high expense of theatre as factors that prevented them from attending. The predominant opinion is, “It’s never cheap to go to theatre” (L6). Adults in the study said they would pay on average $30-$70 per ticket, while the young adults (students) averaged $10-$40 per ticket, depending on the show. This was not an issue for Greek or medieval theatergoers because the shows were free to spectators; rulers, wealthy townspeople or collective guilds considered it an honor to sponsor what was then a well-known social custom. Expense to attend theatre was a criticism levied by the early Church Fathers and Puritans in the sense that leaders thought the money could be put to better use, especially if it was given to the poor. The cost of attending theatre became a social dividing line during nineteenth century in America, when the wealthy deliberately established ticket prices high enough to keep the other social classes from attending their exclusive theaters. High ticket prices seem to be an enduring legacy associated with theatre today.

Time was another factor related to *Accessibility* that contemporary Protestants identified as another practical impediment. People in the study said their lives were very busy and leisure time was minimal, “I’m doing all I can to keep up with all of the demands of my life right now, and that’s [going to theatre] really a luxury that I’m just not – something has to give” (L6). When they did have leisure time, Christians in the study preferred the convenience, control, and lesser expense of staying home and watching a movie. A respondent explained, “what I’m trying to say is you do that [go to theatre] every so
often. You can’t just do that as accessible as you can like a film. You can do that in your own home” (L6). Another specifically cited the convenience of Netflix as their habitual “default” for date night (L2). As mentioned in Chapters 2 and 3, it was social custom to attend theatre regularly, especially the community festivals, in Greece, Rome, Medieval England, and late-nineteenth century America; it was expected. But early Americans considered time spent on entertainments such as theatre to be unproductive or a waste of time. Though they enjoyed theatre, there was a sense in the interviews that modern-day Protestants had a similar view as early Americans; time was too valuable and attending theatre was not seen as a productive use of it.

Coupled with time, there was a sense that going to theatre was less convenient and involved more effort than other entertainment choices. Participants discussed the planning needed to go and see a play, “theater is really like a go-to production; you can't be at home and on a whim, decide to go to the theater” (S6). To people with busy schedules, this was seen as a practical impediment. The limited times when plays take place were also seen as an inconvenient factor, especially when compared to the multiple times of movie showings. Theatre goers have to tailor their plans to attend a show instead of the show fitting in with their personal plans. When faced with limited leisure time, participants expressed frustration about the effort and time limitations involved with seeing a play, “it’s only offered that one time. Then you have to fit your schedule around that. But this movie’s playing six different times throughout the day” (S3). Another participant expressed the time restrictions resulting from her own busy schedule, “you can watch a movie at home at any time that you are free. Plays are only available certain times” (S10).

Theatre was also seen as less accessible because of what it was associated with. It is seen as a more formal, “high end” event, which takes pre-planning and preparation (L8). Participants associated such things as arranging for a baby sitter, dressing up, and going to a nice dinner before the show as necessary, and these things often influenced ease of access for them. One respondent said, “Theater takes a whole different kind of level of participation. You get ready, you usually dress up, so there’s a whole another level – it’s a six, seven-hour commitment. You’ve got to go out to dinner, the whole thing” (L6).
Women did not see this as reducing accessibility or a practical impediment as much as men did. A male participant explained:

Here’s the thing, women prefer to dress up in the fancy gown, have the husband in the suit, a lot more than men want to dress up in the suit and have the woman in a fancy gown. It’s just, it really is that way... it’s always costly, it’s always dressy, it’s always these things that guys just for the most part I think would prefer not to do. I think we’d rather go in shorts and a t-shirt, grab Del Taco on the way! (L4)

In this study there was an overall sense, sometimes stated inadvertently, that theatre was simply not essential or important to most people’s lives. They did not see it as worthless, as Tatian did, just not as valuable or convenient to them as other entertainment options. Several participants said they had busy lives, but that they also managed to make time for things that were important to them. People in this study admitted that if they really wanted to incorporate theatre more in their lives they could make the effort to look up shows, find time to go, and find the money to attend. Recalling the report from The National Endowment for the Arts mentioned in Chapter 1, theatre attendance in America has been steadily declining for many years. Since Protestants make up fifty-two percent of the American population, one wonders what, if any, contribution they make to that declining rate. There is no statistical evidence about theatre attendance of Protestants in particular so it is impossible to compare secular with Christian attendance rates. But perhaps reasons given from Protestants in this study for not attending theatre would overlap with the general population. That is outside the concern of this study. However, it may be relevant that Gallup reported in 2002 that the general American population prefers to “spend an evening engaged in home-based activities” rather than going out.

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27 Gallup poll from December 2012 entitled, “In U.S., 77% Identify as Christian.”
28 Gallup report published January 2002 entitled, “There’s No Place Like Home to Spend Evening, Say Most Americans.” This report found that watching television or movies at home ranked highest among adults 18-65+ years old.
Summary of Findings

In summary, the results of this study show that many of the criticisms and dislikes of contemporary Protestants are the same as previous historical criticisms, and a few are different. Contemporary Protestants find theatre exciting, intellectually stimulating, and a powerful resource to impact people with Christian messages. While Protestants today enjoy theatre overall, sometimes methods chosen to convey the story of the play come across as gratuitous and distasteful. Participants in this study were in favor of using the affective power of drama for religious means, but they were not in agreement about when or where it should be employed in churches. There was agreement about several practical impediments that prevented them from attending, even though there was resounding enjoyment of this art form whenever they did attend.
Figure 5: All Three Comparison Charts, 2013 Results Added

Greek through Medieval Eras

Renaissance through 1950 in America

1950 through 2013 in America
CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study developed out of curiosity and questions about the intersection of Christianity and theatre. In particular, I sought to understand what contemporary Protestants think about theatre and to explore where and how those perceptions originated. Because of the chosen method of inquiry, grounded theory, the study did not begin with a proposed thesis. Rather than seek to prove or disprove a hypothesis, grounded theory allows members of a particular community to offer their perspectives about the topic of inquiry. Yet a way to explore this topic was needed, so research questions were developed and research subjects were queried. The three research questions included: (1) what are current Protestant Christians’ attitudes and beliefs about theatre; (2) if Protestant Christians are not attending theatre, why not; and (3) what is the source of their attitudes and beliefs? These results of the research questions were given in Chapter 6 in more detail but for clarity and relevance to this chapter, the questions are answered below in a summary fashion:

(1) Contemporary Protestants have many positive perceptions about theatre today; they love its live quality, find it intellectually stimulating, and believe it has the ability to impact people to change their lives for the better. However, they also have distasteful associations with theatre, such as that it is primarily for gay men or women and that it can be gratuitous. Their attitude towards drama in church is that it can be very impacting, but they differ about when and how it should appear in church. And their belief is that drama in church is often done poorly or appears “cheesy.” Last, because of peer disinterest and other practical impediments, they do not make theatre a priority entertainment choice.

(2) The analysis of the interview data presented in Chapter 6 suggests that Protestant Christians today are mostly not attending theatre. If they do, it averages one to three times per year. Respondents reported being discouraged by things they perceived as gratuitous in theatre, be it content or messages they could not agree with, which may contribute to their low attendance rate. In addition, men did not feel theatre
was a masculine activity so they do not attend on their own. As described in Chapter 6, many reasons were given by participants as to why they do not attend theatre but overall it seems they do not find it valuable to their lives nor worth the effort, time, or expense. This can be gleaned from the interviews where respondents directly and indirectly expressed that they find the time and resources to incorporate into their lives what they consider to be valuable and theatre was not really part of that equation. Protestants’ overall disinterest and concerns about theatre seem to overwhelm the positive things they enjoy about theatre, resulting in reticent appreciation and very low attendance.

(3) Protestants’ current attitudes and beliefs seem to come from: personal past experiences with theatre, friends’ past experiences with theatre, and movies or television shows that depict what theatre is like. For the younger generation interviewed, the students, it seems parental support greatly contributed to their positive disposition towards theatre. For the actors in the study, school experiences doing theatre primarily formed their positive attitudes towards theatre.

Findings

Historical arguments and concerns from Christians about theatre were explored in Chapters 2 through 4. As a result, four recurring areas were identified as centers of concern to Protestant Christians, and these are discussed below. Chapter 6 reported what contemporary Protestants think about theatre, provided answers to the three main research questions, and compared those results with how past Protestant leaders viewed theatre. This chapter will connect the findings of this current study to the four areas of contention Protestants have historically held in regards to theatre. Ranked from greater to lesser concern for Protestants today, the four areas descend as follows: power, purpose, imitation, origins. However for consistency’s sake and to avoid confusion, the four areas will be discussed in the same order that was used in Chapters 2 through 4.
Plato’s strong concerns about mimesis do not appear to be of major importance to modern-day Christians. Whereas Plato viewed imagination distrustfully and as a possible destructive force for society, contemporary Protestants would agree more with Aristotle and American Protestants in the 1990s that imagination is a positive attribute that should be celebrated and enjoyed. Engaging an audience’s imagination allows theatre practitioners to relate stories of truth, which is a key value to Protestants.

Neither do contemporary Protestants agree with Plato that imitating characters is deceptive and does not lead to truth. On the contrary, Protestants support the art of imitation as a requirement for good acting, they recognize that the actors are not really being the characters they portray, and they believe truth can be revealed through the live storytelling unique to this art form. In fact, they believe that the better the imitation, the more authentic the characters seem, which then draws the audience in to see and hear the truth in the play. Their concern about deception is when the message in a play contradicts Christian truth. If that happens they do not dismiss the play, they said they just cannot enjoy it. Today’s Protestants mirror the sentiment expressed in America in the 1980s: deception in the course of imitating and presenting characters and a story serves as a constructive way to present a message that people might otherwise not be willing to receive. This includes small dramatic sketches done in the service of a church.

Also reflective of Aristotle but not Plato, flawed characters (even heroes) are acceptable to present-day Protestants. These characters feel more authentic and allow for more audience identification than Plato’s preference to just show good characters behaving well. In fact, Christian actors in the study said they enjoyed playing “bad guys.” They were not flippant about this: they saw it this way, “We’re not always good people and we have to show the bad side as well as the good side, and if we need to interpret the bad side in order for someone else to see the good side, or even that it’s just bad, we need to be able to say that too because it’s showing truth” (P2). They all felt negative characters were necessary for a complete story, which echoes late twentieth century Christian writers. An actor in the study clarified his
position about this, saying, “I don’t know how to make stories about redemption unless someone is in need of redemption” (P1). The actors felt they could bring an understanding of the brokenness of mankind to these roles because of their Christian worldview. The actors also said that they would only play these characters if their bad behavior was not glorified or shown to be beneficial by the end of the play. The other two groups in the study similarly felt that it was not a problem for Christian actors to play bad characters, and like the practitioners, they said that those characters need to be shown as unsuccessful. This became apparent in the Redemptive Message subcategory. All three groups in the study articulated that they did not feel anyone should tell an actor what roles to take, even playing bad characters: they felt those choices were between the actor and God. A respondent stated that a good rule for considering whether to play the role of a “bad guy” should be this: “Is this a story that I can get behind, that is communicating truth about God’s world? Playing non-Christians can tell very redemptive stories that communicate truth about God’s world, so I’m all for that” (L7).

There was very little concern from Protestants that unsavory behaviors played on stage would be replicated by actors in their real lives. However, neither did respondents have a high opinion of actors’ behavior in their personal lives. It seems there is an expectation that sexual promiscuity, and drug and alcohol use go with the territory of working in theatre. This surfaced in the Distasteful Association category. These conjectures were drawn from participants who had friends who worked in entertainment or from movies and television shows that depicted offstage lives of fictional characters. Nevertheless, there was no connection evident from contemporary Protestants that supports Plato’s original claim that imitating objectionable characters leads actors to behave poorly in their real lives.

Another issue related to mimesis advocated by Plato, Tertullian, Augustine, and subsequent Christian leaders is the claim that seeing disagreeable behaviors on stage will lead audience members to behave similarly in their lives. American Protestants in the twentieth century demonstrated their strong concern about this topic through their nonstop efforts to censor shows and legislate moral codes. However, this is not the perspective of contemporary Protestants. The data show that Protestants’
preference is to see the whole of life presented in the story of a play, which includes seeing unpleasant characters, behaviors, and outcomes. Respondents did report not liking it when an audience is led to sympathize with characters behaving badly, but they did not express concern that adults in the audience would then behave similarly. Contemporary Protestants would support Augustine’s perspective that spectators are responsible for their own behavior choices and cannot blame bad behavior on anyone else. In the subcategories of Gratuitous Offensiveness, participants did admit that they had limits (expressed as internal lines) about how much objectionable material should be shown. But this was articulated as a dislike for seeing gratuitous things rather than a fear of imitating those things.

Tertullian and subsequent Protestant leaders declared that it is never permissible to pretend to be someone else, even in a play, and that God condemns that behavior. Contemporary Protestants do not agree with these assertions and do not find biblical support for them. In the past, pretending to be someone of the opposite gender was especially denounced. Tertullian and Puritan leaders were concerned that this aspect of imitation would lead to men becoming effeminate or gay. It seems there is still a strong association between theatre and gender issues because Gendered Perceptions emerged in the study as a strong subcategory under Distasteful Associations. Theatre is seen to be primarily for women and gay men: it is not seen as a masculine activity. The perception was that wives dragged husbands to theaters, and gay men performed in and attended plays. Participants were frustrated by these perceptions about theatre because they knew of male actors who were not gay but were assumed to be gay just because they worked in theatre. It is a stereotype that remains, even if it may not be true anymore. Also interesting is that participants did not think of movie actors as gay; even when the same male actors perform in movies and theatre. The association that male actors who do theatre are gay seems fairly strong.

Purpose

The purpose of theatre is as much of a concern today as it was during the Greek and medieval eras as well as the twentieth century in America. Contemporary Protestants would disagree with Plato that
plays are not valuable or do not serve a legitimate purpose. Today’s Protestants say they see plays as valuable sources of entertainment (pleasure) and believe this is a legitimate purpose in itself. Unlike Tatian and John Wycliffe, today’s Protestants value pleasure and entertainment, agreeing more with Thomas Aquinas, Jonas Barish, and others that these things are not sinful and people need them to balance their lives. At the same time, there still exists a remnant of Plato, Puritan and early American sentiment that pleasure should be minimized and since theatre is for pleasure, it is therefore an “extra.” Other things are prioritized or chosen over attending theatre. Perhaps this actually reflects age-old sentiments that watching a show is idleness or an unproductive use of time.

Contemporary Christians also see a valuable purpose of theatre in its ability to present messages creatively and indirectly. Messages in shows, especially redemptive ones, are highly valued by contemporary Protestants. Hence, the highly saturated subcategory of Redemptive Message surfaced under Perceived Positive Qualities. Intellectually Stimulating is another positive subcategory from the study that is directly related to how Protestants see the purpose of theatre. Christians expect to have to think when they go to the theatre, and they enjoy finding and receiving a message in a play. There is a strong sense from contemporary Protestants that theatre should serve an instructional purpose, and this is mostly found in the message the audience is left with at the end of the show. Contemporary Protestants echo medieval Christians, Martin Luther, and twentieth century American Protestants’ perspective that theatre is a valuable tool that can be used to instruct people about God, the scriptures, and the world. Christian patrons and actors in this study said they prefer viewing or doing shows that have what they consider a truthful message they can support, a message that illustrates God’s truth in the world. Concerns about how theatre is being used appear when Christians do not agree with a play’s message. Theatre being used in a purposeful way, for good or ill, is as much of a concern today for Protestants as it has always been.

The messages of dramas done in American churches are especially important to today’s Protestants. The messages need to be clear and replicate Christian teachings in order to be accepted. This
was also true of medieval, Renaissance, and Reformation Christians who supported the use of church drama. The purpose of today’s church dramas is primarily seen as an introduction to the topic of a sermon which immediately follows the drama. As in the early twentieth century, the debate about the appropriateness of having drama in church is still active today for Protestants. Drama in Church emerged as a main category encompassing the issues related to the debate. For the most part, participants expressed support for short sketches or full-length productions in church, but they varied about whether it is appropriate to have them in the main service or at another time. This gave rise to the subcategory entitled Appropriateness. All participants agreed that no matter when the dramas were performed, if they were done in a church they had to serve a ministry purpose and not just be done for enjoyment.

Overall, majority opinion has shifted to be in favor of having drama in church. Perhaps this is partly due to living in such a visually-oriented culture. However, there were enough concerns about the quality of these church dramas to create a subcategory entitled Quality Concerns. Pastors and church leaders said they do not have a regular drama ministry in their respective churches because they do not have trained directors to lead it and they do not want to offer anything in their services that is poorly done. All participants in the study expressed that they had seen “cheesy” or poorly done skits so often during church events that it was almost an expectation they held. They struggled to see these dramas as effective or fulfilling a valid purpose. However, respondents expressed belief that the quality of these dramas is improving, and they remained enthusiastic about the potential that church drama has to help people learn moral truths and better their lives. This also shows the perspective that church drama must serve an instructional purpose.

Power

Protestants’ concern about the power of theatre emerged in interviews in positive and negative ways. This area remains a strong concern for contemporary Protestants. Participants said that they love the energy and powerful effect they experience at live theatre. Indeed, these emerged as strong sub-
categories under the Perceived Positive Qualities category. All participants voluntarily mentioned theatre’s power, and none doubted it. But like theatre’s purpose, all of them expressed the sentiment that its power could be used for good or ill.

Plato’s concern that theatre engages imagination which could have a negative effect upon society by causing people to change their vocation is not shared by today’s Protestants. Rather, using and encouraging imagination are perceived as positive practices today. Using images to imagine God or scriptural stories (even in church dramas) is not seen as heretical to Protestants today as it was for some leaders during the Middle Ages and during the late Reformation.

However, Plato’s concern that seeing visual representations of bad behavior on stage is powerfully effective, perhaps enough to alter acceptable social behavior, still exists. This was revealed in interviews when participants talked about shielding their children from seeing behaviors on stage that they oppose, concerned about the influence this might have on their children. Respondents also said that there are things they do not want to see in shows either. They cited theatre’s power to get them to sympathize with characters exhibiting deviant behaviors they normally would not support, and they referenced the negative impact that seeing certain things (such as nudity) can have on them personally.

At the same time, participants also spoke about enjoying being drawn in to empathize with characters and enjoying that emotional connection. So, if Protestants enjoy theatre’s affective power through character empathy but do not enjoy seeing deviant behaviors on stage, are we back to Plato’s demand that primarily good characters be shown, and they should be doing only good things? No, the answer is more sophisticated than that for contemporary Protestants. They do not mind seeing or playing corrupt characters, but they want those characters to be shown to change for the better and be rewarded for it (or be shown as miserable if they refuse to change), which aligns with their desire to see the play’s message reflect their worldview and Christian truth. Incidentally, belief in the power of a play’s message can also be seen in this perspective. Plato (and others who followed) feared the emotional connection that
participants in the study articulated. Plato worried it would overtake people’s reason and short circuit an audience’s desire to discover truth. But Protestants in the study did not see theatre as this kind of mindless influence. Instead, they discussed the intellectual stimulation they associated with theatre in a positive way. They said they felt theatre appeals to the intellect more than other art forms, and they enjoyed seeking out truth in a play and thinking about its message.

The power of theatre’s draw to attend is not as concerning to today’s Christians as it was to Plato, the early Church Fathers, and Reformation leaders. No longer are plays held at times that are in direct competition with church attendance. Even at other times, however, theatre does not have a powerful draw for today’s Protestants. Their self-reported attendance rates are very low. This can be seen in the Practical Impediments category. Other things are given priority over attending theatre, and it is not prioritized as a valuable social event as it was in previous eras, such as the Roman empire and late nineteenth century America. Once in attendance, participants described theatre as a powerful art form, but it seems it has very little power in encouraging them to attend.

In church, words and sermons are still considered more powerful than visual ways of communicating. The Puritan preference still seems to be in effect for contemporary Protestants. And drama done in church is primarily seen as a preparation tool for the sermon, to get people ready to hear the pastor’s words. Power is ascribed to words and messages in sermons. Words are still preferred over visual communication tools but some progress has been made in that church dramas are now recognized as valid ways of communicating and influencing people. Although Protestants believe church dramas can be helpful or powerful, they are subservient to the greater power of a sermon. The conviction that only a sermon can convert people remains active today, possibly revealing a remnant of Puritan ideology.

Perhaps the perceived lack of quality in church drama has also reduced the respect and impact that it could otherwise have. Protestants readily admitted that drama in church can be powerfully impacting on a congregation; however, they just have not seen it done well very often. This was discussed
enough to develop the Quality Concerns subcategory. They also expressed they thought the quality was improving as it gets taken more seriously by church leadership. Pastors also expressed belief in the power of church drama and want to use it in their services if they can find trained directors to lead it.

Origins

The pagan origins of theatre, appearing as early as the Roman era, have caused much consternation for Christians. And such concerns continued in one form or another, except during the medieval era, until the nineteenth century in America. Plato first accused playwrights of having evil intent by indulging people’s irrational (emotional) nature and reviving evil dream-like desires through their plays. Protestants in the study did not mention anything like this, indicating that these were not concerns for them. Further, they did not seem to adhere to the Roman and Reformation criticisms that evil forces founded and fostered theatre’s popularity. However, participants had enough negative concerns about theatre to form a strong category called Distasteful Associations. And this is where unsavory practices those previous generations of Protestants might have called “evil” appear. Today’s Protestants are offended by practices they call “gratuitous.”

Theatre practitioners and non-practitioners in the study were alike in their distaste for gratuitous practices. They defined gratuitousness as anything in the show that did not serve the story. For the most part they thought nudity, excessive foul language, sex on stage, and promoting gay lifestyles were gratuitous. These were mentioned enough to become sub-categories in the study. Participants were not against hearing some foul language, alluding to sex happening on or off stage, or having gay characters in shows. But when these things did not serve the story, respondents deemed them gratuitous and saw them as marketing ploys. The labels of “gratuitous” for contemporary Protestants correspond to what Roman and Reformation church leaders called evil practices, vile or immoral behaviors, and sexual obscenities.

Contemporary Protestants separate what they do not like about theatre from what they do like. They do not condemn the whole enterprise as the early Church Fathers, Puritans, and early American
Christian leaders did. Allowing drama to be used in their sacred spaces (their churches) also shows they do not believe the medium itself is evil. And unlike medieval criticisms, there are no restrictions about what kind of characters can be played or what stories can be told in church dramas. In addition, since students in the study reported that their parents took them to the theatre, it would seem that neither do the parents of students in the study believe theatre to be organically evil. This contemporary perspective contradicts previous Protestant criticisms that theatre is wicked and supports early twentieth century Protestant thinking that theatre is not intrinsically immoral.

Although participants said that they do not believe theatre is evil, they did discuss their impressions that actors lead sinful lives and this medium inspires them to do so. This was a distasteful association that was not sufficient to become a sub-category but it appeared enough to shed light on a persistent anti-theatrical prejudice. Since Roman times, actors have been accused of living sinful lives and encouraging viewers to do likewise. Church leaders and students in the study especially mentioned that they believed the field of theatre had more challenges and pitfalls for actors to lead virtuous lives than other professions. Working in close proximity, the tight spaces backstage, and necessary physical contact onstage were some of the specific reasons given as unique challenges for theatre actors. And yet they all believed more Christians should be working in this influential field. Practitioners in the study acknowledged that they face moral challenges in their profession but they did not seem overly concerned about it. A few of them said that they had instituted behavioral measures to protect their marriages but these were presented as cautionary rather than necessary, and they did not feel they faced more moral challenges than Christians in other professions.

**Limitations of the Study, Potential Biases**

As this study concludes, attention must be given to some of its potential weaknesses. First, the practitioners interviewed mostly came from one Christian theatre company. There are many more Christian theatre companies in the United States and perhaps they would have different perspectives than the people in the group I interviewed. The company in my study was selected because they were stable,
reputable, familiar to me, and geographically accessible. Smaller, more experimental, or less established companies might do or see things quite differently than the group studied. Nonetheless, the data from this theatre company coincides with opinions from the other Christian practitioners interviewed and the other two groups in the study.

Second, this study only focuses on Protestant Christians; it does not include other categories of Christian groups such as Mormons or Catholics. This could be viewed as a lack of holistic representation of contemporary Christians’ view of theatre. Other Christian groupings may feel or see things differently from Protestants in this study. But, as explained in Chapter 1, the intentional limiting of participants in this study to Protestant Christians was chosen because historically much more opposition towards theatre has come from this particular group.

Third, the method of inquiry used, grounded theory, could be considered a limitation. As explained in Chapter 5, this method seeks to explain the perspective of the people in the study, and it does not strive to apply the results to larger populations. The perspectives expressed by the American Protestants in this study who live in southern California may not be the same as Christian populations in other parts of California or America. However, great care was taken to include a strong cross-reference sample of participants in the study, including varieties in age, gender, profession, and denominations within Protestantism.

Perhaps a fourth limitation to this study was a lack of extensive follow-up visits. At the end of most of the hour-long interviews, I often felt we could talk further and explore more related but minor topics that surfaced in the interviews. The interviews were limited out of a desire to honor the initial time commitment to which participants had agreed. A few necessary follow-up questions were conducted via email but this process impedes nonverbal cues and vocal tonality. More in-depth exploration of some of those topics may have led to even more discoveries.
Last, any study is subject to potential bias from the researcher. As a Protestant Christian and theatre practitioner, I realize that I may have presented one or both groups more favorably than a researcher who was not a member of these groups. Also, I may have seen or interpreted data differently from a researcher who does not have these affiliations.

Despite potential biases, my inclusion in both of these groupings was advantageous to this project. My identity as a Protestant Christian scholar at a Christian university facilitated access and connections to potential research subjects. And my identity as a Christian theatre practitioner aided my attempts to secure interviews with the Christian practitioners in the study. My openness about myself and the study along with evident understanding of theatre and Protestant beliefs and practices opened doors that otherwise may have been more difficult to open. Also, because of my membership in both areas there was a high level of initial trust given to me, and camaraderie became evident during interviews. Several participants even thanked me for their interview, stated gratitude to me for stimulating their thoughts about the subjects discussed, and expressed interest in talking further after the interviews were concluded. In summary, my identification as a Protestant Christian and theatre practitioner provided the motivation for this study, facilitated its process, and provided a conceptual framework for understanding the results of the study.

Suggestions for Further Research

The following observations suggest a number of possibilities for further study in this area. Though grounded theory was included in the previous section, it could also be considered in this section as a vehicle for further research into the intersection between theatre and Christianity. Because of grounded theory’s ability to investigate a specific population’s perspective about a topic and the possibility that the same topic could produce different results in a similar group, it would be insightful to ask the same questions to other Protestants and compare those findings with results of this study. And it would also be interesting to compare results from this study to similar studies involving other Christians such as Catholics and Mormons. And perhaps even the same questions could be used in those studies. If
grounded theory was used in comparative studies such as these and the results were similar, it seems that would be confirmation of how current American Christians as a whole felt about theatre.

Second, in an increasingly secularized and pluralistic society, it may be beneficial to investigate if a secular population is bothered by gratuitous elements as Protestants in this study were, or even if they would identify the same issues as gratuitous. It might also be of interest to research if a secular population prefers shows that have a message, as the Protestants in the study did. And if they do prefer plays that have a message, if there is a preference for a particular type of message, such as the redemptive message that Protestants prefer. Another interesting direction for future research involving Protestant and non-Protestant comparisons would be to investigate reasons why secular attendance has dropped at American theatres and see if they are similar to or different from reasons given by Protestants for non-attendance. Also, one wonders if gratuitous elements or messages that do not reflect a Christian world view were removed, would that turn “reticent” appreciation of theatre by Protestants into “wholehearted” appreciation?

Third, participants in the study attributed part of their lack of attendance at theatres to lack of awareness of what shows were being offered and where they were being offered. To test the validity of practical impediment assertions such as this, one might ask if increased Internet or billboard advertising to Protestants would result in more ticket sales. This could be done for a specific population such as Southern California Protestants in this study, or American Christians in general. If a small adjustment such as increased advertising did indeed increase ticket sales, this could help theatres regain some of their decreasing attendance over the past twenty years (noted in Chapter 1).

Fourth, it seems a larger study about drama in Protestant churches is needed. There are many tenets that could be explored in this area. Since everyone in the study said they found drama and theatre so powerful, it seems pastors would seek out drama leaders instead of waiting to see if potential leaders come to them. Statistical evidence showing how many Protestant churches nationwide use drama in their
church, how often, and when (the main service or just holidays?) could be enlightening. Through its use or nonuse, these statistics may reveal how Protestant leaders and congregations really see or value drama. A more qualitative inquiry could explore if there were a pronounced theological stance towards drama in church and if or how that is theologically different from other art forms such as music in church.

**Conclusion**

The idea for this project came about from conversations I have had in the past several years with Protestants about theatre. I observed and sometimes directly encountered unease or lack of acceptance of theatre from these people. I also noticed they did not attend theatre. I wondered if this represented a larger Protestant population, outside my immediate circles. Being a Protestant and a theatre practitioner myself, I was intrigued to investigate this issue and thought it could be of significance to the theatre and Christian communities at large. As mentioned in Chapter 1, attendance rates have been documented as increasingly dropping in the last twenty years and Protestants make up more than half of the American population. It seems valuable to both camps to discover why so many people are not attending theatre. If this study could uncover concrete answers about why Protestants feel unease with theatre and why they are not attending, theatre practitioners could take that information into account if they want to draw this sizeable group back to their theaters. From a business standpoint, it makes sense to tell stories and present characters in which Christians find themselves represented; they might be more likely to attend. And for Protestants, information from this study could help them understand their inherited anti-theatrical prejudice, perhaps learn to separate biblical truth from false hereditary arguments about theatre, and embrace this art form they enthusiastically find so impacting and powerful to themselves and others. Welcoming and participating in this art form would also allow Christians to understand and engage in their own culture which they are called to do as believers.

The literature and interviews for this study revealed answers to the three main research questions of the study, answers that are explained in Chapter 6 and summarized earlier in this chapter. The study explains the viewpoint and attendance habits of contemporary Protestants in regards to theatre. As we
have seen, anti-theatrical prejudice, identified as such by Jonas Barish in 1981, originated with Plato and has been passed from generation to generation throughout history. The central understanding of this study is that while today’s Protestants do not seem to harbor an anti-theatrical prejudice against theatre as found in previous eras, they remain suspicious of certain aspects and associations with it. The substantive theory developed in this study is that modern-day Protestant Christians hold a stance of Reticent Appreciation towards theatre, and the end result is they rarely make the effort to attend.

In closing, this study has allowed examination of issues that I have found problematic at times in my life. It is my hope and my goal that the data presented in this study and the conclusions drawn may prove helpful to others who are interested in understanding or bridging the gap between these two worlds. My perspective about why theatre should be important to Christians and why it is worth exploring the intersection of these two worlds was articulated well by a participant, so I will conclude with his words:

Theater and art in general has the ability to touch and communicate things in ways that just the spoken word or just intellectual thought can’t. So it has the ability to awaken parts of my life, to awaken good and bad things in my soul that need to come up to the surface I think at times. I think theater is a gift that God has given us, the creator has said to the creation you now have the ability to create and so I think theater allows us to reflect the very nature of God in creating life on stage that is reflective of the life that God gives to us. And I think we can kind of reflect God’s glory in that way, bear image of our father as artists. (L3)
APPENDIX A: APOSTLES' CREED

This creed arose out of the early Western church and should be thought of as a summary of the Apostles' teaching rather than directly attributable to them. Originally it was essentially a baptismal confession and had several variations. The form in use today dates from the eighth century.

___________________________
I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:
Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell.

The third day He arose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.

Amen.

___________________________
Note: The word "catholic" with a lower case 'c' does not mean the Roman Catholic Church, but the universal Christian Church as a whole.

Source: http://carm.org/apostles-creed. Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry (CARM) is a 501(c) 3, non-profit, Christian ministry dedicated to the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ and the promotion and defense of the Christian Gospel, doctrine, and theology.
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Script for: A Grounded Theory Study of Contemporary Christian Attitudes to Theatre

Thank you for allowing me to interview you as part of my study. As you know from the consent form, I am exploring Protestant Christians’ attitudes about theatre.

I will keep your identity confidential, so please feel free to be very honest with me. Your opinions and views are very important to me and this project.

If you don’t mind, I would like to tape record our interview so that I can obtain a more accurate record of the interview. If you are comfortable, I would like to begin.

1. What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, some other religion? Would you consider yourself a Protestant Christian?
2. How long have you been pastoring/working at this church?

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1. In general, how do you, yourself, feel about theatre? Please describe your general attitude towards theatre.
2. Please tell me about the last time you, yourself, went to the theatre.
   - How often do you go to the theatre, and why is that? If they don’t go, why not? (What prevents you from going to theatre?)
3. Is there anything about theatre that bothers you?
4. Please list what the *positives* of theatre are, if any (what do you *like* about theatre?)
   - If you were to argue for theatre, what would you say?
5. Please list what the *negatives* of theatre are, if any (what do you *not* like about theatre?)
   - Would some of these themes bother you more depending on who you were with? A date, friend, parent…
6. Where do you think your attitude and opinions about theatre come from? (How have you formed your attitude or opinions about theatre?)
7. How does your faith apply to theatre, or does it? (How do you see theatre in light of your faith?)
8. Can you recall, offhand, if the Bible says anything about theatre, or not? Give your best guess.
   - Have you researched this yourself? Why do you think that? What are you basing your opinion on?
9. What are your thoughts about Christians being *involved* with theatre?
10. In general, how do you think Christians should respond to theatre?
11. Have you had discussions with other Christians about theatre, or not? If so, what have you found?

12. Have you ever talked to someone in leadership at your church about the arts in general or theatre in particular, or not? If so, what came up in that conversation?

13. Do you, yourself, feel drama should be used in church, or not? Why should it be used in church, or not?

   - If so, where should it be used…the main service, high school group, children’s ministries, other?

14. Do you think how drama is used at your church has anything to do with your opinions about theatre in general?

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(questions added and asked during remaining interviews after initial findings…)

Do you think theatre is more for women than men?

Do you think a lot of guys see theatre as a woman’s thing? …other activities where you take the lead?

(extra questions in case there is time)

Do you have any childhood experiences with theatre or not?

If you have a favorite type of theater, or not?

What is it and why is that your favorite?

If you have any experience working in theatre, please tell me about that (as an actor, crew member, designer, etc.)
REFERENCES


Newton, William W. “Christianity and Popular Amusements, or the Church and the Theatre; A Paper Read at the Church Congress of the Protestant Episcopal Church Held in New York, Nov. 1, 1877.” Memphis, Tennessee: General Books, 2009.


ABSTRACT

A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES TO THEATRE

by

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Advisor: Dr. James Thomas

Major: Theatre

Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

Much has been written about the history of theatre, including its popularity or prohibition in various cultures at various times. The intersection of theatre and Christianity reflects this dialectic throughout history, and much opposition towards theatre has come from Protestant Christians. This study explores where Protestants stand today in regards to theatre. The purpose of this study was to explore what contemporary Protestants think about theatre, to determine if an anti-theatrical prejudice exists within them, and, if it does, what the causes and outcomes are. The three main research questions were: (1) What are Protestant Christians’ attitudes and beliefs about theatre? (2) If Christians are not attending theatre, why not? (3) What is the source of their attitudes and beliefs? The study employed the qualitative method, grounded theory. Twenty-nine participants—students, church leaders, and theatre practitioners in Southern California—were interviewed over the course of several months. Data was directly gathered from these Protestants about the subject of theatre, along with supporting information drawn from historical and archival research. The findings of this study reveal four areas of contention or themes of criticism Protestants have historically held in regards to theatre. Those areas are: power, purpose, imitation, and origins of theatre. These four areas are then examined in light of what Protestants today
think about theatre. The results of this study show that many of the criticisms and dislikes of modern-day Protestants are the same as previous historical criticisms, and a few are different.
Kate Brandon was born in Fresno, California on April 10th. She grew up in Fresno, attending various public and private schools. She was a valedictorian in eighth grade and graduated with honors from junior high and high school. She left Fresno to move to Los Angeles where she attended a Christian university, from which she graduated cum laude. After college she worked for a year in San Diego before moving back to Los Angeles where she began working in the entertainment field. For the next ten years she worked in Los Angeles as a production assistant, coordinator, second assistant director, and executive assistant in development and production for commercials, television, film, and theatre. During those years she also took classes and earned a certificate in film and television through UCLA Extension. She then moved to Indiana to attend Purdue University, from which she graduated magna cum laude with a Master’s degree in Interpersonal Communication. After graduating from Purdue in 2003, she immediately began her teaching career at Biola University as an Assistant Professor. She took a two-year leave of absence and moved to Michigan in 2007 to begin her doctorate program at Wayne State University. Classes completed, she moved back to California in 2009 and resumed teaching theatre and directing shows at Biola as an Associate Professor. She will graduate summa cum laude from Wayne State University with her PhD in Theatre in 2013. Her faithful cat Bailey will be much relieved when all the moving and schooling is done.