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Relevant Jesus: A Study of the Integration of Popular Culture into the Christian Church

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RELEVANT JESUS:

A STUDY OF THE INTEGRATION

OF POPULAR CULTURE

INTO THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

by

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A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The Christian church today takes on the characteristics of many centuries past in style and ritual. Some churches are choosing to embrace the culture of our booming entertainment industry in order to gain the attention of a "sights and sounds" generation. This research contains a historical review of the relationship between the entertainment world and the Christian church as well as a case study of First Hattiesburg Baptist Church of Hattiesburg, MS. The results of this research show that the deliberate incorporation of secular communication and entertainment strategies into the regular functions First Hattiesburg Baptist Church has had more positive than negative results.

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INTRODUCTION

The entertainment industry—the industry behind the promotion of the arts—is at the front lines of pop culture trend-setting and is constantly changing and adapting to suit its most current audience. If you take the time to look back at its history, you will find that the world of entertainment has shifted, adapted, retraced steps, and forged new artistic paths to remain an expression of life that is relevant and desirable to its existing audience. On the other hand, you have the Christian church. While culture changes with time, the church has fought to maintain consistency in message and its purpose remains the same. The church's design is to communicate something holy, set apart, and spiritual. Do we see the two worlds cross paths? Does the entertainment world ever pick up eternal and otherworldly themes while church adopts entertainment? Or do they remain separated for the sake of respected artistic expression and unpolluted spiritual worship?

In an article on entertainment in the church, Aiden Wilson Tozer states that: "The great god Entertainment amuses his devotees mainly by telling them stories" (*The Root of the Righteous*, 17). This statement comments on the deep psychological roots of entertainment. It exists to "divert and hold attention" (WordNet 3.0). To "divert" is to distract, sidetrack, or turn away. The challenge begins here: the Christian church is theologically focused on selflessly serving and solely benefitting the one God, while the foundation of entertainment many times is to solely benefit the attendee. How could the self-focused entertainment culture ever have a place in the Christian community?

My research focuses on three key time periods in the history of the Christian church. I have chosen to examine 1st century Jerusalem as well as the time of the Renaissance before moving into a study of the present-day Christian church. These

periods of antiquity and the Renaissance years serve as significant historical transition times for worship practice and theology. I will discuss the evolution of churches' architectural design and functions of their space as they related to the entertainment structures and trends of the time. The criteria used to develop an understanding of these concepts will include the following: deliberate architectural design, functions of the space, and how space is used for those functions. This study is intended to add to the existing knowledge of historical church/entertainment relationships while including a present-day case study.

During the reign of Herod the Great, the Jews were forbidden by Jewish law to participate or view any spectacle that took place in the theaters. It was against the religious law to observe the violent, political, comedic, or pagan displays that went on in the theaters. The Jewish way of life was carefully designed to center around worship to Jehovah, and entertainment at that time was not only unrelated to the Christian religion, but also pagan in its foundation. But, while the two worlds theologically had to remain separate, in reality, they connected and intertwined on many levels.

I have selected the Renaissance as a mid-point in my effort to bridge the wide chronology behind this study of religious space and its function. This selection privileges specific developments in worship over a strict chronological balance. Renaissance issues of iconoclasm, syncretism and religious dramatic theater show development in the treatment of sacred space as we see it articulated in Antiquity. However, before addressing these developments, it is important to recognize some monumental changes that took place in the system of religious belief between Augustus of Rome and Henry VIII of England. During the reign of Herod the Great, the life, death and resurrection of

Jesus of Nazareth would split the Jewish faith into two groups: those who took Him as Christ and those who did not. Regardless of camp, this event resulted in the elimination of sacrificial systems that existed before. Not only was there no further requirement to bring sacrifices to holy places, but Jehovah promised that His spirit would now dwell in individuals. The impact of Christianity on the concept of sacred space is a profound one inasmuch as the idea of the "temple" expands beyond a structure to the physical body of the faithful. The structures like Solomon's Temple and the Tabernacle were no longer necessary. This is not to suggest that church buildings are not part of Christianity; it recognizes an enlarged conception of sacred space.

For more than a millennium following the reign of Constantine (4th century CE), Catholicism became a state-sanctioned religion. The integration of church and state played a significant role in the evolution of Christian worship as a departure from the ancient temple service and worship structures. Between the time of Christ and that of Constantine, Christian fellowship was against Roman law. Meeting places were also places of hiding like underground caves and grottos. After Constantine, however, we begin to find evidence of the first Christian churches built in a simple, Romanesque style. Although the fall of Rome would radically delay any architectural advance of the design of Christian churches, the church-state relationship would survive the Dark Ages. In so doing, it would provide the manpower, technology and materials for the Gothic cathedrals that rose to towering heights throughout the high and late Middle Ages (ca. 1100-1500 CE). In the chronological jump from the time of Jesus to that of the Renaissance, the Christian place of worship would literally spring up from beneath the

earth reaching approximately 50 stories in some cases (c.f.: St. Mary's Cathedral in Lincoln, England).

During the Middle Ages, Catholicism used worship and religious architecture to persuade the faithful to enter the church. For example, the portals to many Gothic cathedrals are engraved with sculptures that are reenacting important Biblical episodes in order to instruct the largely illiterate congregation with respect to the meaning of the space itself. Finding sculptures of secular kings among those of the disciples, Mary or even Jesus indicates the reality of the church-state arrangement of the time. Responding to medieval critiques of papal power and abuse by theologians like John Huss (1369-1415) and John Wycliff (1328-1384), the Protestant Reformation would be explosive with respect to Catholic conceptions of sacred space. In efforts to restore the glory of the Roman theater, the architects of the Renaissance designed beautiful entertainment spaces and captured spiritual themes that were written by the playwrights of the day. These spiritual themes were not centered on communicating the gospel, but were seemingly compatible with the church as they acknowledged heaven, earth, and hell concepts as well as the ethereality of life in general. The Catholic Church and the Protestant church experienced their separation during this time as deep theological issues arose. The Catholic worship services could easily be described as "theatrical" as they centered around visually stunning decor and eye-catching ritual, while the Protestants believed in entertainment and worship remaining completely separated so as to maintain purity in their worship and sacred spaces.

Loud music, fast-paced communication, competitive markets, merchandise, celebrity endorsements, film, live theater, and media-intensive performances characterize

the entertainment world of today.   While Christian churches continue to communicate the unchanging Gospel message, many have begun to adopt marketing and production strategies from the secular entertainment industry in order to compete for the attention of a "sights and sounds" generation. This can be seen through changes in worship music style, sermon series advertisement, high quality video production, and more. My study will focus upon the history of the Christian church's relationship to the entertainment world and will specifically examine a Bible Belt church, the First Hattiesburg Baptist Church of Hattiesburg, Mississippi. The Bible Belt area is home to denominations that hold traditional and historically conservative beliefs. Their traditional worship practices rarely resemble the entertainment industry. That being said, a transition to a more trendy worship style may prove to be a large leap theologically for denominations located in this area. My research is centered on First Hattiesburg Baptist Church (to be referred to as "First Hattiesburg") for this reason exactly. Three years ago, First Hattiesburg chose to completely transform the style of their worship services. They overhauled their traditional hymns, choir robes, and sanctuary and created a service characterized by an auditorium complete with moving lights, intense set design and modern, guitar driven musical worship sets. First Hattiesburg is one of a growing number of churches that have chosen to embrace the entertainment culture and use it as a ministry tool.

This study will not be a study of religion. Nor will it cover in-depth information on the economic or political facets of the industries in discussion. Consider this study a collection of snapshots that contain common threads that include the architecture/design of space, the function of space, and the concept of dual purpose. These commonalities will be discussed in each of the time periods stated previously and then applied to the

object of my personal research—First Hattiesburg Baptist Church of Hattiesburg,

Mississippi. Coliseum

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to provide a foundation for research involving the Christian church/entertainment industry relationship, my choice resources will establish an understanding of the origins of Christian worship, in terms of its physical or spatial arrangement, the function or functions of the sacred space and the relationship that space establishes between the sacred and secular. From there, I examine some key moments in history where the Christian worship practice collided with the entertainment culture of the time. I also include a brief review of the evolution of communication and how it has affected the church. My Literature Review closes with information on the Bible Belt and the Southern Baptist Convention as my research is focused on a church of this denomination.

The Tabernacle

In the Old Testament, the Tabernacle existed as the very first physical location that housed the divine presence of the God of the Jews. It was during this period of time that Moses supernaturally received instructions from Yahweh, the Hebrew God, for the construction of the first Tabernacle. The Tabernacle consisted of a large courtyard and the Tabernacle tent itself that was used as a place for worship through sacrifice and service. The Tabernacle functioned exclusively as a place for worship. Despite the fact that a particular tribe (the Levites) served to guard and to minister in the Tabernacle, there was not a social arrangement to the space for worship due to the fact that worshippers entered one at a time.

Author Stephen Olford discusses the significance of the Tabernacle in his work *The Tabernacle: Camping with God*. The Tabernacle marks a key moment in the

Israelites' history as their God chose to dwell supernaturally among his chosen people in a physical location for the first time. This was an entirely new concept for the people of God. Before the Tabernacle, God had only visited or spoken to a select few people but, "He had never had a home on earth until the Tabernacle was erected among His redeemed and separated people" (Olford, 24). Now, because of the divine presence of Yahweh dwelling in their camp, they were required to tend to His presence and were held accountable to committing their worship to Him alone. Among the Israelites was a tribe called the Levites; the members of the tribe of Levi were chosen to be sole caretakers of the Tabernacle. They acted as custodians of items contained inside, as well as guards of the Tabernacle, making sure that unauthorized individuals never entered.

Olford explains the testimony of protection and provision of God that the Tabernacle provided. He says "All that the Tabernacle stood for was God's promise of provision for His people in the wilderness; and since then, for all His people down through the centuries. Whatever the children of Israel required was guaranteed to them, so long as the Tabernacle of witness stood" (27). So we see that Yahweh promised to provide for the Israelites as long as they continued to abide by his requirements. The Tabernacle, wherein his presence dwelled, had to stand in the camp as an act of obedience on the part of the Israelites. In return, Yahweh promised to protect them and provide for their every need. For Olford then, the Tabernacle stands as a symbol of the promise or covenant.

In his work *The Tabernacle of Israel: Its Structure and Symbolism*, author James Strong indicates that the Tabernacle as a religious space was based partly on the tent that Moses occupied during the Exodus. Strong shares that the tent was "set apart by the

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token of the divine presence at its doorway as the regular place of public communication between Jehovah and the people" (11). While the tent was nothing elaborate in design, it was the place where Moses received audible word from an invisible god. As leader of the Israelites, Moses received word from the Lord and was responsible for communicating it to the people. This simple shelter served as the "tent of meeting" (*Holman Bible Dictionary),* and soon gave way to what is known now as the Tabernacle. Strong adds the idea of sacred communion to the image already provided by Olford.

The Tabernacle was constructed "according to a pattern shown him [Moses] during his stay" on the summit of Mount Sinai (Strong, 12). According to Scripture, Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai and received detailed instructions from God concerning the official Tabernacle structure to be built.   A key characteristic of the Tabernacle was its portable nature. Strong shows that it was designed to be capable of disassembly "piecemeal, carried on vehicles constructed for the purpose and drawn by oxen" (Strong, 12) and reassembled at every stopping place as the Israelites traveled. Strong also focuses on how this sacred space was created through cleansing and separation. A space known as the Court surrounded the Tabernacle tent, and defined the enclosed area as holy—and set apart from the rest of the camp. The space contained a hollow box made of copper plated acacia wood called the Altar of Burnt Offering. After a priest offered a burnt sacrifice on the Altar of Burnt Offering, he would proceed to the Laver—a basin used by priests to cleanse themselves before entering the Tabernacle tent. The entire Court was enclosed by a curtain made of fine twined linen that was "suspended upon pillars" (Strong, 17) so no one standing outside of the Court could see into the worship area and observe the sacred rituals. A curtain of blue, purple, covered

the entrance to the Court and scarlet fine twined linen that was suspended from the pillars in the same fashion as the Court's enclosing curtains. Strong explains that the "Needlework consisted of purely fancy patterns" (23) as the second commandment of the Hebrew faith forbids anyone to identify and worship anything as an idol. Only carefully crafted designs and shapes could grace the walls, pillars, furniture, and linens so as not to promote any form of image idolatry among the people. One recurring decorative motif that did appear in the Tabernacle were the cherubim represented in some needlework and gold forms on the Ark of the Covenant. These were included because they did not represent any specific, recognizable individual. It is important to note that the holy Court and Tabernacle were designed to be void of images representing specific objects, individuals, animals.

The Tabernacle had one opening on the east side covered with a veil, like the Court space. When a priest lifted the veil and stepped inside, he would find himself in the Holy Place, the first chamber of the Tabernacle. This chamber contained items like a golden lamp stand, a table and loaves of unleavened bread, along with a golden altar used to burn incense that were all used as a part of the rituals outlined for the priests to perform as worship. Author Michael Zarlengo describes the second chamber of the Tent of Meeting in *Tabernacle Gifts, Our First Day in Heaven*. Zarlengo explains that behind the golden altar was a veil leading to the "Holy of Holies or, in some translations, the Most Holy Place" (Chapter 2). The Holy of Holies contained one of the most significant pieces of furniture in the Christian religion's history, the Ark of the Covenant. Described by author Kerry Ross Boren as "the greatest treasure the world has ever known and the oldest sacred relic in the religious iconography of the Hebrews" (*Following the Ark of the*

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Covenant), it also contained mysterious supernatural power. The lid known as the Mercy Seat was made of gold nine inches thick (Zarlengo 5) and featured two cherubim on each side. It was from the Mercy Seat throne that Yahweh would speak audibly to Moses. As the hosts of the Ark of the Covenant, the Israelites were given exceptionally specific rules to follow when dealing with the Ark in service or transportation. Those who failed to adhere to those rules were instantly struck dead.

The construction of the Tabernacle is significant because it was completely private. It served exclusively as a worship venue while curtains closed off the Court from outside viewers and only allowed Levites and priests into the space. At this point in Christian history, the Jews' worship and the outside world were deliberately separated, one never touching the other. The Israelites were given specific instructions for their worship and suffered the consequences when they failed to adhere to the requirements. So, the culture outside of the Israelite's camp was completely irrelevant to the worship ritual taking place within the camp. The Tabernacle never functioned as a venue for anything other than housing the Ark of the Covenant and providing space for worship ritual (offerings).

<u>The Temple</u>

Solomon's Temple was the very first permanent structure designed for housing the presence of the God of the Jews. The Jews did not believe that God needed a physical home. But because of the depravity of man, a designated place of worship was necessary for forgiveness of sins. The Temple's primary purpose was to hold the Ark of the Covenant and thereby house the presence of God. In his article "The Temple of Solomon," Lambert Dolphin describes the Temple as a symbol of the hearing ear of God.

The Temple was marked as the place of communication from God. The foundation for Solomon's Temple was laid in 983 BC and the Temple stood until 586 BC when King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon burned it to the ground. Zerubbabel's second Temple was built around 520 BC, and King Herod reconstructed the structure later. Herod's Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70AD. Because Solomon's Temple was the first to exist and set a standard for the temples built in replacement, I chose to research the significance and design implementation of this Temple alone.

In *The Temple of Jerusalem*, John Lundquist clarifies some of the political significance in the layout of Solomon's Temple. The Temple did not stand alone, isolated or set apart from other structures.   Solomon had the Temple built so that it physically connected with his palace (which was four times as large as the Temple) and a number of other significant structures. Lundquist states: "The close link between the royal dynasty and the worship of the lord was powerfully instantiated in the linked building complex of the Temple and palace" (30). He goes on to explain, "[t]he political authority of Solomon sat side by side with the religious law of God" (30). As the keeper of the Ark of the Covenant, Solomon served as the mediator between God and the Jews. The Temple was intended to be the final resting place of the Ark of the Covenant. It was designed as a permanent structure, differing from the completely portable Tabernacle that the Israelites used in the desert. Solomon displayed his overlap of responsibility physically through a connected palace and Temple. In the Jerusalem of Solomon's reign, the government and world of religion were one.

In his work, *Solomon's Temple, Its History and Its Structure,* W. Shaw Caldecott explains that the Tabernacle of Moses provided "the outline and the measures which were

to dominate the new Temple building" (221). In planning the construction of the Temple, Solomon referred to the God-given ratios and materials used by Moses when the Tabernacle was built. It was intended to maintain somewhat of a tent appearance. Caldecott states that the tent concept was the "master idea which flowed, from Mosaic, through Davidic and Maccabean, to Herodian days" (222). Much like churches today look to the past for architectural guidance and inspiration, the tent-like appearance would influence generations far beyond Solomon's time.

While some traditions of the Tabernacle were preserved, many of the materials used in the Tabernacle structure were upgraded for the Temple. Cedar wood was used instead of acacia and gold replaced brass in the Temple. Caldecott explains further that the "materials for the Temple were to be costlier and less perishable than those used in the Tabernacle, but they were to be treated as wholly subordinate to the scope and design of the structure" (221). This echoes author James Strong's statement about the Tabernacle being void of images. There was a strong pull away from anything that would devalue the glory of Yahweh. In both the Tabernacle and the Temple, no images of people or objects were used as decoration to ensure that no earthly item was associated with the other-worldly God of the Jews. And while the Temple was constructed and decorated with some of the most valuable and expensive materials to be found, the rare materials were not intended to be the focus. While the materials used were visually stunning, they were to remain subordinate to their architectural and symbolic function.

Sacred and Secular Functions of Space in Antiquity

The Tabernacle represented an unpolluted, designed by God, structure and ritual for worship. The outside world bore no relevance in their worship; the Israelites were to

worship they way Jehovah commanded, and they experienced consequences if they did not carry out the directions. When the Ark of the Covenant was moved into Solomon's Temple and subsequent structures, the permanent structure began to house rituals that were not originally in Jehovah's pure design. The Jewish people began to implement secular entertainment forms and pleasures into their worship practice. Some of these activities, like temple prostitution, were specifically prohibited in the Temple. But the Israelites justified the activity by using it as a form of worship ritual. Later, we see theater as well as political spectacle not only taking place in the same spaces that worship was conducted, but we also see these secular entities having a place in the presentation of the Gospel.

Temple prostitution was very common for a period of time in many different religions. In an article titled "Entertainment as Worship: Old Testament Trends," Kai Arasola sheds some light on the unpopular issue that was not absent in Jewish worship. He states that "Temple prostitution was common in many religions, and God warned Israel against it in the most unmistakable terms." God spoke to the Israelites during the time of the Exodus and specifically told them not to make treaties with prostitutes or join with them in marriage, as they "will lead your sons to do the same [prostitute themselves to gods]" (Arasola). Jehovah also demanded that they not bring a prostitute's profits into the Lord's Temple to pay a vow.

As clear as these instructions were, prostitution still appeared in the shrines and altars of the Christian faith all throughout the country. In fact, both male and female prostitution were practiced in the Jerusalem Temple itself. Prostitution was considered to be a part of the worship ritual in the Temple. How could this forbidden act be allowed

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near the sacred Temple grounds? Temple and shrine prostitutes were not uncommon in pagan temple worship; pagan and Christian worship practice overlapped quite a bit during this time period. While it could be said that the Israelites were emulating pagan temple worship, Arasola argues that the sexual pleasures celebrated through prostitution used "the temple as a place of entertainment, albeit entertainment with 'religious' overtones." He shares that "such religion provided a way, for the Israelite, at least to legitimize illicit sexual practice, placing it under the guise of religious faith." The pleasure is dubbed "entertainment" by Arasola because the ritual focuses on selfish enjoyment. This is a definite crossover between personal entertainment and Christian worship. What we see here is a carnal pleasure being given a place in the religious space and ritual. Because of this, Israelites were "allowed" to participate in the deplorable acts because they were now under the guise of bringing honor and worship to Jehovah.

The prostitution did not last long in Jerusalem, but was more fixed in surrounding areas. Arasola suggests that maybe the Jews adopted a largely pagan practice like prostitution because "they wanted their religion to be relevant and meaningful." Not everything outlined in worship ritual was something that was also done outside of the Temple. However, sex is something that brings pleasure and exists outside of worship. According to Arasola, perhaps bringing sexual activity into the Temple as a part of ritual was an attempt at creating a personal connection into the worship experience.

Herod I (37-4 BCE), also known as Herod the Great, built numerous theaters during his reign. Secular events that would take place in the theaters were either public drama or ceremonies honoring pagan gods. The *Holman Bible Dictionary* states that "Public performances began with a sacrifice to a pagan deity, usually the patron god of

the city. Dramas and comedies included historical or political themes and were often lewd and suggestive" (Butler, "Theater"). The Jews were forbidden to take part in these activities as they contradicted the foundation of their religious beliefs and standards, so the presence of a theater near the Temple in Jerusalem infuriated the Jewish people. In addition to representing pagan and secular cultures, theaters were a symbol of the Greek and Roman control over Palestine, a Jewish state. The theaters were a constant reminder of the Greco-Roman ownership of their government during that time as theaters around the Roman Empire flourished and Herod continued to build and elaborate.

The average theaters built during the time of Herod the Great were magnificent structures built to hold anywhere from thirty-five hundred to four thousand people. Herod's structures were built in an amphitheater style, as shown below, to ensure that all attendants could both hear and see everything taking place on the stage below. The rows upon rows of ascending stone seats curved into a semi-circular shape facing the stage (See Figure 1). Behind the stage stood an enormous facade decorated with sculptures and columns that served as a backdrop to any event taking place.
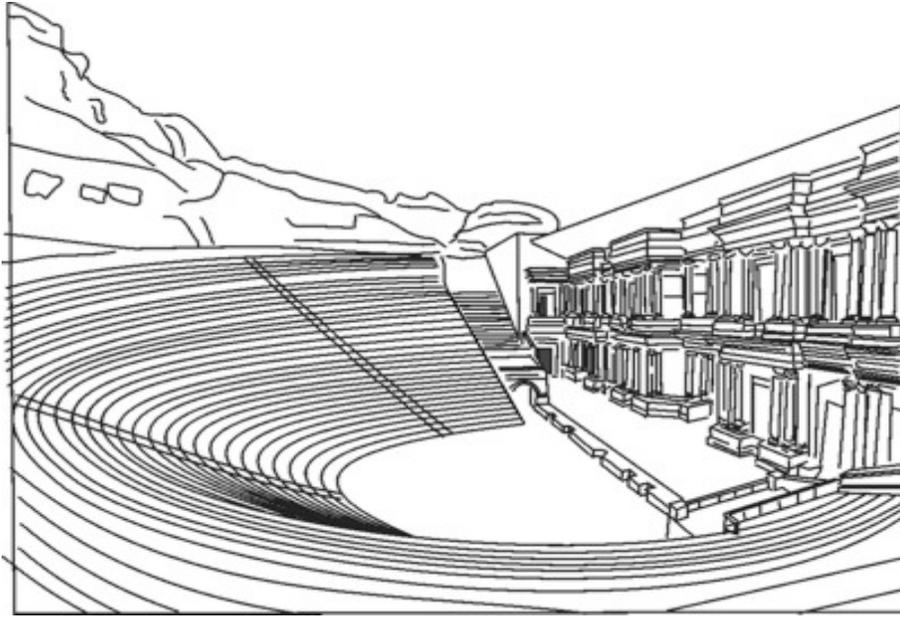
Figure 1 An illustration of what Herod's amphitheater structures generally looked like

Source: "Scenery." (*Cornellcollege.edu.* n.d. Web. 19 March 2012.)

In *Herod's Judea: A Mediterranean State in the Classical World,* Samuel Rocca uses the writings of Josephus to discuss public entertainment in both Augustan Rome and Herodian Jerusalem. Rocca reports the opinions and writings of Josephus on the issue of Jewish reactions to Herod's entertainment buildings during his reign in Jerusalem. It is widely understood that the Jews were horrified and offended at the gruesome games and pagan sacrifices that took place inside of Herod's entertainment buildings. Josephus' writings, however, reported that the Jews were not necessarily concerned with Herod's construction of leisure buildings (i.e. theaters, entertainment buildings) or the games that took place at those locations. They were mainly concerned with the cultic images placed on the buildings. Because of this, Herod the Great probably placed most of his buildings outside of the cities and did not decorate them with images in order to avoid offending the Jews.

In his work *Facing the Wall,* Don Potter reviews the history of Old Testament worship and examines the changes that have taken place in Christian worship practices since that time. In the chapter "Entertainment," Potter walks the reader through the days of Herod the Great and discusses the impact that Herod's elaborate theaters had on the temple worship culture. Potter states that the combination of temple worship and public drama resulted in a third culture that can be seen today. He explains that the Jews used the theater buildings not only as a location for elders to come together and judge a matter, but they began to use the spaces for worship and praise practices (71). The theaters were only used by the Jews in matters concerning justice (judging) and for worship or praise; they were forbidden to take part in any other events that took place in the theaters. These other events included the secular dramas and comedies that often were suggestive and indecent. This is where the contradiction of location began. People assembled in the theaters for two entirely different reasons, one to worship or judge under Jewish religion, and the other to be entertained apart from religion. It was not long before the two intertwined.

"From the forced marriage of these two cultures, the Jew judging and sometimes worshiping in the theater, and the Greek entertaining with spectacle in the theater; there emerged a third culture" (Potter 71). This third culture was characterized by people attending events at the theater to judge the entertainment. According to Potter, following suit was judgment of praise. He claims that the judgment of praise in the Old Testament has developed into modern Christians' tendency to judge or grade the praise in their churches. Up until this point, worship rituals had taken place solely in the temple. The temple was a sacred place and was not even open to all of the Jews. Those who

participated in worship ritual and entered the holy space did so in private. There was no

room for criticism or judgment of the worship rituals because Jehovah Himself had

outlined them. But when the Jews brought this private practice to a place of

entertainment and show, the public could then observe and comment. Don Potter's

analysis of this third culture offers a clear argument as to where the development of

critical praise tendencies in the modern day church originated. This third culture is the

result of a worship space infiltrated with secular values.

The Tabernacle and Solomon's Temple were essential components to the Jewish

faith inasmuch as the Jewish God required a sacred space for his people to provide

service to His presence. Stephen Olford describes the Tabernacle as a symbol of the

covenant between Jehovah and the Jews. James Strong adds the idea of sacred

communion to Olford's description of the covenant relationship. The Tabernacle was a

sacred space, set apart through a process of cleansing and physical separation. Strong's

detailed description of the Tabernacle defines it as a functioning venue for religious ritual

alone.   In contrast, John Lundquist discusses the time of Solomon's Temple, where the

Christian religion began to lose its holistic distinction from all things secular. Faith and

the state began to intertwine as Solomon architecturally connected the Temple to his own

palace.   While in some areas, the sacred and secular remained separate, overlap between

the two worlds did occur. The *Holman Bible Dictionary* discusses the "lewd and

suggestive" themes that Herod's theaters utilized for the sake of their audiences, and

Samual Rocca explains the Jews' horrified reaction to the entertainment of their day.

Yet, according to Don Potter, a coexistence still managed to find its place in history as

the Jews began to hold some of their worship practices and judging activities in

entertainment facilities. The once private, and untainted worship rituals (in the Tabernacle) began to overlap with the secular world of entertainment as some worship rituals integrated secular—even sexual—pleasures into their practice.

<u>The Renaissance</u>

In *The Renaissance: A Short History*, author Paul Johnson makes the statement that the Renaissance "signifies the rediscovery and utilization of ancient virtues, skills, knowledge and culture, which had been lost" (5). Roughly spanning the 14th through the 17th century, the Renaissance marked a time of rebirth and new passion to restore the splendor of Rome before the fall of the Western Empire. The Renaissance movement influenced the worlds of philosophy, art, literature, music, science, religion, politics and other intellectual interests as the European people sought to revive the grandeur of pre-fall Rome.

The initiative to recover Greek and Roman philosophy is known as humanism. In an article titled "Renaissance Humanism," Steven Kreis states, "[t]he return to favor of the pagan classics stimulated the philosophy of secularism, the appreciation of worldly pleasures, and above all intensified the assertion of personal independence and individual expression." The medieval focus on supernaturalism was quickly fading and an effort to explore secular and human interests swept the nation. One such effort is called "syncretism." This synthesis of ancient systems of belief into the existing Catholic structure represents a significant infiltration of the secular into the religious. Steven Kreis explains that "as the age of Renaissance humanism wore on, the distinction between this world (the City of Man) and the next (the City of God) tended to disappear." This perspective did not eliminate spirituality; rather it sparked an idea to explore all

aesthetic aspects of the human life because life and time on earth was to be savored in every way possible.   Kreis' thought opens the door to questioning the political import of this overlap, a situation in which the overt deification of kings comes into sight.

Not all of the Christian church agreed with this concept of the glorified human. In fact, "[t]he Church asserted that rampant individualism was identical with arrogance, rebellion, and sin" ("Renaissance Humanism"). While the Christian church fundamentally disagreed with a movement of self-absorption, at lease one faction latched onto the idea of individualism. Kreis states, "[h]onest doubt began to replace unreasoning faith." It was not long before Renaissance scholars discovered that the translations of sacred texts used by the Christian church were actually different than the original sacred texts. Protestants rejected this idea of implementing secular, or non-religious thought in order to return to a more pure and direct form of Christianity and worship.

As the Catholic Church began to implement some forms of art and modern culture into their worship ritual, the Protestants were more fundamental and identified themselves as separate from the orthodox Catholic Church. The Protestant rejection of the license of Catholic ritual exploded into religious war throughout Western Europe during the second half of the 16th Century. Protestants found a particularly offensive target in the icons and representational art that decorated the Catholic places of worship. They responded with Iconoclasm, the destruction of religious icons or images motivated by political or religious ideals. Matt Eatough describes the movement as one that "entails a contestation over—and destruction of—images coinciding with a belief in the fallacious nature of their representation" ("iconoclasm"). Iconoclasts believe that a physical

representation of something divine is an injustice and misrepresentation of that entity because the physical expression will always be just that—a physical expression, lacking divinity and therefore denying the form of its central characteristics. According to Eatough, forms of iconoclasm exist all throughout history and are not confined to one religion. From ancient Judaism to modern Islam, the movement to remove or destroy fallacious images from existence remains present. In Christianity, the term "iconoclasts" refers to those who adopt a literal interpretation of the Ten Commandments, which forbids the worship of graven images. The Christian iconoclasm movement really took shape in the Byzantine Empire under the direction of Emperor Leo III and was met by much opposition during the reign of Constantine VI. It remained an issue during the Protestant Reformation and Renaissance as Reformers and Puritans fought to remove idols and "graven images" from places of worship.

The first iconoclastic period started when Emperor Leo III had an image of Jesus in the Great Palace of Constantinople removed and replaced by a cross. This act instigated controversy between the iconoclasts and the iconodules—those who support the use of images in their worship practice. The iconoclasts stood on the belief that any lifeless image intended to embody the Christ figure or the saints should never be used. If one wished to create an accurate religious image, the image must be made of the same substance of the original form to be of exact likeness. Even if one were to form an image of the same substance as the prototype, the spirit would still be lacking. To create a physical image of Jesus Christ, Eatough tells us, was to separate his spirit from his physical image, thus misrepresenting him entirely. On the other hand, the iconodules of the Byzantine Era believed that Jesus, God incarnate, had superseded the commandment

concerning graven images. Images representing the Christ figure were not misleading because they were a physical image of a physical being. The iconodules also used the example of cherubim angels in the embroidery of the Tabernacle and on the Ark of the Covenant as justification for images in their modern worship spaces.

The arts thrived during the time of the Renaissance. Because of efforts to explore all mediums of human creativity, the developments in storytelling, music, dance, and drama marked the Renaissance as an artistic golden age. However, there was a movement amongst Protestants to purify the church of representational art forms. Eatough reminds us that reformers led attacks on symbolic images ("iconoclasm"). This group of Puritans believed that art forms depicting spiritual events and individuals had no place in the church because they were not accurate expressions of divinity. The art was dubbed as a form of idolatry and Puritans extended their purification movement into performance-oriented art forms, like theater.   The Globe Theatre drew in thousands of people for wild entertainment including bear baiting, gambling, and lewd theatrical productions. Because of large numbers in attendance and the nature of the entertainment, the Globe Theatre became a hub for thievery, prostitution, begging, and rogues. The Puritans were outraged that this facility was a growing part of European culture and led a movement resulting in the demolition of the theater. During their brief period of power, the Puritans did a lot of harm to the theater industry in an effort to purify the culture in England.

The growth of theater at the time of Renaissance was tied to social expansion and was supported by the Catholic Church. While the Protestants struggled to keep the two worlds—religion and entertainment—separate, the Catholic Church embraced new

developments in entertainment. Along with Catholics adopting drama as a part of their

traditional mass, playwrights began to adopt some religious strategy into their works. In

her work *Handbook to Life in Renaissance Europe,* Sider tells the reader that "[d]uring

the days just prior to the fasting of Lent, Catholics were permitted to ridicule church

authorities and, in general, behave outrageously" (143). The theater served as an outlet

for the Catholic community to mock their religious leaders. This is one example of an

overlap between the entertainment world and the religious community. Unlike the Jews

in 1st century Jerusalem, the Catholics during the Renaissance were allowed to take part

in secular entertainment events. The theater and its playwrights understood their

audience and controversial issues of the day, and adopted some religious themes to

connect with a religious community. This is an example of syncretism. While the theater

of the time was not necessarily partnering with the church, it was adopting spiritual

themes in order to draw in the religious population. The theater used religion and

spiritual symbols/characters to become relevant to the religious population.

Dramatic Expressions in the Catholic Church

This section focuses on the link between the theatricality of Catholic ritual and the

forms of religious theater known as the Mystery and Morality plays. These specific

styles of drama were born in the Catholic Church and grew out into the world of secular

theater. This is significant as it demonstrates the extent to which Catholic ritual

manifested itself outside of the church walls by adopting non-religious practices as a way

to teach the Gospel story to England.

As previously stated, the medieval Catholic Church ruled the European home

front with unwavering religious requirements for all. The Catholic Church had integrated

itself into European culture so powerfully that it was an essential part of everyday life for both the rich and the poor. Lizanne Flatt explains: "It [the Catholic Church] performed the rituals that were central to all stages of life. The Church baptized children when they were born, performed marriages, and then buried people when they died" (8). The church put itself in a position where it was the sole provider for almost every necessity. In order for a person to experience baptism, marriage, burial, and even a comfortable afterlife, they had to be in good standing with the church.

In addition to these milestone events, the church required much from people during daily life. The Catholic Church was strongly based in ritual and stood in a place of authority using fear as a tool to inspire people to follow religious instruction. People lived in fear of committing sin because sin resulted in damnation. The Catholic Church required its members to participate in confession that consisted of confessing sins to a priest, "and then doing a task to do penance or make up for the sin" (Flatt, 9). This act was one way to free the soul of sin. The church offered many different ways for an individual to avoid harsh consequences in the afterlife, and no method could be fulfilled without the presence of a priest or ritual provided at the church. Roman Catholicism controlled the destinies of the people during this time, and one of the ways they expressed their beliefs was through theater and the arts.

Robert Huntington Fletcher goes into great detail describing drama's place in the Catholic Church in his book *A History of English Literature.* He opens a section on the mystery plays with the following words:

> We must try in the first place to realize clearly the conditions under which the church service, the mass, was conducted during all the medieval centuries. We should picture to ourselves congregations of persons for the most part grossly ignorant, of unquestioning though very superficial faith, and of emotions easily aroused to fever heat. Of the Latin words of the service they understood nothing: and of the Bible story they had only a very general impression. It was necessary, therefore, that the service should be given a strongly spectacular and emotional character, and to this end no effort was spared. (105)

The passage shows that the faith of the people was very trusting of authority and very shallow. The masses were not even carried out in the language of the people. And so, the Catholic churches cathedrals were built to be awe-inspiring. This strategy drew upon the aesthetics of the person and provided a place where one felt surrounded by God. The cathedrals were spacious and decorated with stone sculptures, beautiful stained glass windows, tall columns, and colorful Biblical art. The services were filled with music produced by a full choir and an organ. The procession of priests and ministrants left behind them the fragrance of incense. In this way, it was hoped that "the eye, if not the ear of the spectator, also, might catch some definite knowledge" (Fletcher, 105).

Yet, the Catholic service increased its relevance to the masses animating the spectacular space of their cathedrals with a theatrical quality. The first way this was done was through taking down the cross from behind the altar on Good Friday, and laying it by the altar as a representation of the death and burial of the Christ. Two days later, with great celebration, the cross was taken up and placed in its original elevated position as a symbol of the Resurrection. The priest, dressed in white, sat near the altar representing the angel at the tomb where Jesus had been buried while three others represented the three Marys. They reenacted the scriptural dialog between these characters and during the last phrase were joined by the full choir and the organ. The joyous celebration filled the Sanctuary as the reenactment concluded. Plays like this are known as liturgical plays

26

and they enjoyed increased popularity during the Renaissance. Christmas was celebrated

in a similar way and soon almost every sacred day was dramatized for the people during

the Catholic Mass by virtue of its celebrations of the lives of the saints. It was not long

before the growth of religious drama would extend beyond the physical space of the

church.

The local priests began to lose control as skillful actors took on roles in these

liturgical plays and the local artisans and unions took complete ownership of the events.

The trade-guilds now handling the plays began to present regular extended series that the

Catholic Church was invited and encouraged to attend. When the Pope promised a

removal of one thousand days in Purgatory to anyone in attendance, people from all over

the country came to see the series of reenactments. The people of England soon insisted

that the plays not remain in Latin any longer, and the Biblical dramatizations were

partially translated into French and then English. Then, "the religious spirit yielding

inevitably in part to that of merrymaking, minstrels and mountebanks began to flock to

the celebrations; and regular fairs, even, grew up about them (Fletcher, 108). By the late

Middle Ages, these events became such a large, regular celebration that the community

began to assume charge of them. The scriptural dramatizations along with stories of the

saints became wildly popular and grew out of the cathedral spaces for lack of room.

They were relocated to the courtyard and then out into "the market place, the village-

green, or any convenient field" (Fletcher, 107). The plays were performed on square

platforms that were generally kept very simple in design. The stage sets, however, were

elaborate and well designed to suit the story being portrayed.

As the series continued to grow in regularity and size, they came to be known as the Mystery Plays. The Mystery Plays, no longer owned by the Catholic Church exclusively, began to take on some secular characteristics that the coarse tastes of the public demanded. These included the insertion of elements of comedy and realistic scenarios into sacred stories and Biblical plots. Fletcher closes his entry on the Mystery Plays by stating that the "frank coarseness of the plays is often merely disgusting, and suggests how superficial, in most cases, was the medieval religious sense" (111). However, he also says that they "no doubt largely fulfilled their religious purpose and exercised on the whole an elevating influence" (111-112). The Biblical stories portrayed through the Mystery Plays succeeded in simply sharing the knowledge of Biblical plots to England's public. The impact of the inspiring stories reenacted over and over again should not be considered lightly as it created a religious backdrop and reference system by which secular culture could be understood.

The Mystery Plays reached their peak of popularity somewhere between the 14th and 15th centuries and were replaced by a new genre in England known as the Morality Plays. The Morality plays extended some of the ideas of the Mysteries but were designed to communicate moral principles more directly and deliberately than the Mysteries had. The Morality plays used abstract allegorical characters to represent ideas like Good and Evil, the Seven Deadly Sins, and even God and the Devil. While Mystery Plays were tied down to plots from Biblical history, Morality Plays allowed playwrights greater independence in the developments of their own story lines. The stories usually involved a young hero who deliberately lives a life of sin and pleasure. The character then is forgiven by the grace of God and given the free gift of salvation. As Fletcher explains,

"the whole plays become vivid studies in contemporary low life, largely human and interesting" (113). Fletcher is saying that the abstract characters were portrayed in a lifelike way, taking on the characteristics of a human. This allowed for a more relatable story despite the "spirit of medieval allegory" (113). As dramatic theater continued to develop into the late 16th and early 17th centuries, the use of characters to embody abstractions can be traced to these religious forms of drama.

The religious wars gave concise expression to the tension and opposition between the secular and sacred spatial organization, whereas dramatic theater represents their overlap. Author Matt Eatough examines iconoclasm in the 16th Century as an attack on the church and theaters during this period of religious tension. Despite the Protestant effort to remove representational artistic expression from the worship setting, Sandra Sider explains that the Catholic Church began to adopt forms of dramatic expression that initially were only found in secular settings. Not only did the Catholic dramatic expressions prove to be successful as a tool for sharing Biblical stories but, as Paul Johnson shows, they also caused an expansion in the world of theater. Authors Flatt and Fletcher explain how the Mystery and Morality plays became wildly popular. Expanding outside of the church, they were adopted by the surrounding communities and were cultivated to promote less religious ideas. At this point in time, the Catholic Church represents a branch of the Christian population who embraced the ideas explored in secular thought and integrated them into their own strategy to share Biblical stories and messages. Kreis discusses the implications of this overlap between the sacred and secular during the Renaissance. The integration of secular artistic expression into the Catholic

service was objectionable to the Protestants whose own conception of sacred space would be deliberately cleansed of such influence.

Modern Church-Media Relationships

So what impact does the evolution of modern media have on fundamental modes of religious communication? Rapid developments in technology have not only left some churches in the Information Age, but also caused them to be a victim of message de-contextualization.   Worship services are no longer confined to their one physical location; an individual or group of people can now be a part of worship events taking place thousands of miles away through audio and video streaming, recording, or printed media. Advances in technology have removed the four walls of the church and allowed for an expanded notion of space. Some churches have embraced the developments in technology and communication strategies, while others consider the adoption of new technologies to be a secular infiltration of sacred space. Scholarship on this issue reveals technology to have both benefits and dangers for modern religious communication.

The Art of Dialogue: Religion, Communication and Global Media Culture by Ineke de Feijter critically analyzes the Christian policies in the field of communication and the church's relationship to media. Ineke de Feijter discusses the ways that media has reshaped the church to some extent because "media are 'not interested' in the spiritual messages of the church" (15). He states that it is crucial for the church to begin to establish boundaries and standards to define their relationship with the media. In other words, the terms with which a church may be relevant in contemporary secular society are no longer set by theatrical performance alone. Now a multi-media approach is available to compete for attention. Can we speak of a church based strategy to reclaim

entertainment industry models in this effort for attention? To follow Feijter's argument, the answer is "yes." The entertainment industry in 2012 is progressively dependent upon social networking sites, apps, and its consumers having Internet access at all times. This is the number one way to communicate with the up and coming generation. Why is this important for churches? According to Feijter, the argument extends beyond the relevance alone to the core issue of controlled communication. In other words, churches will become irrelevant culturally if they choose to become victims of changes in communications instead of embracing new ways to reach the world around them. One case in point is that Biblical facts and concepts have consistently been mistranslated through various streams of media. These misconceptions have not only misinformed the public, or the media consumer outside of church, but also the churchgoer. The challenge for the church now is to decide or learn to either work with the media and create a relationship with an understanding of media's nature, or separate as much as possible and know media will still exist to comment upon religious events and institutions.

Feijter discusses significant transitions in media technology and culture that effected more global spreading of the Christian Gospel. First, the transition from oral communication to written communication resulted in "the redefinition of faith from a particular into a universal context" (16). New technology represents a process of adjustment that includes shifts of authority and the stabilization of Orthodoxy. Each new form of communication serves as a challenge for the church to adapt to and integrate into their communication strategies. From the printing press to the Information Age, new forms of linguistic development were required to communicate the gospel. Looking at the shifts realized by the first of those developments speaks to those required by the most

recent media-related innovations. Feijter states, "[t]he impact of the printing press was profound. De-contextualization of messages, due to the possibility to transport them, accounted for less control and more flexibility" (17). Suddenly, a message that originated in one location could be recorded, sent off, and then received in a different location. With the printing press, communication became an art form with great impact on a much larger community, but the church's control over knowledge and interpretation substantially weakened. The church's messages were no longer limited to face-to-face sender and receiver. The sender could send a message (orally or written), to one audience, and the printing press made it possible for copies to be made and the message could be received by anyone. Although the media have changed dramatically in recent years, the relationship between the church and the reception of its message remains similar following the advent of the printing press. Even though electronic forms of communication take physical transportation out of the equation, the sender's control is nonetheless drastically reduced.

The significance in this source lies in the author's analysis of the church's response to changing media culture. He comments on the church's tendencies to ignore the changes in practice with justification in faith-based separation from the secular or carnal world.

> I find it hard to avoid the impression that communication from a church perspective is primarily focused on 'surviving' the institutional crisis that the churches find themselves in. Whatever legitimacy one feels this might be, it might also restrict the churches to an inward perspective, avoiding the real challenges that media culture places upon them. (257)

Rather than integrating new media forms and adapting to common lifestyle changes, the church tends to take on a victimized position as its ideals and concepts get mistranslated

or communication outside of its control. In this study on the church's relationship to the entertainment industry, it is crucial to understand that these electronic forms of media are completely integrated into the entertainment world. Yet, Feijter shows us how the church appears to shy away from challenges like this one in communication and justifies that lack of boldness by calling the new challenge "worldly." The author's imperative is simple: people on planet earth communicate differently now than they did fifty years ago and in order to reach people with any message, you must start speaking through the right medium.

Feijter's work is ultimately significant because it outlines the ways that the church has adapted or not adapted to changes in communication. These include: the construction of identity through multiple media; advertising methods and the impact of the removal of time from the communication equation. First of all, Feijter identifies three elements of religious identity construction—religious symbols, personal autonomy/privatized religion, and the interpretation of media texts. These have all been prevalent in media culture and have had a significant role in shaping religion in the eyes of the media consumer. Secondly, electronic ritual presence gives individuals the possibility of immediate and constant fulfillment, as they have become part of a community albeit a virtual one. As Feijter describes it, "[t]ime has been redefined as an ecological niche to be filed down to the microsecond, nanosecond and picoseconds—down to a level at which time can be pictured but not experienced" (20). Lastly, Feijter shows this promise of immediate satisfaction as the legacy of religion upon advertising. As he describes it, church-driven media draws upon the concepts of salvation and choice in its advertisement strategies. "The television commercial may be the most significant example of a

fortuitous interaction of media and 'religion' in contemporary American society" (22).

More often than not, advertisements are constructed from the inherent need for a person

to relate to a hopeless or needy situation and be offered a way out of that position with a

product. The secular world has picked up the salvation concept indirectly and uses it to

promote their products and agendas.

The Bible Belt

The focus of this study is on the area of the United States known as the "Bible

Belt." H.L. Mencken, who coined the term "Bible Belt" in the 1920s, distinguished

Jackson, Mississippi as "the heart of the Bible and Lynch Belt" (Duncan, 100). Authors

Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce state that the term Bible Belt refers to "states,

mostly in the South, where religion has a strong hold. In particular, evangelical or

conservative Protestant views tend to prevail in the Bible Belt" (6). The Bible Belt is

located in the Southeastern and Southern regions of the country. Characterized by strong

Christian church attendance across the denominational board, the area holds a highly

conservative reputation. The following illustration (see Figure 1) provides information on

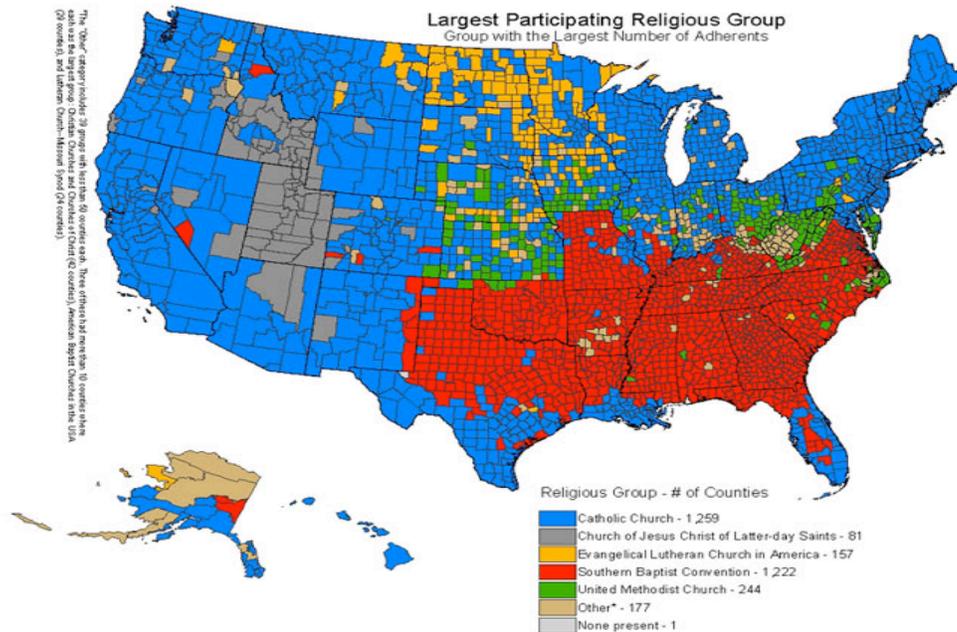religious demographics in the United States.

Figure 1. Thielen, Christopher. "Maps of Religions in the United States." An American Atheist. WordPress, 2011. Web. 5 May 2011.

As the map above indicates, the Bible Belt stretches from the northwest border of Texas across to the southeast border of our country. This figure shows that the Bible Belt is a strongly Southern Baptist area sharing space with the Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, United Methodist denominations, as well as a very small amount of other religions.

In her work *Rural Poverty in America*, Cynthia Duncan explains that the Bible Belt is an area marked by "emphasis on the literal interpretation and authenticity of the Scriptures" (100). This is a reference to the Bible Belt's roots in fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is an idea that saturates most Christian denominations, but is not limited to the Christian faith. Malise Ruthven attempts to express a broad definition of the term in her work *Fundamentalism: The Search for Meaning*. Ruthven calls it "'a religious way of being' that manifests itself in a strategy by which beleaguered believers attempt to preserve their distinctive identity as a people or group in the face of modernity and

secularization" (8). The Bible has been seen by Protestant religions as a source of

universal, authenticated truths because of its divine inspiration from the Creator. In this

belief of absolute truth, literal and traditional values were strongly established in

Protestant religions and made very apparent in the Bible Belt area. Ruthven explains that

in the 18th and 19th centuries "the Bible was considered compatible with reason" (17).

The Bible was not considered a scientific textbook, but it was also not considered to

contradict any scientific knowledge. When Biblical scholars began to question and

criticize the literary and scientific credibility of Scripture, newly self-aware traditional

fundamentalists became defensive. As a reaction to secular criticism, religions that make

their home in the Bible Belt have deliberately maintained their traditions.

Southern Baptist Convention

The Bible Belt and its Southern Baptist Convention are of significant interest to

the study of evolving Christian worship practice because of the idea of fundamentalism.

While the Christian churches in the Bible Belt are theologically committed to maintaining

traditions and the literal application of Biblical truths, a desire to change can still be seen

in worship styles to suit the more modern generations. This area of the United States,

along with the rest of the nation, is dealing with a communications and entertainment

revolution that is requiring a response on their part.

The Southern Baptist Convention is the single largest evangelical denomination in

the United States. Davis S. Dockery describes the Southern Baptist denomination as a

church, deeply rooted in the South, which often "functioned separately from the rest of

American Christianity because of their sectionalism, their inability to separate from

Southern culture, their parochialism, and their self-sufficiency, though there are some

indicators that these things are beginning to change" (13). In *Southern Baptist Identity: An Evangelical Denomination Faces the Future*, Dockery discusses the identity of members of the Southern Baptist Convention. He states, "[b]eing a Southern Baptist had a cultural programmatic identity to it unlike anything else" (14). In practice and stability, the Southern Baptist Convention has stood alone amongst hundreds of other denominations. He goes on to point out, however, that it has experienced a breakdown in their tradition over the past thirty years because of "the growth of multiple Bible translations, the impact of para-church groups, the expanding diversity of music, varied worship patterns, and the unexpected reality that church models and heroes for many Southern Baptists now come from outside the Southern Baptist Convention" (14). Dockery is bringing to light an issue that many Southern Baptist churches do not like to talk about. The traditions are becoming old are begging for change as the world outside of the Southern Baptist Church changes.

Southern Baptist churches carry a strong visual tradition in the Bible Belt and are easy to identify. They are generally made of brick and carry a tall, white steeple. The services are very consistent, just as Dockery stated, across the board. Relatively formal in dress, casual in style, the services are characterized by hymns alternated with speaking parts. While some have chosen to, you do not often see Baptist churches stray from a structure like what was just described. Dockery closes his work with the following recognition of the impending identity crisis facing this church: "As we look toward the future, let us suggest some important steps that might help us focus on our identity, build consensus, and work toward renewal" (18). Dockery is hopeful that the members of the

Southern Baptist Convention will work together with their internal staff, then with other churches to take on a challenge to change with the new times.

Churches in the Bible Belt have struggled with this communications revolution because of the issue of secular integration. Feijter informs us that the four walls that existed in the Tabernacle and the Temple are now gone; new technologies allow for a moment in time to live on and be re-experienced in almost any location. Feijter explains that the sender's control of his/her message is drastically reduced. Because the Southern Baptist church as a denomination is strongly associated with its stylistic preferences and its theological traditions (as with any denomination), message decontextualization threatens to misrepresent the church to the public and even its own members. According to Ruthven, the Baptist denomination has maintained its stylistic traditions in response to secular criticism. Rooted in fundamentalism, the Baptists' belief in the infallibility of Scripture received a lot of scrutiny from the non-religious world. Ruthven states that the denomination reacted by deliberately preserving its traditions to separate itself. Dockery explains how the process of separation included a separation from quickly developing media trends as well. These media trends represented pleasurable and "self-centered" entertainment, so the church rejected them as a strategy to communicate to the world. However, there is a movement amongst some churches that are a part of the Southern Baptist Convention to begin the process of integrating current trends into their services. According to Dockery, churches need to adjust their styles and strategies in order to maintain any grounds for relevance to the community they are trying to reach. He states that regardless of message, if you are communicating in way that does not relate to your recipient, you will not be effective.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ 1: *How is First Hattiesburg Baptist Church's worship structure designed*

        architecturally?

Hypothesis 1: *First Hattiesburg Baptist Church's worship structure was designed to*

        break a Southern Baptist architectural stereotype.

RQ 2: *What are the functions of First Hattiesburg Baptist Church's auditorium, atrium,*

        and how does digital communication affect these spaces?

Hypothesis 2: *First Hattiesburg's physical venue functions exclusively as a worship*

        space while digital communication works to expand the traditional,

        physical space and introduces secular elements.

RQ 3: *Has First Hattiesburg Baptist Church separated entirely from secular influence,*

        or has the church incorporated any outside strategy or trends into their function?

Hypothesis 3: *First Hattiesburg has deliberately incorporated outside strategies and*

        trends into their weekly functions.

METHODS

Case Study

The following case study is focused on First Hattiesburg Baptist Church of Hattiesburg, MS. The case study includes an in-depth interview with the Worship Programming Director of First Hattiesburg as well as the Live Production Director. The interview focuses on the intentions behind the layout of their worship space. Central to my inquiry is an effort to illuminate the relationship between this rationale and a complex of issues. Atmosphere, ritual, leadership/hierarchy, communication strategy, the role of entertainment, and the idea of secular integration are all daily operational issues informed by the layout of the church. The questions are open-ended and discussion is encouraged throughout the process. Listed below are the basic series of interview questions with which I engage and direct conversation:

A. General information

     1. Can you give me a summarized history of this church?

     2. How did you become involved with First Hattiesburg?

     3. What is your current demographic?

     4. How many members does First Hattiesburg have?

     5. How would you describe your overall worship style?

B. Architecture

     1. What is the layout of your worship space and why is it designed that way?

     2. What atmosphere are you trying to create with your building's design?

     3. What is the worship space's capacity?

C. Ritual

    1. What positions need to be worked on a service day in the production

        department?

    2. What is available in terms of member participation?

    3. How is your worship service structured?

    4. Who participates in the worship service?

D. Communication

    1. How do you communicate with your members?

    2. Are you present on social networks?

    3. Do you tape, record, stream services?

E. Current trends/ integration

    1. How do you keep up with the current generation?

    2. Do you feel pressure to change your style?

    3. Have you changed because of pressure and criticism?

    4. Do you try to match any entertainment industry standards within worship

        services?

    5. How important is the outside-of-the-church entertainment industry to you?

    6. Has your team/department tried to integrate current entertainment trends? In

        what ways?

    The rationale of this methodology is based on the precept that a face-to-face interview is an excellent way to get beyond the polished rhetoric of brochures, advertisements and even services themselves in order to discover the goals for which this Church is striving. In this approach, I assume the place of the critical "eye" of the reader.

I gather ideas on the intentions behind the church's setup and operation and I compare

them against the resulting realities of the way the church actually operates with regard to

its public. In order to realize this comparison, a second component of the methodology is

needed: an analysis of the church operation during a typical service. To this end, I

attended a Saturday evening service to assess the program in comparison to the intentions

communicated in the interview of the Worship Programming Director. I decided to

attend as a regular member and take notes on service structure, music, style, represented

demographics, atmosphere, and architecture. This component of my research will allow

me to be a receiver of First Hattiesburg's message. In the "receiver" position, I assess

whether or not the communicated material is the same as the intended message (as

conveyed in the interviews).

RESULTS

<u>Interviews</u>

The interview questions listed in the METHODS section served primarily as a framework for discussion with Jeff Powell, the Worship Programming Director of First Hattiesburg and Justin Nunez, the Live Production Director. Those questions were communicated in the interview and were often a springboard for other questions and conversation. Below, I have outlined each of my research questions and then included quotes from both Jeff Powell's and Justin Nunez's interviews that directly relate to each of the research questions.

RQ1 : *How is First Hattiesburg Baptist Church's worship structure designed architecturally?*

Jeff Powell set up his discussion on the current architectural design of First Hattiesburg Baptist Church by first explaining the church's previous worship space. First Hattiesburg Baptist Church was founded in 1880, and until three years ago was located in downtown Hattiesburg in a traditional Baptist sanctuary. Powell described the old building as "very much the stereotypical Southern Baptist Church in a small town, deep South. It was very traditional." Services were scheduled in the Southern Baptist custom and included elements like robed choirs, a large pipe organ, a formal dress code, and pews. Upon learning that 70% of Americans are functionally "un-churched" (i.e.: they claim no church membership), the church leadership decided that a stylistic change needed to take place. Powell explained that with these changes came a need to move into a different worship structure. According to Powell, the old building "was designed for the way that you did church in the 50s and the 60s, which was the Golden Age of the

Southern Baptist Church. So it was not really usable for us." The worship structure was designed for speech and music with minimal technological enhancements. When the leadership began to incorporate lights, a drum kit, and more media elements into their services, it was obvious that the existing worship structure was not an ideal venue for the equipment. So the current building was constructed.

The worship space was intentionally designed to send out "a signal, just a real clear signal, that this is not church as usual" (Powell). From the outside, the building does not resemble the typical red brick with white columns and steeple characteristic of more traditional Baptist churches. The blue-roofed church building is surrounded by a large parking lot and the exterior is light off-white brick. A large digital sign displays moving graphics with announcements and the current sermon series title. According to Powell, this appearance was deliberate and intended to remove visual barriers that may keep some people out of a Baptist church. Inside the building is a large space known as the "atrium." With floor-to-ceiling windows and a wide-open floor plan, the area is a place for people to sit down, drink coffee, and visit with others before and after services. The atrium also contains information kiosks that serve as resources for anyone wanting to become involved in Bible studies, missions, or children's events. The atrium offers four different double door entrances to the auditorium where all regular services take place. On a service day, participants are ushered into the auditorium and seated in movie theater-styled chairs that curve around semi-circled room and face the elevated stage. Powell states, "pews are incredibly uncomfortable, so we don't have pews, we have chairs," making a note of the seating arrangement and its contrast with the traditional pews that the church had utilized. As far as social arrangement in the space goes, there is

none. People entering the auditorium are encouraged to fill in the front sections of chairs

first so that those following can easily find a seat behind. Powell explained the

motivation behind filling the auditorium seating from front to back with the following

statement:

> If they sit scattered all over the place, here's what happens: for the people on
> stage, it feels like the room's kind of empty. For the speaker and the musicians:
> they gain energy from the people out there, so we do it for them. But we also do
> it for the people themselves because what we want them to do is connect with
> other people. We want them to experience the energy, the life. If I'm sitting back
> here and there's no one within three rows of me anywhere, especially if I'm just
> by myself, what I'm doing is I'm probably just sitting and watching. I'm a
> spectator. But if I'm closer to the front, if I'm surrounded by people that are
> singing and are really into it, that is contagious. They have a much better
> experience if we can move them up there.

Powell explained that seating people close to the stage has benefits for both the

individuals on the stage and the congregation members. Those on stage will likely have a

better experience if they can see people up close as opposed to the congregation being

spread out and distant. Powell brought up the issue of observation and made a point that

the church does not want people to just be spectators of action on stage. Instead, the

more people participate, the better. A way to get people more involved is to seat them

closer to the stage, because the energy is "contagious." While physically sitting close can

do great things for energy level, there is not an issue with regard to seeing the stage.

Large screens on either side of the stage project live video of stage action during services

to ensure that everyone in the auditorium can see. In fact, to some extent, the atrium

serves as an overflow space for individuals who prefer to watch the sermon on television

screens outside of the auditorium. So, while people are encouraged to sit up close to the

stage and in close proximity to each other, there is absolutely no requirement. The design

of the worship space allows for people to select their own seating placement according to their personal preference.

RQ 2: *What are the functions of First Hattiesburg Baptist Church's auditorium, atrium, and how does digital communication affect these spaces?*

The auditorium is used on a regular basis for worship services. These identical worship services take place on Saturday evening and Sunday morning of each week. They include a time for announcements, musical worship, a message, and response time. Occasionally, the auditorium and atrium spaces will be used for a mid week Bible study or social gathering. The church as a venue is not used for any purposes unrelated to the study of the Bible or the functioning "body of Christ." Powell took time to explain the "safe place" atmosphere that the church's staff is creating in the atrium. The goal is for the atrium to be a place where people can sit down and relax. He said: "We want it to be a kind of a third space, like Starbucks, where folks come in, sit down and sigh…they can just sort of relax." So in addition to housing regular worship services, the staff's desire is for the church to be a place where people can relax and enjoy each other's company. In addition to the physical church venue, First Hattiesburg has developed a large, virtual community. The church is present on the two major social networking sites: Facebook and Twitter. Powell stated that the church itself as well as subgroups and staff members is represented on these sites. The social network profiles serve multiple purposes for individuals seeking information: a platform for announcements, and a vehicle for trends and personal endorsements. The church also has a website that provides resources for members and guests, provides a domain for event registration, and posts video recordings of services. The posted services allow for anyone with Internet access to experience

musical worship or sermons from any location. Powell stated, "It's for folks who missed

the service, but in my mind it's a great outreach tool." He is aware of people regularly

tuning in on the website to watch services that they were not physically present for. In

addition to that use of digital space, the availability of sermons online serves as a tool for

outreach. Someone could easily post a service video on any social network or email a

link to someone who has never attended a service. In this way, someone uncomfortable

with stepping foot inside of a church building could experience a service in the location

of their choice.

> RQ 3: *Has First Hattiesburg Baptist Church separated entirely from secular*
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> *influence, or has the church incorporated any outside strategy or trends into their*
>
> *function?*

In my interview with Justin Nunez, a Live Production Director, I asked if the

production department had integrated any secular strategies or styles into what they do.

He answered, "We've integrated as much as possible. Most of the lighting and most of

the props that we use, stage design, comes from CMA shows, different bands." And thus

began a focused discussion on the deliberate incorporation of secular styles into the First

Hattiesburg culture. In my series of interview questions, a two main integration points

came up: the use of the secular as a vehicle for emotional connection and the use of

physical secular tools.

It is important to draw attention to the demographic that First Hattiesburg is

targeting and reaching out to. Powell explained to me that the church's goal is to be a

"church for the un-churched." In order to get this group of people into a church building

to hear the Christian gospel, First Hattiesburg is eliminating some non-Biblical traditions

or rituals that the American church has developed over time. The more the church building and its functions are separated from American church traditions (that are not necessarily a part of the Christian faith's requirements), the more likely an "un-churched" individual will step foot inside. In addition to the elimination of stereotypical church appearance and rituals, First Hattiesburg has deliberately adopted some secular forms into their regular functions. Powell stated, "We're very modern. The music that you hear is music that you would hear on the radio." He added that it is important for people in the congregation to connect on an emotional and personal level when they come in. Many times, as people fill into the auditorium pre-service, the band on stage will play through a secular song "because if someone walks in and hears a song that they recognize, their guard comes down. And they'll recognize that they feel more at home" (Powell). Jeff Powell shared a story in which a church visitor was emotionally affected by this strategy. The visitor said, "I walked in, and you guys were playing Johnny Cash. I knew this was the place for me." In a case like this one, secular music was used as a tool to connect with a guest. It made someone who may not have been familiar with church/religious culture feel comfortable.

The production team at First Hattiesburg has also used physical tools that are regularly found in the secular entertainment industry as a part of their regular production techniques. The band that leads musical worship sets is very electric guitar-driven and utilizes a full drum kit (as opposed to an electric drum kit). The stage during these sets is covered in moving lights that are a key characteristic of modern live entertainment performances. Many forms of media that include video announcements, communication through Facebook and Twitter, and live video projections on large screens carry the

service in its entirety. Powell explained, "This is very much a sight and sound generation, so we want to be very much sight and sound in the way we deliver the message." Nunez built off of this point by sharing that the church has "all the right people in place and we almost have a budget where we can purchase and use equipment that some of the hottest bands are using now. [It's] what people are used to seeing in top-notch productions." This statement was a reference to the standard that the secular entertainment industry has set for live performances and what is considered to be high quality production.   Secular industries use a lot of flashy, attention-grabbing visual elements to appeal to their target audience, and First Hattiesburg has deliberately incorporated this idea into their own strategy to get the attention of a media dependent generation. Nunez gave an example of the Christmas 2011 services when the church rented a drum riser that is regularly used by the overtly non-religious band, Godsmack. Nunez said "We're not afraid, we're not superstitious. We are not afraid to do industry standard or industry impressive stuff." The production team has brought in physical tools with blatantly secular associations in order to maintain a production standard that is equal to what the creative secular world is producing.

Reactions to the church culture shift and adoption of secular strategy have been very strong. Powell pointed out one specific statement that captures the opinions of many who opposed the stylistic change: "We had one lady that told me 'I don't care if these people go to hell or not, I don't want you playing that kind of music in my church.'" Churches that are a part of the Southern Baptist Convention have, for decades, maintained a very traditional style in their services. That style has become almost synonymous with sound theology. Powell shared that this individual was not alone in her

stand against stylistic changes; many left because they did not agree that moving lights and a modern musical ensemble were appropriate in church. What is interesting to note is the woman's use of the phrase "my church." Powell mentioned that many long-term financial contributors feel a sense of ownership over church functions because their gifts make the functions possible. When controversial changes take place, those givers will pack up because they have lost control.

On the other hand, many reactions have been extremely positive. Powell said that, in the location transition, the church lost "five to eight hundred people because of what we do. But from the time we've come out here, [the new location] we've grown from one thousand to about twenty-two hundred people. So that's a pretty good trade off." The church, in any given service, is now filled with an extremely diverse demographic that represents almost every subculture that exists in the Southern Mississippi area including: old, young, married, single, divorced, mixed couples, homosexuals, recovering drug addicts, and others. Powell shared that many members stuck with the church during its move and love seeing this new "life" in the church. Nunez said the church is "just exploding, not just with numbers, but with salvations." And many people who do not care for the new service style are continuing to participate at First Hattiesburg because it is an effective ministry tool.

DISCUSSION

 At the start of this research, I expected to answer these three questions:

- *How is First Hattiesburg Baptist Church's worship structure designed architecturally?*

- *What are the functions of First Hattiesburg Baptist Church's auditorium, atrium, and how does digital communication affect these spaces?*

- *Has First Hattiesburg Baptist Church separated entirely from secular influence, or has the church incorporated any outside strategy or trends into their function?*

I am very pleased that my research results clearly answer each of these questions. And while my three hypotheses were close to what my research results showed, I learned a lot about the "why?" Not only did I gain information that directly informed and corrected my hypotheses, but I gathered adequate information to tell me about the motivations and intentions of the church's strategies as well.

 My first research question, "*How is First Hattiesburg Baptist's worship structure designed architecturally,*" was followed closely by my second question, "*What are the functions of First Hattiesburg Baptist Church's auditorium, atrium, and how does digital communication affect these spaces?*" My interview with Jeff Powell revealed that the church was originally housed in a very traditional Baptist structure, red brick and all. However, upon learning that 70% of people in the United States are functionally "un-churched," First Hattiesburg began to take drastic measures to eliminate as many barriers as possible to make the church a safe, unintimidating place for individuals from all walks of life. Their new building does not maintain any Southern Baptist architectural traditions. With its open floor plan, spacious atrium, and semi-circular auditorium space,

the worship structure is almost religiously unbiased in its presentation. The worship

space in no way resembles the Tabernacle tent of the Old Testament, and Solomon's

Temple would have outshined the Baptist space with ease. Service in both the

Tabernacle and the Temple was dependent upon significant pieces of furniture (i.e.

incense, Ark of the Covenant, Altar for Burnt Offering), whereas First Hattiesburg's

building does not contain elements like these. Rather, the intention of the architecture

appears to be more of a blank canvas with movable pieces inside so that it can be

transformed and adjusted according to sermon themes. When compared to the Christian

church of the Renaissance, First Hattiesburg's venue lines up well with the Protestant

function of space. The Protestants of this time focused on meeting in homes, as a single

church building was not required for their worship practice. The Catholic Church, in

contrast, made its cathedral an essential part of worship ritual. An individual needed to

physically walk into the cathedral in order to complete actions required in Catholic

theology. First Hattiesburg's members are strongly encouraged to be a part of a Bible

study that meets outside of the church's four walls, and being present in the worship

venue for services is an optional part of the denomination's worship practice. Beyond

First Hattiesburg's physical space, the church is present in the digital world through a

website and social networks. This follows the trend of expanded space as discussed by

Ineke de Feijter. With changes in communication technology and trends, First

Hattiesburg has taken on the challenge of working with, not against, new media. The

website is an active form of communication and serves as a resource for anyone with

Internet access. Musical worship and sermons are posted online, allowing for anyone to

experience a service from miles away. With this communication gain comes a loss of

control, however. Feijter discussed the threat of message de-contextualization and a sender's loss of control. In my interview with Powell, he shared that he does not know exactly who watches the videos online—and this is an example of that loss of control. While there is no way to accurately track every viewer, the church gains a near infinite audience with the Internet.

My final question asked *"Has First Hattiesburg Baptist Church separated entirely from secular influence, or has the church incorporated any outside strategy or trends into their function?"* This question was answered clearly in both of my interviews. Both Justin Nunez and Jeff Powell stated that it is important for the church to remain culturally relevant in order to reach current generations. Powell shared that as knowledge doubles every eighteen months, the culture of an area changes. He does not want the church to get stuck in a routine that works, then look up one day to find that they are no longer keeping up with the culture of their target demographics. Powell explained that he tries to accomplish this by being a "life-long learner." This means that he surrounds himself with younger individuals and allows them to keep him informed on what is current and trendy in the world. In order to reach that 70%, Powell, Nunez, and the First Hattiesburg staff constantly reinvent how they communicate to their people and the community around them.

The concept of adoption for both the church and the secular world is key here. First Hattiesburg has chosen to adopt current trends in the entertainment world in order to remain relevant and relatable to the people of Hattiesburg. I opened this project with a definition of the word "entertainment." It exists to "divert and hold attention" of its audience. I stated in my introduction that the foundation of entertainment is often simply

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personal pleasure, while worship practice in the Christian church is theologically focused around solely benefitting and glorifying the Christian God. Throughout Jeff Powell's interview, he stated often that it was important for those attending/participating in regular services to have fun. Through elements like quality live music, flavored coffees, free candy, creative visual media, set changes, etc., the staff intends to create an atmosphere of anticipation and excitement that would draw people in on a service day. Author Arasola discussed a form of personal pleasure that was introduced into Temple Worship of Jerusalem. The Jews allowed prostitution in the Temple as part of the worship ritual, and Arasola argues that this was an effort to make worship more relevant to the worshiper. While, I am in no way suggesting that candy and visual media are morally equivalent to prostitution in the church (prostitution was specifically banned by Jehovah, whereas there are no regulations in Scripture regarding candy), this incorporation of pleasure into worship practice does problematize the secular infiltration.

This parallels the movement of the Catholic Church to incorporate dramatic theater into their worship ritual during the Renaissance. Though the religious drama drew in large crowds to hear Biblical stories and spiritual plots, the Protestants considered it to be a form of secular integration that was inappropriate for sacred spaces. As the dramatic expressions became more and more popular, they heavily influenced secular theater of the time. What is so interesting is Powell's statement that some businesses are now looking to First Hattiesburg's production models. This is rarely seen today. The Christian community is almost always behind on cultural trends, never setting the bar in any way for the secular community. In this case, First Baptist has gotten the attention of some secular business because of the church's quality production work.

These businesses are now trying implement First Hattiesburg's strategies into their work. This shows us that in the surrounding community, First Hattiesburg's shift from a traditional to modern style has opened a door for the church and the secular communities to use each other as inspiration in their respective fields.

I am very pleased with my research with the methods I utilized for this project and the achieved results. The information I gathered is clearly not to be generalized for all churches that are in this geographical location, but they do produce some valuable information regarding a theologically controversial topic. First Hattiesburg's story is one of change and adaption for the purposes of communicating an ancient story and faith to a modern culture. The Christian church, as a whole, has more consistently maintained traditions (practices that were at one time modern) and pulled away from changes in culture. First Hattiesburg's approach to communicating the Christian gospel was once very similar to this. But when approached with information regarding the effectiveness of churches across the United States, the staff faced our "sights and sounds" generation head on. Powell and Nunez communicated the efficacy of this transition by stating that the church has doubled in size, acquired viewers in many other locations through online videos, and the number of salvations is "exploding." If salvations are the goal for the Christian church, it is clear that this adopted strategy has produced its desired results.

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