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How Would Jesus Watch This?
An Investigation into Dance Restrictions in American
Protestantism

by

REBECCA HUPPENTHAL

B.F.A., Dance, University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2019

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

In the United States there has been many disagreements concerning the place of dance within Protestant Christianity. Some denominations have banned dance entirely while others utilize dance as an essential element of worship. At the center of this argument is the understanding, treatment, and use of the physical body. Beginning in the sixteenth century through current times, I analyze specific Protestant denominations including the Puritans, Evangelical Fundamentalists, Southern Baptists, the Shakers, certain African American denominations, and Pentecostals. Additionally, I examine notable liturgical modern dancers, as well as my own choreographic work, a dance film titled *Rebirth*. This research displays the importance of having a faith practice that fully utilizes the mind, soul, and body that does not demonize or prioritize one part over the other.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In the United States, there have been many disagreements about the place of dance within Protestant Christianity caused by cultural divisions, inconsistencies in theology, and worship styles (Wagner 1997, xv). Some denominations have banned dance entirely while others have implemented dance as an essential element for religious worship. At the center of this argument is the treatment, understanding, and use of the body. Is the body a holy vessel that, if connected to the mind and soul, can deepen a person's spiritual experience and expression? Conversely, is the body only capable of sin (from the Christian perspective), must be policed and controlled to remain "pure"? The rejection of dance in certain Christian communities has resulted in the intense and excessive vigilance over physical expression and the body, with the female body being the primary target. Again, this vigilance is both a cause and result of prohibitions on dance.

Warranting analysis, this religious divergence concerns the role of dance in Christian practices through investigations of attitudes, laws, specific theology, and overall culture to explain why dance has such a heterogeneous relationship with American Christianity. This research begins, in the sixteenth century with early European settlers in America through the colonial period and into the modern era, by analyzing multiple instances where dance was either encouraged or rejected by a variety of Christian groups. I will also look at religious and spiritual dance practices outside of codified denominations, specifically focusing on modern dance. Modern dance is a highly expressive genre of dance created in the early twentieth century as reaction to classical ballet. John Martin, a dance critic of the *New York Times*, described modern dance as, "... movement devised not for spectacular display, as was ballet... but it was movement made to 'externalize personal, authentic experience'" (Duane 208, 4). Finally, I will

share my own experience of Christianity and the physical body by analyzing my film *Rebirth*; which, I consider to be my dance testimony. Christian groups that have celebrated dance have been able to obtain a balance of spiritual and artistic expression. This allows dance, along with the musical and the visual arts, to be a physical manifestation of faith, that celebrates their religious belief, cultural heritage, and the bringing together of the spiritual, cerebral, and physical selves.

My interest in this project began with the realization that the most consistent things in my life, dance and faith, have remained completely separate. Growing up, I practiced dance in a secular setting; yet, I have continuously felt a connection between movement and my spiritual beliefs. Before this project, I had never performed inside a church or with a liturgical dance troupe, but I have often dedicated and intended my dancing to be a form of praise and worship to God. When I have devoted movement or pieces of choreography as part of my spiritual practice, they have meant more to me and remained clearer in my memory. This experience of metaphysical movement is not unique to me. Dance connects people in ways beyond the physical and into the spiritual realms across the world in religious and secular practices.

Purposes of Dance

With this examination, I argue that dance has a variety of purposes, including dance for worship (liturgical dance), dance for entertainment (e.g., commercial, and concert dance), dance for enjoyment in social settings/community dance, and dance for ritual. In the book, *Making Dances That Matter: Resources for Community Creativity*, by Anna Halprin, she writes that dance is, "... and important language, communicating ideas about power, spiritual matters, and the natural world. Before written language, dance was an essential part of the oral tradition, a way of passing morals, ethics, and story from generation to generation" (2019, 2). I will discuss

groups who favor dance in a worship setting and others who believe dance is a detriment to the Christian life many of which only oppose dance in a social setting. It is also noteworthy that many individual churches within the same denomination may hold different beliefs on the practice of dance. The denominations and cases I will be focusing on have shown clear and strong stances either for or against the practice of dance for any of the purposes stated above.

Chapter 2

The Protestant Backdrop: How Did We Get Here?

There are many instances of dancing found in the Bible and there is evidence of the early Christian church using dance as a form of worship in religious celebrations. Some of these celebrations incorporating dance were the feasts of Sukkot and Nissuch HaMayin (Webber 1994, 719-720). Within the medieval Catholic church, there were prohibitions against dance attached to pagan ceremonies, circus, and pantomime but Christian congregations occasionally would practice processions and some minor liturgical dance practices such as the tripudium (“three step dance”) (James-Griffiths 2016). Medieval Catholicism, in general, given its sacramental nature, was strongly physical and embodied in its worship.

Christianity was forever changed in 1517, when Martin Luther published *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*, also known as the 95 theses which many consider to be the official start of the Protestant Reformation in Europe (González 2010, 26-28). By this time, the Roman Catholic Church was a political powerhouse having strong attachments and influence over European monarchies. Power that the papacy held across Europe led to major corruption within the church. The Reformation was a radical rejection of the Roman Catholic Church, opposing papal hierarchies, decadence especially in the form of indulgences and perceived moral laxity, and multiple aspects of Catholic theology (González 2010, 7-9). The split of Reformers

from the Papacy birthed Christian religious pluralism that was revolutionary to society and communities across Europe.

To further separate from Catholicism and its strongly embodied worship style, Protestants fiercely pursued a “pure” life, discouraging drinking, gambling, and dancing because it was believed to lead to licentiousness. The denominations that arose from this time were Lutheranism, Anabaptists, Calvinism, and the Church of England. The Reformation led to many bloody religious wars, political turmoil, and aggressive persecution towards groups not in line with the state religion, whether Catholic or Protestant. Examples of this violence include: the Spanish Inquisition (1478-1834) led by Spanish King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Castille torturing and killing people of Jewish, Muslims, and Protestant faith (Homza 2006, ix-xix) as well as the Massacre of St. Bartholomew’s Day (1572), a wedding turned into bloodshed by the hands of French Catholics murdering 10,000 Huguenots (French Protestants) (González 2010, 128-131).

This extreme political unrest and persecution caused many Protestant groups to immigrate to North America fleeing from oppression and the hope of finding religious freedom. The groups that came to America were the Pilgrims, Puritans, and Anglicans later followed by the Baptists, Quakers, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed, Moravians, and French Huguenots (Schmidt 2009, 30-48). It was the extreme violence and demands for religious conformity in their home countries in Europe that led groups coming to America to create a country that not only allowed for religious freedom but celebrated it. Although varied in their theology, many of these Protestant groups imposed moral and theological structures of their own once they arrived. After freedom of religion was established in the first amendment of the Constitution, the United States became a breeding ground for new Christian denominations and

groups such as Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Christian Science, along with several others (Schmidt 2009, 149-160). Many of these new groups were considered heretical by traditionalist Christians and found highly questionable but were influential to American Christianity and culture.

All these new, diverse Christian denominations and movements showed the multitude of ways the Bible was being interpreted and theology that was being formed. These groups had a direct effect on the perceptions of dance and its place in the Christian life, with some denominations concluding that dance had a rightful place in both liturgy and the culture at large. While others, typically with more radical and stricter beliefs, directly opposed the practice of dance for all purposes (liturgical, theatrical, and community/social). This diversity and differing of opinions have led to perpetual arguments about theology, worship practices, and societal moral standards that continue to be debated today among American Christians. Where dance can exist in relation to the Christian church is one of these ongoing controversies. The main Protestant denominations and ideologies in the United States historically opposed to dance were the Puritans, Evangelical Fundamentalism, and the Southern Baptists, most of which were Calvinist off-shoots. Other Christian denominations such as: the Shakers, Pentecostals, and multiple African American denominations (e.g., the African Methodist Episcopal Church) believed dance had a rightful place in the church, deeming it as a legitimate expression of liturgy and love for God, with the capability of building strong community bonds.

Chapter 3

Religious Groups Against the Practice of Dance

Puritans (Calvinist Theology in Early America)

Calvinism, the dominant Protestant theology of the American colonial period, began with John Calvin, a French Protestant who was part of the second generation of Reformers. He was known for his severity and heavily promoting religious and moral reforms with strict disciplinary measures. This is shown in the 1547 *Ordinances for the Regulation of Churches*, written for the citizens of Geneva, Switzerland (González 2010, 80-85). Calvin outlined the prohibited behaviors and punishments in his comprehensive system of Protestantism that focused on blasphemy, drunkenness, usury, games, marriage celebrations, and song and dance. Regarding song and dance, Calvin states, “If any one sing immoral, dissolute or outrageous songs, or dance the *virollet* or other dance, he shall be put in prison for three days and then sent to the consistory” (Calvin 1547). The worship style in Calvinism was simple and stripped back, for instance, avoiding any forms of ornamentation or pageantry.

This fear of the sensuous embellishment of the Christian faith stemmed from opposition to the Roman Catholic Church’s excessive opulence. Calvinists believed the papacy’s sumptuousness led to in-church corruption, distraction from a simple Biblical faith, and the spoken/written word. Singing of the Psalms was allowed but only for the glorification of God; it was never to be overly theatrical. Musical instruments were not permitted in early Calvinist worship practices (Schmidt 2009, 60). There were many groups that immigrated to America that had a basis in Calvinist theology including the Puritans and the Pilgrims (González 2010, 279-281).

The Puritans were a fervent Protestant group who firmly rejected anything papist. They were renowned for their moral intensity and judgement. Additionally, they believed in a simple life of Bible study, prayer, devotion, and rules with the goal of moral and spiritual conformity. The Puritans strived for a pure God-focused life, based on hard work, valuing education, and holiness of the laity and the clergy. The goal of simplicity affected all parts of their day to day lives including unadorned architecture, plain clothing, and minimal holiday celebrations. A strong work ethic was an essential element to Puritan culture; they believed one's vocation was holy, useful, and to be executed to the best of one's ability (Schmidt 2009, 60-64). They considered hard work, discipline, and success as a sign of God's favor. In her book *Adversaries of Dance*, Ann Wagner states in reference to Puritan attitudes: "As a kind of recreation, entertainment, art, amusement, and/or exercise, dancing provides no necessary material goods or services" (1997, xiii). The Puritans viewed dance, along with the arts in general, as a non-essential and superfluous activity whether written, spoken, or performed. They believed dance wasted people's time and money both which would be better spent glorifying God with "real work" and more cerebral worship. In addition, it was considered a worldly, bodily temptation that would distract Christians from purity and the Word of God.

Puritans believed anything in one's life that did not point to and exalt God was immoral and should be punished, which, included the practice of dance for both religious and secular purposes. One of the earliest examples of Puritans banning dance was a pamphlet called, "An Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing" written in 1684 by the Puritan clergyman, Increase Mather, located in Boston (Marks III 1975, 1). This pamphlet specifically warned against the evils of "mixt dancing" or men and women dancing together. Mather states:

But our question is concerning *Gynecandrical Dancing*, or that is commonly called *Mixt* or *Promiscuous Dancing*, viz. of Men and Women (be they elder or younger persons)

together: Now this we affirm to be utterly unlawful, and that it cannot be tolerated in such as place as *New England*, without great Sin (Marks III 1975, 31).

He described dancing as a malicious activity, finding it to be offensive and potentially leading a person to sinfulness, especially, sexual impurity. Mather excused examples of dancing in the Bible such as Miriam dancing in the book of Exodus and David dancing in the book of Samuel. It was excused because they were not dancing with anyone of the opposite sex and it was done in worship to God or in celebration of victory over God's enemies. Mather wrote, "Dancing is a recreation fitter for pagans, whores, and drunkards than for Christians" (Marks III 1975, 43). Increase Mather was not the only Puritan who wrote about the "evils" of dance. Another writer included Increase Mather's son, Cotton Mather, who wrote *The Magnalia Christi* and *A Cloud of Witnesses*, both discussing correct moral behavior including dance customs.

Both Increase and Cotton Mather's attitudes and influence in Puritanism toward dance resulted in the prohibition of the Maypole dance. The prohibition involved Puritan leaders physically cutting down maypoles and halting celebrations. This was a custom, typically celebrated on May Day (May 1st), where young women would make flower garlands and wind them around a pole while dancing. The Maypole dance originated as a pagan practice in Germany as a fertility ritual (Johnson 2010, 44-45). The custom found its way to the early American colonies. An article discussing the attacks on May Day Celebrations written by Peter C. Mancall stated, "the Puritans believed they needed to be exemplars of proper Christian behavior. Everyone in their towns had to abide by their rules, and they punished colonists whose actions seemed to undermine devout religious practice" (Mancall 2021). From the Puritan perspective, the Maypole dances were too phallic, sexual in nature, and containing clear pagan roots to ever be considered allowable Christian behavior.

In the United States during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, partner dancing was gaining popularity and was being practiced at balls which were fashionable to attend. This required people to take time to learn dances from a Dance Master, spend money on gowns, and perform mixed dancing such as the waltz which Puritans considered unholy. In *A Cloud of Witnesses* Cotton Mather states, "...the Dancing Humour, as it now prevails, and especially in Balls, or circumstances that Lead the Young People of both Sexes, unto great Liberties with one another" (Marks III 1975, 65). Mather believed those who participated in these balls were not "people of quality" or abiding by their set Christian lifestyle. These Puritans believed that not all dancing was explicitly sinful; but specifically, the dancing conducted in accompaniment with lavish feasts, drinking, and what they considered to be inappropriate and provocative clothing. It was this combination that drove them to believe dance would lead Christians and their communities on a path of sinfulness and licentiousness.

The Puritans had considerable influence on American culture which, in many ways, may still be considered today as "Puritanical". The lingering effects of Calvinism including views on profanity, prostitution, drug laws, and blue laws (laws prohibiting certain activities on Sunday) tend to be more conservative in the United States than in other more secularized Western countries. Given the Puritans' simple worship services, intense morality laws, an emphasis on a work-filled life, and deep fear of anything that could be considered Pagan; dance was destined to be considered a sinful activity by the Puritans. The denomination was in denial of the sensual aspects of the human experience and the physical body. Rather, they prioritized the cerebral mind through thoughts and words. Puritanism, as a distinct denomination, faded out by the end of the seventeenth century, but their legacy of severe moral sensibility and suspicion of bodily, sensory expression was sustained within Evangelical Fundamentalism.

Evangelical Fundamentalists

Evangelical Fundamentalism was in many ways an heir to Puritanism. It is a movement which began during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries within American Protestantism. The movement arose in opposition to modernizing and progressive trends in American culture including shifting gender roles, liberalism, political extremism, and immigration. Adherents were opposed to the developments of modern science, particularly Darwin's theory of evolution (Gaustad and Schmidt 2009, 297-298). Fundamentalists have a strict code of morality based on their literal interpretation of the Bible. This code is bolstered by cultural norms, from the Victorian period, often opposing drunkenness, gambling, smoking, going to the movies, immodesty, tattoos, and piercings, in addition to dancing.

Evangelical Fundamentalism has various similarities to the Puritanism of the First Great Awakening and pietistic Wesleyan sensibility of the Second Great Awakenings (revivalism). Both held literal beliefs in the Bible and informal worship practices which do not contain set rituals or liturgy. The First Great Awakening (early eighteenth century) focused on the individual pursuing knowledge about God and the self. The movement revitalized the early American colonies to make religious and spiritual matters the corner stone and passionate aspect of their life (Gaustad and Schmidt 2009, 106-109). The Second Great Awakening occurred fifty years later in the 1790's. It was less emotionally charged than the First Great Awakening and focused on encouraging Christians to live a Godly life, turning away from sin, and focusing on morality and education (Gaustad and Schmidt 2009, 140-145).

The specific actions and beliefs of Evangelical Fundamentalists does not represent all Evangelical Christians. "Evangelicalism is a Christian faith rooted in Protestantism that preaches the truth of the gospel and the authority of the Bible" (Caffrey 2021). British scholar, David

Bebbington, outlined four essential elements of Evangelicalism which aid in understanding the inner workings of Evangelicalism, including Fundamentalist Evangelicalism. These elements include of Biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism. In Biblicism, the Bible is treated as the highest authority of meaning, and any belief that is held as unbiblical is immediately rejected. Crucicentrism is an emphasis on Christ's crucifixion; specifically, that the cross is more than a symbol but rather an atoning sacrifice for sin. Conversionism puts emphasis on the need for an identifiable and datable conversion experience. Activism, within the context of Evangelicalism, comes from the belief that Christians should be involved in the world and spread the "good news" which can be seen through missionary work (Bebbington 2005, 16-17). These groups have a strong presence in political activism demonstrated through protests, judicial, and legislative efforts in the defense of conservative Christian causes. Their theology and preaching, often, focuses on the end times emphasizing the second coming of Christ and believe that Jesus would not come back until they were "ready" or morally pure. This drive for moral purity and Biblical precepts about refraining from worldly activities were the leading elements prohibitions on dance.

The most overt stances against dance, within this movement, are seen in Evangelical Fundamentalist college campuses through strict rules and required behavior. An example of anti-dance practices is seen at Bob Jones University, a Fundamentalist university founded in 1925 in Bay County, Florida. The university, later, moved to South Carolina after the Great Depression. Bob Jones University is a good representation of Fundamentalism as a whole: extremely politically conservative, socially engaged, and hold aggressively strict views on sexual purity. Bob Jones University is infamous due to their strict policies some of which include not allowing students to listen to secular music, no physical contact between unmarried men and women on

campus, stringent curfews, dress codes, and internet policies. Bob Jones University current policy on dance is found in their 2020-21 student handbook:

The term “dance” includes forms of choreography, types of exercise, types of cheering or celebration and historical dancing (often used in productions). In general, these forms of dance can be appropriate in a Christian higher education setting and are permitted. However, many forms of modern dance and the music to which they are performed violate biblical principles due to their expressions of worldliness or sexually provocative nature. Dancing that contains these elements is prohibited (2020-21, 31-32).

Bob Jones University has been severe and uncompromising with all their policies. Maintaining what they believe to be a respectable culture mirroring the overall mentality of the Evangelical Fundamentalists.

It is important to remember that although this specific Christian university, and later mentioned Baylor and Liberty University, are against the practice of social dance; there are many other Christian colleges that celebrate dance as an art form. Texas Christian University, Anderson University in South Carolina, Taylor University in Indiana, and Belhaven University in Mississippi are all examples of Protestant Christian higher education institutions with renowned dance departments. They have established dance programs, dance teams, and social events involving dance. There is a variety of dance forms that students can study at these universities including ballet, modern, improvisation, musical theatre, tap, and jazz. These universities do not have a specific stance against dance in a social setting. This variability illustrates that there is no one interpretation of the Bible and its moral demands, at least as it pertains to dance.

Southern Baptists

The Baptist denomination originated in the seventeenth century, as an off shoot of Congregationalism. Congregationalism is a system of organization among Christian churches whereby individual local churches are largely self-governing. Beginning in England, many of the

Baptists followers immigrated to America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Roger Williams established the first Baptist church in Rhode Island in 1638 (Gaustad and Schmidt 2009, 65). Baptists began to grow in numbers during the First Great Awakening where they received many converts. The formation of the Southern Baptist Church occurred in 1845 when Northern and Southern Churches split over the issue of slavery; Methodist and Presbyterians also split at this time. The Baptist denomination was the only one not to reunite and both Northern, the American Baptist Churches, and Southern denominations exist today (Gaustad and Schmidt 2009, 191-194). South Baptists are a denomination that has been a part of the fundamentalist movement with some basis in Calvinist theology.

Baptists are characterized by their belief; that baptism must be done by full immersion rather than a sprinkling or pouring of the water. Additionally, Baptists require baptism to be reserved for those who are old enough to make a profession of faith. Southern Baptists have simple worship practices which focuses on an individual relationship with God. They follow the Lutheran doctrine of the Priesthood of all Believers meaning all followers of Christ no matter one's community or vocation are valuable before God (González 2010, 52-53). Southern Baptists are notorious for their rigid and conservative stances on gender roles, sexuality, drunkenness, gambling, and dancing. In 1945, in Tonkawa, Oklahoma, Southern Baptist minister Jesse Marvin Gaskin wrote *The Modern Dance on Trial* specifically speaking against ballet. There he stated, "Sex and the dance are inseparable. The ballet, for example, loses its appeal when clothes are put on the dancer. It is the base, vulgar display of nudity that appeals to the cheap-minded admirer" (Wanger 1997, 330). Gaskin, like most Christians opposed to dancing, linked dance to extramarital sex; he believed they were innately tied together.

Liberty University, located in Lynchburg, Virginia (founded in 1971), is a private Evangelical Christian University with strong Southern Baptist roots and is one of the world's largest Christian colleges. Liberty University does have dance teams allowed to practice on campus if teams follow strict rules including specific music, type of movement, and modest costuming; although, the rules on social dance are still incredibly strict. Dance is considered a violation by the university when deemed lewd, sexual, and "un-pure". Liberty University has extremely strict regulations against social dance with the assumption it will be promiscuous and infringe their Christian values such as purity and temperance. The university policy states attendance at a dance carries a 6-point violation and \$25 fee. Their stance on dance specifically for a liturgical purpose is not stated (Singletary 2019).

Baylor University, a Southern Baptist University located in Waco, Texas, opened in 1845 (right at the time of the split of Northern and Southern Baptist Church), and did not allow for any dance on their campus until 1993 (Yardley 1993, C2). The president of the University at the time, Robert Sloan Jr., decided to lift the ban even though many Baptists still consider dance to be morally destructive because of its supposed ties to other sinful behaviors. Sloan still warned the students against being obscene or provocative. "No pelvic gyrations: no excessive closeness; no 'Dirty Dancing'" (Ap 1996). Dance, at Baylor University, was banned in both secular and celebratory environments mirroring the earlier Puritan culture.

One of the more memorable dance bans, which inspired the popular movie *Footloose* (1984), occurred in the rural Christian-majority town of Elmore City, Oklahoma. Dancing was forbidden in the town since its founding in 1898. In 1980, students from Elmore City High School led by the junior class president, Rex Kennedy, pushed to change the law so they could have a senior prom. Kennedy finally succeeded in changing the board's mind after ten previous

class presidents' failed attempts. In a neighboring town, Reverend F.R. Johnson of the United Pentecostal Church famously commented: "No good has ever come from a dance. If you have a dance somebody will crash it and they'll be looking for two things—women and booze. When boys and girls hold each other, they get sexually aroused. You can believe what you want, but one thing leads to another" (Demaret 1980). Another article in the *New York Times* about this story, published on March 16, 1980, spoke about the reverends in the town:

The Rev. David Flick of the First Baptist Church has spoken out against the dance, but unlike some of the other ministers in the city's six churches, he has not taken to the pulpit over the controversy. 'Things will be going on that are less than Christian,' Mr. Flick said. School officials in other towns where dancing is permitted, he said, 'may have been successful in keeping alcohol away from school grounds, but lurking in the darkness, it was there (After 80 Years 1980, 55).

The town and this infamous incident aptly demonstrate the overall cultural beliefs and practices held by Southern Baptists.

The key element that explains why dance is so frequently banned and treated with disdain is its believed attachment to worldliness and dance is seen as worldly amusement. In 1 John 2:15-16 (EVS), it is written, "Do not love the world or the thing in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him, for all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possession—is not from the Father but is from the world". Puritans, Southern Baptists, and the Evangelical Fundamentalist movement share a deep fear of worldliness. This fear, in practice, turned into hyper moral control of their communities. With these denominations and ideologies, dance has been pushed repeatedly into this category of the secular world. Separation from worldliness is an essential principle of the Christian faith; although, there have been many Christians and denominations that have not found dance as a part just of a secular lifestyle but as an essential aspect of their faith that deepens their experience of God.

Chapter 4

Religious Groups in Favor of the Practice of Dance

Dance Found in the Bible

There are many references to dance within the Bible. One of the most famous references being: “For everything there is season, a time for every activity under heaven... A time to cry and a time to laugh. A time to grieve and a time to dance” (Ecclesiastes 3:1,4, NLT). In addition, there are references to some of the most known figures in the Bible dancing in celebration and joy of God such as Miriam (Moses’ sister). It states in Exodus 15:20, “Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing” (NLT). Additionally, the story of David shares a zealous dancing experience in 2 Samuel 6:14, “And David danced before the Lord with all his might” (NLT). It is these examples of dance along with others found in the Bible that give inspiration to the liturgical dancers, of today and the past. These examples give pro-dance Christians validation that dance is an essential part of the human and faith experience. Whether connected to a specific denomination or not, these Christians find dance an essential part of their human experience but more importantly their spiritual welfare.

The United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing (The Shakers)

In this section, I will examine Christian groups that have historically embraced the practice of dance. While some streams of American Christianity frowned upon and continue to prohibit dance, others see it as an appropriate way to communicate with God, enhancing both their worship style and faith. The United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, also known as the Shakers, came to America from England in 1774. The Shakers came under the direction of Mother Ann Lee, who they believed was the female incarnation of Christ. This

denomination was based partially on Christianity and on quasi-socialist principles. Making the denomination an outlier in the nineteenth-century American religious landscape, which was largely Protestant. Nonetheless, the Shakers were influential in American culture, including dance culture (McLendon 2013, 48). The religion was a utopian experimental lifestyle, which many new religions were embracing in the eighteenth and nineteenth century America during the Second Great Awakening across the America.

The Shaker lifestyle was all encompassing and carefully structured around communal living and property, gender equality, celibacy, and celebratory dance worship with the hopes of creating a heavenly society (Gaustad and Schmidt 2009, 191-194). Ecstatic and elaborate dance worship was a cornerstone of their society that served as a means to holiness. The intensity and spontaneity of their worship with both song and dance was one of the biggest appeals of their lifestyle to outsiders, who were thinking of joining the movement. Dance practices in the Shaker communities evolved over time. Beginning in the 1780's, worship was described as "diverse charismatic manifestations of direct spiritual agency" (McLendon 2013, 52). Believers would improvise individual and out of control movement almost like a spiritual possession that was intended to show empowerment by the Holy Spirit, a practice that even they, the Shakers, described as strange. Like the Pentecostals' speaking in tongues, the Shakers would begin their movement as an impulse that came from God creating an intimate connection with the divine. All members, of the community, were involved through hand clapping, stomping their feet, and singing even if they were not individually moving. As the Shaker movement attracted more followers, dance as worship became more uniform and choreographed. They created specific exercises such as the square order shuffle where the assembly moved "in rank and file". With this type of more clearly structured worship they were able to translate the individualistic zeal

and passion from their early style of worship into a “heart-pumping liturgical production” (McLendon 2013, 53). Whether choreographed or improvised, Shaker worship practices encouraged and gave space for a fully embodied and liturgical experience.

The most common reason for dance being prohibited by any Christian denomination was because of the perception that dance was sexual and would lead to sinfulness and promiscuity. The Shaker society was completely celibate, with men and women living separately, so dance being considered sexual was never an issue. Rather, dance existed as an indispensable element of their holiness and connection to God. They believed that whirling dances would literally shake off their sin. At the height of the Shaker movement, there were around 6,000 members.

Unfortunately, the celibacy that allowed for more freedom of worship did not help the religion to have stable growth. Most Shaker communities had died out by the start of the twentieth century because of this. In *Dance Revolution: Bodies, Space, and Sound in American Cultural History*, Christopher J. Smith writes about the Shakers: “In their movement aesthetic no less than in their architectural design, the Shaker vision of the meanings of communal dance responded to and influenced—mostly unconsciously—a range of external cultural dynamics uniquely available in the North American context” (2019, 71). The Shakers left a legacy and influence in worship practices that still exists in the United States.

As shown in the previous chapter, there are many denominations that believe the practice of dance is an obstacle on the path to righteousness, separating a person from God. The Shakers believed and practiced the opposite. The fully embodied worship practices of this denomination demonstrated that dance could be an aid to further support an individual relationship with God. This allowed for the body/material realm to not be in contradiction of a pure and righteous faith. This attitude influenced later groups such as the Pentecostals.

African American Christian Practices (Before and After the Civil War)

My research has identified substantial religious practice among African Americans as a group, and affiliations with Christian religious groups including Evangelicalism and Pentecostal Christian denominations. Specific Black Christian congregations are known for being lively, enthusiastic, experimental, and embracing a highly embodied practice. African American Christianity was shaped by traditional African traditions as well as the trauma they experienced through nearly four hundred years of slavery and continued racism in American society (Erskine 2014). The First and Second Great Awakenings were major turning points for the growth of Black Christianity. Methodist, early Baptist, and Evangelical Presbyterian denominations were particularly successful in proselytizing enslaved people because of their more inclusive theology and lively extemporaneous worship style (Lambert 1992, 185-189). African Americans made these denominations their own, adding even more culturally inspired movement to the worship service (Costen 1993).

Despite the opposition from white Christian enslavers—who wished to extirpate anything “African” or non-Christian. Many enslaved people maintained their own rituals, songs, dances, and cultural expressions discussed by Noel Leo Erskine in his book, *Plantation Church: How African American Religion Was Born in Caribbean Slavery*, stating:

“One of the reasons that enslaved persons survived on plantations in the New World in spite of the long hours and brutality was their ability to adapt their religious practices to a Christian frame of reference without losing the essentials of their native belief. They found ways of maintaining the integrity of their religious beliefs while at the same time they were open to the change that a new sociological and theological environment imposed on them” (Erskine 2014, 117).

This resulted into a hybrid of West African and Christian religions. The true practice of converted Christian enslaved people was made invisible to enslavers. They did this through creation of “praise houses” or “hush harbors” which were designated and secret clearings or

buildings in the woods. (Raboteau 2004, 215-216) Believers created these places for religious worship and community. It was here where African American religious traditions were formed combining West African religion and Evangelical Christianity using heartfelt preaching, call and response (where the leader calls out something and the congregants respond aloud), and spiritual singing and dancing.

One of the most important and influential practices of dance to take place in hush harbors was the “ring shout” (Foster 1999, 56). It would take place on Sunday or at night throughout the week. The musicians and singers would stand around the edges of the room; while other worshipers would move in a counterclockwise circle by shuffling, stomping, and clapping often while singing or breaking out into prayer. The foot was barely taken off the floor and the movement of the circle came from a “jerking, hitching motion which agitates the entire shouter” (Costen 1993, 53). This zealous dance was practiced often and would sometimes last deep into the night. Ring shouts were an essential part of their worship giving them a connection to God and their past religious practices (Raboteau 2004, 74), helping to fulfill physical, spiritual, emotional, and rational needs (Stuckey 2014, 24). In the essay “Christian Conversion and the Challenge of Dance”, Sterling Stuckey describes the Ring shout as an “ideology embedded in artistic experience, a form of dance ceremony in which a religious vision of profound significance was projected even as it underwent transformation in the face of the pressing challenge of slavery” (Foster 1999, 56). Their trauma was embodied so it is logical that their practices of faith are embodied as well. The practices were taken from African tribal religions, Islam, and Catholicism, which do not have the same body-neuroses of many Western Protestants but understand religious worship as a total-body experience.

African American Christianity became more formalized by the early nineteenth century with the formation of many specifically Black churches and served as the heart of the black community (Hine 1998, 184). These churches were a community resource that provided more than a religious experience. They often included schools, libraries, athletic clubs, social events, political lobbies (focusing on abolitionism), and forming their own missionary organizations (Hine 1998, 184). With the establishment and progression of African American Churches, their style of worship evolved while remaining just as passionate. A major turning point was the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation signed in 1863. Many southern enslaved people joined the independent denominations created in the north including the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), AME Zion, Church of God in Christ, and National Baptist Churches among others (Gaustad and Schmidt 2009, 192).

Praise dance was established in the twentieth century and is still practiced today. It is especially popular among women of color and is described as a physical testimony that can allow for a physical deepening of their religious and spiritual experience (Elisha 2018). Omri Elisha, author of *Dancing the Word: Techniques of embodied authority among Christian praise dancers in New York City* described praise dance as:

Combining spiritual and artistic disciplines, including techniques derived from ballet and modern dance, black female praise dancers embody the gospel and cultivate religious authority in ways that reinforce orthodox norms while elevating creative skills and aesthetic sensibilities normally found outside the purview of religious tradition (Elisha, 2018).

Elisha described praise dance as medium for liturgical worship, testimony, and evangelism with dancing being ministered rather than performed (Elisha 2018). Praise dance has given specifically African American women a voice and authority in their communities (Hine 1998).

Praise dance is far more than a religious practice, but additionally, a major source of connection within African American communities. Praise dance is performed at notable events such as McDonald's Gospelfest, the International Festival of Blacks in Dance, Praise Dance Festival, and many others across the country. This practice has evolved from enthusiastic ring shouts hidden away in the woods to praise dance celebrated on some of the biggest stages in the United States. Dance continues to be a corner stone of African American Christianity that exemplifies the importance of an embodied worship experience.

Pentecostals

Another large branch of evangelical Protestantism is Pentecostalism, which traced its spiritual origins back to the apostles. It was established in the United States in 1901 by Charles Parham, in Topeka, Kansas at Bethel Bible College. Parham believed there was a need for Christians to get away from cold, complacent, formalistic religion, and have a revival of spiritual, and loving outpouring for God. A few years later, the Pentecostal movement grew rapidly at Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, California (from 1906-1909); where the movement was taken over by William Seymour (Synan 1998). Seymour (1870-1922) took, "Pentecostalism from being a radical brand of Wesleyanistic Methodism and turned it into a universal church of a new-found Christian faith" (Sanders 2003, 1). Pentecostalism has continued to grow into one of the most widely practiced Christian denominations today. One of the most essential elements of Pentecostalism is learning one's own spiritual gift such as speaking in tongues, spontaneous prophesying, or faith healing. It is believed worshippers will encounter their spiritual gifts through worship which is always—as with the Shakers and the African American traditions—a full-body experience in Pentecostal custom. Pentecostal—which

includes many historically Black churches— worship is one of its biggest attractors to new converts but also its the most shocking and controversial elements to outsiders.

Pentecostal worship is charismatic, intense, and often improvised. It is a highly emotional event containing loud music, singing, and spontaneous preaching. Congregants can be seen swaying, shaking, jumping, dancing, hugging, and crying, and at times people begin to speak in tongues. Author of *Holy Praiseco: Negotiating Sacred and Popular Music and Dance in African Pentecostalism*, Ogbu U. Kalu stated “Pentecostalism’s Charismatic liturgy- its worship, music, dance – is its most attractive feature. Some have argued that by privileging experience and performance, Charismatic religion engages the whole person instead of emphasizing reason” (2010, 17). It is noteworthy that Pentecostalism is one of the most racially integrated denominations and a variety of customs from African American Christian worship practices are found in the movement.

Insight into Liturgical Dance

In the article, *Sometimes You Just Gotta Dance: Physical Expressiveness in Worship*, David L. Johns explains, “Liturgy, at its best, places us honestly before each other and before the face of God. To be honest about ourselves we must acknowledge the complexities and ambiguities of our human existence, and this acknowledgment is absorbed into and expressed through our words, gestures, silence, and movement” (2002, 207). The word liturgy is derived from the Greek word, *leitourgia*, which directly translates to “the work of the people.” Liturgical dance can be performed both inside and outside of a church building. Additionally, in our current times, it can be shown through online/digital platforms. It is difficult to connect liturgical dance to one specific denomination, but the practice appears to be accepted within liberal mainline Protestant churches, in addition to the dance-positive denominations discussed above. The

allowance of this type of worship is often decided on a church-by-church basis taking into consideration the opinions of the congregation and the availability of someone in the church to run a dance program. Liturgical dance has also taken place outside of churches in independent organizations. There was a new movement of liturgical dance, not attached to a specific sect of Christianity, which started at the beginning of the 1900's alongside the formation of modern dance.

Dance in Christian practices does not have one codified technique. Dance styles vary from church to church, often chosen based on what connects most within different communities and cultures. There are some reoccurring positions and gazes that show up in several dances including the suggested prayer position from the pre-Constantine era when prayer was done standing with hands raised over the head. Popular religious art depicting Mary with a soft gaze and small smile is often seen during performances as well (Kieswetter 2012, 354). In many liturgical dance groups, dancers come with previous movement experience, but it is not required and holding auditions can be frowned upon by dance directors/church leaders who believe everyone should be free to worship God in this way. There is no age minimum or maximum, but a large majority of those participating dance are children or youth.

Chapter 5

Spirituality in Modern Dance

Current practices of liturgical dance began in the early twentieth century alongside the beginning developments of Modern dance, with liturgical pioneers training under influential modern dance figures. In 1917, Ruth St. Denis (key figure in the formation of modern dance), danced the prayer, the doxology, a Gloria, and the sermon “Ye Shall Know the Truth” at the Interdenominational Church in San Francisco. Interdenominational churches try to incorporate and celebrate the practices of a variety of denominations with their focus on the love and worship for God. Ruth St. Denis and her partner Ted Shawn formed their technique around the connection of the body and the spirit coming together. Ruth St. Denis describes the connection between the physical and the spiritual: “We are not made of one substance and our bodies of another. The whole scheme of things in reality is not two, but One. On this hangs not only the whole law and prophets of the liberation philosophy of the age but the very starting point and method of the Divine dance” (Apostolos-Cappadona 2001, 111). This concept references the mind-body split (dualism) present in Christian traditions even though dualism (e.g., in the early form of Gnosticism) was declared a heresy in the early church.

Ted Shawn, before becoming a dancer, was studying to become a Methodist minister at the University of Colorado. Through his theological studies Shawn believed:

...dancing was originally part of the Christian liturgy until the Middle Ages, when ascetics condemned beauty and pleasure from Christian ceremony. To demonstrate the ways dancing might revitalize the modern liturgy, Shawn choreographed and performed an entire church service in dance, an experiment that drew both praise and dissent from critics and clergy alike (Scolieri 2019).

Neither Ruth St. Denis or Ted Shawn was specifically attached to any religion but their interest in the connection between dance and sacred practices left a profound impact on how liturgical dance was performed during the twentieth and twenty-first century.

Margaret Fisk Taylor, a liturgical dance pioneer and minister's daughter, was influenced by a performance of the Denishawn dance company in 1929. Taylor felt the break from ballet allowed for a deeper significance in the work; she described the performance as a religious experience. While working on a graduate degree at the Chicago Theological Seminary, a liberal Protestant school, Taylor enrolled in a dance course at the University of Chicago where her professor trained under Martha Graham (Saumaa 2016). Later, spending three months in Berlin, Taylor trained under Mary Wigman learning the value of free movement and social consciousness perspectives. Returning to the United States, Taylor utilized modern dance movement in her work with church groups. From the 1940's onward, Taylor led multiple religious conferences and workshops. She worked with church dance choirs across the country and was a leader and teacher of summer youth programs and educational events. Taylor was one of the founders of the Sacred Dance Guild serving as the president for five years. Notably, in June 1958 the first Sacred Dance Guild Institute was ran by Ted Shawn in Massachusetts at the renowned Jacob's Pillow. Taylor continued to work in the academic, religious, and dance fields into her nineties (Saumaa 2016, 31-32). Her work influenced thousands of people not only in the United States, but across the world, encouraging them to view dance as legitimate form of worship to be implemented by the church.

Two other key figures in the formation of liturgical dance in the twentieth century included Ericka Thimey and Carla de Sola. Ericka Thimey was a German-American dancer who also trained under Mary Wigman. Thimey created and presented many religious dances in

Unitarian Churches on the East coast as well as directing multiple dance choirs from the 1930s through the 1950s (Daniels 1981, 74). She went on to create the Ericka Thimey Dance & Theatre Company located in Washington D.C. Timey was quoted in the Washington Post saying, “‘Why do you pray? It’s a need,’ Thimey explained. ‘When you [pray] with movement, you can make it even stronger. And people will very easily understand what’s behind it’” (Hopkinson 1999).

Worship and prayer were a point of connection both to faith and community that for her was best expressed through dance and movement.

Carla de Sola grew up in New York. De Sola received her training in dance at the Julliard School of Music, training under Jose Limón and Hayna Holm. She went on to create one of the most influential liturgical dance companies in the United States called the Omega Dance Company. The company began in 1974, with the support of the dean (recognizing the ability of the arts to be a window to the Divine), at the Episcopal Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City (Kirk n.d.). The Episcopal Cathedral Church of St. John is a part of a famously liberal Protestant church that has been more body-positive, lacking the aversion similar to the conservative Protestant denomination, to material/bodily, physical expressions and overall being more pro-dance (Daniels 1981, 79-80). In 1992, the company was expanded to California and named Omega West Dance Company. In California, De Sola received a Master of Arts in Theology at the Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley. Both companies are still functioning and tour today (Kirk n.d.). De Sola’s work has left lasting impacts on theology, academics, and dance studies, opening the door for liturgical dance to be seen by wider audiences and congregations.

The resurgence of liturgical dance to areas outside of churches continued in the early 2000s in the form of Christian-based dance companies and foundations. Multiple Christian companies across the United States were founded at the start of the twenty-first century,

including Ad Deum Dance Company (2000), Cantinas Art Foundation (2004), Paradosi Ballet Company (2007), Petra Ballet Company (2008), Unity Dance Troupe (2010), Ballet 5:8 (2012), Open Sky Arts Collective (2014), Ballet Gloria (2017), Magnum Opus (2017), and Zion Dance Project (2019). These organizations are comparable to most secular dance companies today as they employ dancers, create repertory, tour both nationally and internationally, and develop young future dancers. These companies have the unique ability to share their art and beliefs in a contemporary way utilizing live performance, media, and digital platforms. I believe these companies formed out of a desire from Christian dancers to express their faith free from the controversy, stigma and often rejection that has come from some Christian denominations. None of these companies are specifically attached to one denomination although their mission/artist statements, clearly express a desire to spread the gospel or the “good news” through teaching and performing. As mentioned earlier in this paper this goal has a basis in Evangelical theology, not to be confused with Evangelical Fundamentalism.

Mainline Protestants have undergone a liturgical renewal in the last fifty years that has reclaimed the arts, including dance, in worship. This is in direct opposition to the rigidity and sterile culture of fundamentalism. Liberal mainline Protestants allow believers to maintain their faith without denigrating sex and the body or giving up artistic and physical expression. In the book *Care of Soul*, David Benner states, “Efforts to separate the spiritual, psychological, and physical aspects of persons inevitably result in a trivialization of each. ... when the spiritual is separated from the physical, the result is a spirituality that lacks groundedness -an ethereal experience that has no connection to the rest of one’s life” (Benner 2004, 62-63). Modern dance has been exceptionally effective at this because of its basis in sensation, emotionality, and

spiritual connection. It is a substantiated form of physical faith that is grounded in our humanness.

Chapter 6

Rebirth (Introspection of My Own Body through Choreographic Works)

Being a Christian choreographer and artistic creator comes with great challenges in the current dance and religious environments. As I have spoken about above, there is a two-fold history that is highly nuanced and complex. Dance is often celebrated within the Christian church being utilized as an essential part of worship. Other times it is shunned and associated with sinfulness, as a result, being valued less than music, and the visual arts as an aid to worship. I am highly unsure if there will ever be a consensus about the place of dance within the church, but this does not deter me.

I see myself in the middle of two worlds and through the film I created in tangent with this thesis, titled *Rebirth*, I discovered pathways and methods these “worlds” can be brought together harmoniously. The film is depicting an experience of a bodily faith and spiritual conviction that the modern world can relate to. I consider *Rebirth* a piece of liturgy and worship that shares my testimony, personal story, and experience with Jesus. I have frequently and will continue to share my verbal testimony in the future. Although, using the language of dance to share this story has allowed me to deepen and expand my faith by merging the most important aspects of my life into one codified purpose.

The creation of this film forced me to show love and kindness to myself disputing years of body-specific negative critiques and evaluations negating the positive reviews of my dancing. The secular world of dance taught me that my body type is not correct for “high-art” concert performances and that I must change and lose weight to become a dancer worthy of being on the stage. I was constantly in fear choreographers would not cast me because of my body type. This fear was reaffirmed by various comments from choreographers, casting directors, and feedback

on lost roles. If I did get into a piece: I was worried what costume I would be handed, if it would fit, and how much skin I would have to show. This feedback made me think and feel my only place in the dance world was off stage either teaching or choreographing but not directly being seen. *Rebirth* has compelled me to confront this belief about myself and stop trying to conform to other's ideals but instead focus on pleasing myself and more importantly God.

Originally, this project was going to be a live-production with multiple dancers but with the COVID-19 pandemic this was not possible, so I transformed it into a solo dance film where I am acting as the choreographer, production manager, editor, and dancer. This forced me to edit footage of myself for hours dealing with many negative thoughts that I am not a good enough dancer, not the right size, and should only remain in the dance field as a choreographer. With the intention and meaning of this film, it was essential to remember that this work was not for me. It is about my experience with Jesus and giving my worship to him. It does not matter how I look or my insecurities because this piece of dance is for a higher purpose. Through dancing in this film and especially through the editing process, I was able to show myself forgiveness, kindness, and love in the way Jesus has shown these things.

Although the subject matter of this film allowed me to experience a joy and freedom in dance, there were also other worries and concerns that arose due to the complicated history of Christian dance. It felt necessary to be hyper aware of how my body was being seen and portrayed. The choreography, costuming, music, mood of the film, and editing were specifically chosen to stay within the bounds of "appropriate Christian art" for the non-secular viewers while remaining intriguing and accessible to a secular audience and most importantly depicting an honest representation of my experience. The costuming seen in the film was selected predominantly to support the narrative, but I cannot deny that the specific clothing pieces were

chosen because I viewed them as modest and covered my body. The color pallet for the costumes was subdued with tones of beige, blue, and black. Despite these efforts, when showing the first draft of the opening piece, *Genesis*, of *Rebirth*, a professor described the piece as sensual. I was in horror! The Christian dance film I was creating could not be viewed as sensuous but after much thought I decided to keep the piece, unchanged. This piece is dramatic, moody, and theatrical, and yes, even sensuous and that is an important aspect of life. Cutting out all sensory or even sensual elements of creative work makes extremely boring art and, in my opinion, does not represent the Bible which is filled with life experiences of every kind. I am not saying Christian/liturgical dance should have no rules or boundaries but sanitizing it for every type of possible controversy will take away onlookers' ability to connect, relate, and be affected by the work. It is essential to find a balance in Christian art that equally celebrates God and does not shame the artist or artist's body. *Rebirth* is an example of this balance from my religious and dance perspectives. My personal experience is consistent with the idea that spiritual belief regarding the body is at the heart of Christian attitudes towards dance.

Chapter 7

The Body

The literature, laws, and attitudes cited in the anti-dance section of this paper promote the belief that when specifically, “a woman dances she loses all of her modesty” (Wager 1997, 332). Keeping modesty and virtuousness (the Madonna figure) is of the highest importance for women within the mentioned denominations. This idea speaks to the Madonna/Whore complex, termed by psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud, describing that woman can only be viewed in a dichotomy: the virgin or the slut (Women 2017). Anything that risks this female purity has been historically banned including dance. Dance is viewed as the “gateway drug” to sins of the flesh. Although some of the most stringent stances against dance have been lightened, these denominations still hold the stance that dance when done in an “improper” setting is immoral and will undo the covenants to keep God’s commandments made during baptism.

These specific Christian groups are notoriously sex-phobic and have a history (as shown above) of policing sexual behavior with a focus on women. Sex, sexual concupiscence (libido), and bodily passions have traditionally been seen (among Western Christians, who embrace the Augustinian doctrine of Original Sin) to be the cause of sin (Bonaiuti 1917). The belief that Eve specifically, because she took the first bite of the forbidden fruit, was seen as being most culpable. Therefore, women (and by extension, women’s bodies) were/are seen as especially dangerous and tempting (Barrett n.d.). Historically and still seen today, dance is most often practiced by women, especially in the western world. This has created the perception that dance is a tool for female, sexual temptation and should be feared and prohibited ensuring oneself is holy and without sin.

The Puritans, Evangelical Fundamentalists, and Southern Baptists held and continue to believe that dance, especially in a celebratory and social setting, is a sensual pleasure that is to be considered immoral and an entry to other sinful activities. Often dance is put into the same category as other “worldly” activities like drunkenness, gambling, drug-use, and sexual misconduct. In some sense I can understand this since, dance is most often practiced by the public at parties, whether at balls in the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, speakeasies and dance halls in the twentieth century, or night clubs in the twenty-first century which were all known to be accompanied by these other controversial behaviors. In addition, movies focused on dance that were released in the late twentieth to early twenty-first centuries such as *Cabaret* (1972), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), *Flashdance* (1983), *Dirty Dancing* (1987), *Showgirls* (1995) *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), *Chicago* (2002), *Burlesque* (2010), and *Hustlers* (2019) depict drug use, explicit language, drunkenness, smoking, sexual promiscuity, and prostitution. This supports the idea that dance is connected to sinfulness and “worldliness” by the standards of these denominations. By following “worldliness,” it is the Christian belief that one is led away from God and from the community of the faithful thus, endangering their soul and eternal salvation.

By promoting a religious culture that aggressively separates the soul and mind from the physical body a full experience of faith and belief can never be had. In the book, *Anatomy of the Soul*, author Curt Thompson states:

As Christians, we sometimes dismiss our physical experience as inferior to the abstract, ethereal part of our consciousness where we “imagine” or “think about” spiritual matters. Yet Paul describes our bodies as the temples of the Holy Spirit, so clearly, they’re involved in our deepest spiritual experiences. If you are not paying attention to what your body (or “gut”) is telling you, it will be difficult to love God with your mind because you will be disconnected from it. (Thompson 2010, 29)

As shown by the pro-dance denominations discussed in this paper as well as my own experience, dance creates the opportunity to go beyond a bodily experience. It is an activity that also fully

engages the mind bringing together all parts of our being. Modern dance has been used in liturgical settings because of its basis in connecting one's spiritual self to the physical body. It was the first genre of dance in the United States beginning in the twentieth century to directly expand this relationship. Some of the most notable liturgical dancers were trained in modern techniques.

In my own choreography it is necessary for me to utilize the mind, body, and soul in harmony. My choreographic process begins in the mind, contemplating and envisioning the story, meaning, and visual aesthetic of the piece. Next, I move to the physical creation of the movement requiring a full use and active experience of the body, while cognizant of the abilities and strengths of the dancers. Throughout the development of creating dances, I must use the spirit and soul to embed the work with emotionality and meaning. It is the mind, body, and soul in culmination where we experience our fullest depth of humanity. The most important part of Christian theology is Jesus' execution and resurrection from the grave in a human body. Jesus, the son of God, was fully divine yet fully human. The human form was considered worthy for the Savior. I believe this means holiness and goodness can come from the physical human body.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

Dance, in relation to Christianity, has created intense opinions and emotions both in favor and opposition, where the body is at the center of this controversy. The largest defining factor in the acceptance of dance in Protestant Christianity, is if the body is considered a sinful or holy vessel. With denominations against the practice of dance, there is clear separation between the mind, body, and soul. This separation has caused many Christians to police their physical body, only allowing it limited and controlled actions. Pro-dance denominations allow the body to become one with their spiritual expression. Unlike anti-dance Protestants, the Shakers, Pentecostals, and specific African American denominations have been able to have a clear, connected experience of faith that brings together their entire being. Liturgical dance has been a meaningful and effective way of bringing together these three elements while simultaneously being a unique and full-bodied form of worship, deepening their relationship with themselves, God, and their community.

Liturgical dance is an embodiment of Christian beliefs and faith that utilizes every part of the self. It is enriched by the individual's soul and experience of life. Dance makers have had to fight and prove their worth and holiness time and time again in ways that musical and visual artists have not. Omri Elisha in *Dancing the Word: Techniques of embodied authority among Christian praise dancers in New York City* stated, "Opponents in the church condemn it as 'worldly' entertainment...Praise dancers therefore take great pains to distinguish themselves from secular artists, emphasizing that they are ministers, not 'performers'" (2018). I do not believe one art form is intrinsically more valuable than another, but dance is singular in how it continues to overcome the odds against it. Dance has received an incredible amount of resistance in

conservative, traditionalist, and mostly Anglo-American settings. I attended the International Association of Blacks in Dance 2018 conference in Los Angeles, California. Here I witnessed a concert of only Praise/Gospel dance in an overall secular setting. Viewing this performance made me question why this type of worship was not in my own religious community. I believe this experience was not unique to me. As Praise dance has been viewed by a wider population, it has allowed more Christians to question why dance is not a part of their own religious practices.

As shown by the plethora of Christian dance companies beginning in the twenty-first century, many Christian dancers have separated their artistic liturgical practices away from codified denominations to have more freedom of expression within their faith and worship. I believe these companies have found success out of a desire and need to view their faith displayed in an artistic and embodied way, reaching individuals and audiences who would not have otherwise heard their message. These independent dance companies have also been able to be more open to all body-types while maintaining a comfortable sense of modesty. Dance artists have had to be more ingenuitive in presenting their work because of the intrinsic nature of dance being innately tied to the body.

After the premiere of *Rebirth*, I held an artist talk where the audience members could ask me any questions about the film or my research. The questions I was most asked were: What was my intention with this film and my hopes for the future of art in the current Christian environment? My intention for *Rebirth* was to create a piece of art that told my story of faith in a way that was relevant and impactful for today's society in both secular and non-secular environments. It was of the utmost importance to show my humanness and imperfection because the film would have been otherwise disingenuous. I believe this is what is missing in much of current Christian artistry today. It has been forced to strip away depictions of imperfectness to

avoid any controversy, but this is a completely inaccurate portrayal of the life of a Christian or any human for that matter.

I will not always be creating specifically Christian art although my choreography and teaching will be influenced by the connection of dance and spirituality. In the future, as a Christian choreographer, I am interested in creating work that depicts the humanity of Biblical figures. This would allow myself and audiences to understand the disciples and others as real people struggling and fighting for their relationship with Jesus. This is in great contrast to the perfect saints that they are often presented as. Biblically, one can see universal struggles such as depression, anxiety, and anger represented in these figures. By taking these characters off an unrealistic pedestal, it makes genuine faith obtainable for the everyone. Beyond Biblical stories, I can see dance utilized as a tool for outreach in the form of community gatherings, dance lessons, and charitable performances – further uniting dance, church, and the community.

The door is being opened as many current Protestant Sunday services, especially non-denominational churches, are modernizing through dynamic contemporary music, theatrical lighting, design aesthetics, and focus on connecting to congregants through digital platforms. It is the time for a cultural shift in the Protestant viewpoint that incorporates dance into this revival. It is my deepest hope Christians of the future generation will be able to fully express themselves in a way that speaks to the current struggles of their time and more importantly, worship God in diverse and dynamic ways. I believe secular dance, connected to a worldly lifestyle, will continue to be frowned upon by the Christian denominations discussed in this paper. Liturgical dance has the opportunity for new life in Christianity, creating a renaissance of the early Christian faith with passion and zeal of the American Great Awakenings.

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