Taking the Gloves Off:
A Defense of Honest Confrontation in Christian Music

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TAKING THE GLOVES OFF:

A DEFENSE OF HONEST CONFRONTATION IN CHRISTIAN MUSIC

Brilliant men and women have gone before us and sagaciously defended the importance of music within the kingdom of God. When one finds a passion for creating music above any other, the obvious question arises as to what the goal of a Christian artist should be, and what makes a great artist. If we are to embark on this mysterious adventure of creating music, having been gifted with a love and skill for the task, then why not seek to make that which pleases God, who so graciously invites us to join him in creating new things and delighting in the seemingly inexhaustible array of sounds available to us? God has given art intrinsic value, which only increases when we use our gifts to emulate his character, which he reveals to us through his word in the Bible and his Word incarnate, Jesus Christ (John 1). As those who have been offered new life and salvation, should we not testify to the tangible hope we have in Jesus with our musical efforts? With humility and a willingness to learn, we look first to scripture and then to the work of these scholars to determine how best to steward the gift of musicianship among those who are lost and listening.

A problem confronts Christian artists: namely, much of today's popular music made by Christians stands knee-deep in sentimentalism, obscuring Christ's offering of hope in the face of postmodern despair. *The type of music that can most effectively bring Christians back into conversation with postmodern artists and listeners exhibits boldness, uniqueness, and the will to engage the most troubling objections to Christianity in a way that avoids neat or pithy solutions.* In one word, this music is "confrontational".

Confrontational music is that which does not shy away from difficulty and evil; it

is culturally aware and dialogical, in that its creator seeks a conversation with his or her audience. The confrontational musician listens to other artists, understands the world he or she lives in, and responds in a manner that answers questions and raises even more. Its opposite is sentimental music, which we will examine later.

This exploration will happen in four parts. First, an understanding of postmodernity and its conflict with the Christian worldview will be established. Second, an examination of the character of Jesus and how his followers can make music that aligns with the Biblical mandate to make disciples will follow. Third, we will examine the concept of sentimentality in music and the ways its use by Christians has constituted a capitulation to postmodernism's core ideologies. Finally, our attention will turn to practical ways of creating forward-thinking music that engages our fellow humans, Christian or not, in an implicit apologetic for the kingdom of God. We will look at what makes a great artist and what is meant by "confrontational art." Although musicians are the primary focus of this essay, we will soon see how little the distinction between "artist" in a general sense and "musician" matters.

20th Century Confusion

Modernism began forming in the late 17th century and is an ideology that rides upon humankind's liberation from religion and tradition and its romanticized turn towards autonomy and secularization.[1] Francis Schaeffer gives us a proper label for this striving for autonomy: "Humanism in the larger, more inclusive sense is the system whereby men and women, beginning absolutely by themselves, try rationally to build out

[1] Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 1-12.

from themselves, having only Man as their integration point, to find all knowledge, meaning, and value."[2] Craig Gay notes that this does not leave much room or need for God in the life of modern men and women, who live as "practical atheists," largely ignoring God's existence.[3] It is the seizing of control by humanity, which in turn brings about secularization and anxiety caused by the exciting but heavy burden of carrying the world upon one's own shoulders without the help of any religion or God.[4] Modernism delineates a time period of invention, freedom, and unprecedented faith in humankind.

Our understanding of postmodernism, which is itself "parasitic upon modernity," depends on our understanding of modernity.[5] Begbie rightly notes that some "see postmodernity not so much as a 'turn' but as a regression, or even an imploding of modernity; others as an intensification of the modern condition that exposes its internal incongruities."[6] Postmodernism challenges the assumption that an objective, rational truth can be known fully by humanity. It builds upon the decentralization of meaning suggested by Deconstructionist literary critics like Jacques Derrida, who does away with what he calls the "transcendental signified" in favor of linguistic "freeplay."[7] The transcendental signified is synonymous with absolute truth, God, or fixed meaning. Language's meaning is lost in our interpretation of it, and so we lose God and any other absolutes, or at least our grasp on them.

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[2] Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who is There* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 29-30.

[3] Craig Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World*, 11, 2.

[4] Ibid., 10-11

[5] Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 57.

[6] Jeremy S. Begbie, *Music, Modernity, and God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013),

[7] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences," in *Criticism: Major Statements*, ed. Charles Kaplan and William Davis Anderson (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 493-510.

In *How (Not) To Speak of God*, Peter Rollins summarizes the postmodern zeitgeist – that thinkers like Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud "persuasively uncovered the various places in which our supposedly untainted, objective, and rational understanding of the world or God was influenced by a variety of largely unconscious desires."[8] Postmodernism does not necessarily reject the existence of an objective world. Rather, it rejects the idea that the absolute truth is objectively knowable by interpretive humanity and our limited intellect.[9] This worldview largely hinges upon the idea that the God-given human intellect is insufficient, and that there is no criteria by which we may hope to affix any one coherent explanation to reality.

One of the more convincing arguments for postmodernism departing from modernism rather than amplifying its principles comes with its rejection of modernism's faith in humanity's ability to find a unified meaning and take mastery over anything one wishes. Stackhouse clearly summarizes this:

> *It is this confidence that has been lost in postmodernity.* Indeed, this confidence has been repudiated. Instead, there is the postmodern recognition that all human perception and thought is necessarily *perspectival*, that is, a matter of point of view.[10]

He then turns right around and gives merit to the amplification or completion view of postmodernity:

> Thus postmodernity deserves its alternate title of *hypermodernity*, for in this respect it is modernity against itself. The modern emphasis upon the critical role of reason and experience is now directed against every scheme of modern conceptualization that had used those very tools to construct this or that *grand récit*.[11]

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[8] Peter Rollins, *How (Not) To Speak of God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010), 9.
[9] Ibid., 11.
[10] John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "Postmodernity and Postmodernism(s)," in *Humble Apologetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 26.
[11] Ibid., 27.

The irony is that modernity becomes its own failure and realization at the same time. In trying to do away with any and all "metanarratives" including Christianity, postmodern thinkers terminate their own worldview in the process. This illustrates two crucial tenets of postmodernism that are incompatible with the Christian worldview: nihilism and relativism.

Nihilism, the "even more radical" relative of "radical skepticism," rejects the notion that "the truth" is "out there" and can be found by anyone.[12] The concept of "truth" is simply a power play by individuals or groups.[13] The Nihilist dismisses any attempt to explain reality in terms of absolutes by interpretive humans. Since, according to the postmodernist, nothing can be known for certain, any given code of ethics is chosen by personal preference or cultural conditioning. This is the idea behind pluralism and relativism; because nobody can know what truth "for everybody" is, what's true for one person, group, or culture may be false to another. One's worldview becomes arbitrary, based on an interpretation of the world that relies on personal experience instead of the traditional idea of antithesis upon which science in the old sense it rooted.

The spiral into despair from here becomes inevitable, as evidenced in postmodern art. Modernism was an era of experimentation in every artistic discipline. Musically, strict forms began to obfuscate, while tonality and traditional harmony was deconstructed and reassembled in a vast number of variations. The world became more globalized and pluralistic, and suddenly neat answers were difficult to find. The aftermath of two world wars left people shaken and uncertain; philosophers fumbled for a rational and unified explanation for reality but, unable to find one on the basis of rationalism, they departed

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[12] Stackhouse, "Postmodernity and Postmodernism(s)," 34.
[13] Ibid.

from the classical methodology of antithesis and shifted the concept of truth, giving birth to "modern man."[14] The ensuing hopelessness is what characterizes and unifies postmodern art across the board; authors, musicians, painters, filmmakers, and playwrights produced works of a complex and often nonsensical nature, and one finds a palpable mix of humor, absurdity, and deep sadness all interwoven as artists try to make sense of things. Fragmentation, plurality, semantic mysticism, and loss of meaning reign supreme. The meaning is that meaning is lost; this is the "end of ideology," and the best we can do is resort to some extremely subjective value systems.[15] At worst, the characters of postmodern literature and music laugh maniacally, drink more rum and go gurgling beneath the waves with their entire ship and crew.

Postmodernism challenges Christianity on the premise that a personal, knowable God spoke to his creation, and that humans in particular are capable of knowing God specifically because he has revealed himself to us. This divine revelation happens in several ways, but most important is the instance in which God directly communicates in our language through scripture. Without a way to articulate this, Christians would be as lost and adrift as the rest of the world.

This gives us some idea of our place in history, which is too new to name and still riding the cultural currents of modernism and its amplification, realization, destruction, etc., in postmodernism. Modernity presents a hurdle that has been largely ignored or shrugged at by the Christian musician. As musicians living in the aftermath of postmodern thought, it's important to recognize that a significant number of one's

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[14] Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who is There* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 29-31.

[15] Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 9.

listeners do not even approach music with the assumption that truth can be located, paraphrased, or made understandable. We should cultivate an awareness of what our art conveys to a generation that places so much value on personal interpretation, at the expense of authorial intent. We need take upon ourselves the difficult task of learning how to communicate effectively with the lost sheep that God so desperately loves and chases after, if we are to share his heart for our fellow men and women.

This Wasn't in the Job Description

This brings to mind a worthy question: why even try? Music is fun to play and fun to listen to – does one need another reason to pursue it? As Schaeffer argues in *Art and the Bible*, art has intrinsic value to God. The temple that God instructs David to build in a certain way contains precious stones that served "no pragmatic reason."[16] The creation of something more self-aware, then, is not a desperate bid for Christian musicians to stay relevant in the eyes of God; it is, in part, a reaction against the gross compartmentalization of our spiritual lives from our professional and day-to-day pursuits. First and foremost, the pursuit of confrontational music-making here comes from a desire to integrate our entire selves and lifestyles under the lordship of Christ. We will explore the ways in which Jesus' commands and examples to us demand a confrontation with postmodern thought.

When we look at Jesus in the gospel accounts, we find multiple examples of him confronting and undermining people's erroneous presuppositions. Some of these are accomplished artistically, through the use of parables and story-telling. This, coupled with his devotion to getting his hands dirty by spending his time with sinners, provides a

[16] Francis Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 26.

fantastic model for the Christian artist looking to make a difference in people's lives for the kingdom of God.

To find the most obvious examples of this, one need only skim the gospels for Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees, who offer a convenient parallel to modern humanity's overblown trust in itself. The Pharisees were the religious elite, characterized by their careful (and hypocritical) adherence to the law as a means of attaining righteousness. Though it may seem laughably obvious, the erroneous assumption that a fallen human could attain righteousness through his or her own effort did not sit well with Jesus. When a woman kneels at Jesus' feet in the Pharisee's home and washes his feet with her tears and hair – an uncomfortable act in any culture – in Luke 7, the Pharisee, named Simon, remarks, "If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner."[17] Simon assumes Jesus' ignorance, as though he had caught the Son of God red-handed as an impostor for allowing a broken and disheveled woman to humble herself and, in anointing Jesus with the perfume, offer her worship and implicit plea for forgiveness. Jesus responds in turn with the parable of two debtors – one who owed their lender five hundred denarii, and one who owed fifty.[18] One of the less cryptic parables Jesus offers, it teaches us the obvious lesson that if both debtors are forgiven, the one owing the greater amount will love the moneylender all the more for it.[19]

Important to our purpose here, however, is the way in which Jesus does not shy away from the obvious implications and leave the subject alone. Although Simon

[17] Luke 7:36-39.
[18] Luke 7:40-41.
[19] Luke 7:43.

probably understood where Jesus was going with the parable, Jesus drives his point home: "I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume."[20] One would be hard-pressed to find more cringe-worthy dinner conversation, and yet Jesus, who loves people better than we know how, faces Simon's erroneous worldview directly in what can best be described as an artistic confrontation.

We see this sort of startling confrontation time and time again, when Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the night and understands none of what he is saying,[21] when Jesus flips the temple tables upon his arrival to Jerusalem, parrying again the skeptical objections of the Pharisees to his healing works,[22] and in his infamous declaration in Matthew 10:

> Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and a man's enemies will be the members of his household.[23]

There seems to be no vacancy for a timid, feel-good, relativistic way of life if we are to emulate Jesus and his love for sinners. Jesus frequently took it upon himself to verbally communicate the truth, and his whole ethos of humility and self-sacrificial love challenges the assumptions of rational humanism – namely, that humanity can attain utopia and mastery on its own. Nearly everything about Jesus' ministry on earth represents a rebellious departure from the militant conqueror-king the Jews were

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[20] Luke 7:44.
[21] John 3:1-21.
[22] Matthew 21:12-17.
[23] Matthew 10:34-36.

expecting – he rides into Jerusalem not on a war-horse, but a donkey.[24] He overthrows death itself and all that Rome had come to represent to the Jews, not with an army, but by losing his life miserably and willingly. If the Christian musician has any hope of conversing with the secularized, bleak landscape of modern art and music, he or she must emulate Jesus' boldness, care for the lowest of the low, and concern with making disciple by sharing the gospel, whether this is inferred or stated explicitly in music.

Whether one enjoys it or not, every Christian is called to be a Christian apologist to a certain degree. Many who take interest in apologetics for the first time do so because of the realization that obedience to the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) commonly requires a robust defense of the Christian worldview. If Christians ought to "make disciples of all the nations," and people with vastly different worldviews populate all the nations, then Christians need to prepare for a multitude of deeply intellectual questions.[25] Where paradigmatic dissonance occurs, fruitful philosophical dialogue can erupt without warning. This provides fantastic opportunities for Christians to defend the truth of the gospel and respectfully lead others to a relationship with Christ.

Several key passages in the Bible directly affirm the usefulness and necessity of apologetics. Peter exhorts his readers in 1 Peter 3:15 to have an answer prepared for anyone who requests "an account for the hope that is in [them]." Clearly he recognized this need for a "rational defense of the gospel."[26] To exude the hope of Jesus without explanation is insufficient; believers must serve as witnesses to this very real and specific truth, which the lost may already recognize as a mysterious and powerful alternative to

[24] Matthew 21:1-10.
[25] Matt. 28:19, NASB.
[26] Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 24.

their own lives. In Colossians 4:5-6, Paul acknowledged the importance of answering others' questions about faith.[27] He instructs the believers in Colossae to conduct themselves "with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity," seasoning their speech with "grace" and "salt", so they "will know how [they] should respond to each person."[28] This shows a concern for not only the exercise of apologetics, but for the intentional manner in which Christians should engage their audience.

In addition to these explicit Biblical commands supporting apologetics, there are a number of instances in scripture in which such commands are implicitly demonstrated. Whenever Paul confronts false teachings such as Gnosticism or Jewish legalism in his epistles, he uses rational arguments to defend the truth about Jesus or some aspect of following him. Even Jesus himself contends for the truth boldly with various religious leaders in the gospels, and his example as an apologist sets the tone for his disciples' interactions with the world.[29]

This task of defending the Christian faith necessarily entails a confrontation with postmodernism, because our daily lives bring us into contact with postmodern people: men and women whom God has seen fit to offer salvation and the hope of redemption in Christ. Naturally, a significant portion of people born in the postmodern era will have adopted and learned how to intellectually defend any number of presuppositions available in the postmodern marketplace of ideas – including, but not limited to all of the major world religions, atheisms, and philosophies. Our focus here is with the quintessential ideologies of postmodernism as previously discussed: nihilism, relativism, and

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[27] Mark Mittelberg, *The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2010), Kindle Electronic Edition: Introduction, Location 134.

[28] Colossians 4:5-6, NASB.

[29] Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 33.

rationalistic humanism. We need not shrink from any challenge to the truth-claims of Christianity, and Schaeffer once again proves illuminating: "once we understand that Christianity is true to what is there, true to the ultimate environment – the infinite, personal God who is really there – then our minds are freed. We can pursue any question and can be sure that we will not fall off the end of the earth.[30] Many Christians fear, perhaps, that doubting like the postmodernist will lead them away from their faith. If this is so, then one's faith was just as ungrounded in reason as anyone else's, and one should abandon Christianity altogether – leaving the musician with no higher purpose in creating music than that of the entertainer, making a bunch of noise until the world's lights go out once and for all.

This has significant implications for the Christ-following musician. Christianity provides an answer to postmodernism in that it does not merely serve as another metanarrative; it is the one explanation for reality that holds true – that is, the claims of the Christian worldview correspond to reality. Schaeffer explains this with beautiful simplicity:

> In Christianity the value of faith depends upon the object towards which the faith is directed. So it looks outward to the God who is there, and to the Christ who in history died upon the cross once and for all, finished the work of atonement, and on the third day rose again in space and in time. *This makes Christian faith open to discussion and verification* [emphasis added].[31]

Schaeffer also provides us with the upshot of this in his concept of "finding the point of tension."[32] The idea is that "no non-Christian can be consistent to the logic of his presuppositions," because he must live in reality, and no matter what somebody believes,

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[30] Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible,* 17.
[31] Schaeffer, *The God Who is There*, 84-5.
[32] Ibid., 147-154.

they cannot "change the reality of what is."[33] Since Christianity is true, "to deny this, on the basis of another system, is to stray from the real world."[34] When we face our fellow humans, we "are facing a man [or woman] in tension; and it is this tension which works on [our] behalf as [we] speak to him."[35] Our role is to find the place where this inconsistency exists and push people towards the logical implications of their position.[36]

The intention in doing so is rooted in love and a desire to offer our brothers and sisters in humanity the freedom of knowing the truth about reality. "If I begin to enjoy it as a kind of intellectual exercise," he cautions, "then I am cruel and can expect no real spiritual results. As I push the man off his false balance, he must be able to feel that I care for him. Otherwise I will only end up destroying him, and the cruelty and ugliness of it all will destroy me as well."[37] Pushing people towards the logic of their presuppositions causes them pain, and so we must be careful not to push any farther than is necessary.[38] Again, the goal is to lead people to recognize their great need. Schaeffer names this concept "taking the roof off" someone's head; every person has built a roof over his or her head at this point of tension "as protection against the blows of the real world."[39] The role of the Christian apologist and the Christian musician is the same: to remove this roof in as loving a manner as possible, exposing our listeners to the truth of the external world and let it "beat upon" them.[40]

The creation of art is by nature revealing of one's worldview; art serves as a

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[33] Ibid., 150.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid., 151.
[36] Ibid., 154, 156.
[37] Ibid., 156.
[38] Ibid., 157.
[39] Ibid., 158.
[40] Ibid., 159.

powerful vehicle for communicating truth-claims and making them existentially significant. As a result, every artist is already an apologist. In order to create music of this caliber and function, Christian musicians must understand themselves as whole artists and not just instrumentalists, vocalists, or composers. The difference may at first appear subtle; the musician *á la carte* concerns oneself with the enjoyment of music through the performance and consumption of it, whereas the musician who sees oneself as a total artist strives to bring something new to the conversation, offering his or her unique vision to a composition, arrangement, or performance. This simple offering can be personal style, especially if one is playing in a cover band or playing jazz standards at a wedding – often the goal at these gigs is to replicate, but replicating well is a form of self-sacrificing stewardship, and this too is valuable in the kingdom of God. Why should the musician stop there? Sure, one may find contentment in the simplicity of making music, but the prospect of changing history through the creation of something new is too exciting to pass up.

Based on the classical understanding of antithesis, art is at its most basic level a search for truth made relatable. This claim requires substantiation, for the way people consume art today revolves around enjoyment and entertainment. Indeed, this can be traced directly to nihilism, which claims there is no truth worth making experientially relatable – only one's impressions, power plays, and preferences are valid. Art in the postmodernist's mind cannot serve as a vehicle for the communication of truth. Ironically, postmodern art does serve as a vehicle for the communication of truth, whether intended or not – namely, that the truth is difficult to discern for interpretive beings and our world is more fragmented and complicated than artists have previously let

on. Where the nihilist musician might disagree that his or her music makes existentially significant some absolute, unified explanation for reality, the music speaks for itself: one feels humanity bowing to chance and chaos when listening to John Cage or a present-day southern hardcore band, *Every Time I Die*. Nihilism has stepped into music in such a way that artists today create disjointed, "happy accidents" to portray emotions of anger, hurt, and despair in a postmodern world. A crucial difference between postmodernity's concept of musical expression and that of the Christian is that the Christian knows the hope of finding a rational worldview hypothesis, and the Christian's music is in itself an expression of his or her worldview by the act of making some aspect of truth not just cognitively understood but experientially relevant. This paradigm for understanding art coupled with the Biblical mandate to make disciples offers a worthy goal to Christian musicians: musicians should seek first to make what is true about reality known and felt in their music.

Sentimentalism and Sensibility

Up until this point we have operated from a relatively high philosophical level, keeping a bird's eye view over our present situation and the greatest needs of our generation, which bid the body of Christ take action. Instead of coming up with new and creative ways to constructively engage 20th and 21st century listeners, many musicians who work in the "genre" of Christian music have created safe, in-house music that never ventures far from camp. We will expound upon Sentimentality, the major theme tying this debacle together, and look for examples of this at work.

Jeremy Begbie provides a clear explanation of sentimentality and the problems it proposes for Christian musicians in his essay, "Beauty, Sentimentality, and the Arts."

Careful to separate sentimentality from the concept of beauty, he suggests three major traits that characterize it: "the sentimentalist (1) misrepresents reality through evading or trivializing evil, (2) is emotionally self indulgent, and (3) avoids costly appropriate action."[41] He calls sentimentalism an "emotional pathology," in which human nature is looked at "through rose-tinted spectacles."[42] The sentimentalist is emotionally self indulgent in that he or she "appears to be moved by something beyond themselves but is to a large extent, perhaps primarily, concerned with the satisfaction gained in exercising [his or her] emotion."[43] Finally, the sentimentalist divorces one's emotion from his or her "intellect, judgment, and thus from reasonable action," because "her emotional engagement is not with reality X but a falsification of reality X."[44] In other words, the consumer of sentimental art is not spurred to sacrificial action or even genuinely moved in the way that a compassionate human being should be. Instead of dealing with the problems of the world, the sentimentalist engages in a form of emotional escapism, nourishing a synthetic empathy for other individuals or groups; he or she can hold the world at arm's length and still feel like a good person introspectively.

Begbie also skillfully explains why sentimentalism is such a terrible match for the climate brought about by modernism:

> I recall Professor Nicholas Lash once remarking that it was hardly an exaggeration to say that Western modernism (as a worldview) could be defined by the twin belief that humanity's deepest problems not only *can* be solved but eventually *will* be. But faced with the horrors and terrors of history – the vast quantities of pain, suffering, and loss in the story of humankind (not least in modernity), and the fear of a future that cannot be wholly predicted and controlled

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[41] Jeremy S. Begbie, "Beauty, Sentimentality, and the Arts" in *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts*, ed. Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands, and Roger Lundin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 47.

[42] Ibid., 47-50.

[43] Ibid., 47-51.

[44] Ibid., 52-3.

> – this [sentimentalist] misrepresentation of reality proves singularly ill-equipped. Intractable and starkly irrational evil . . . exposes the bankruptcy of all schemes that trade on the supposed immanent purity of human nature.[45]

If the whole of postmodern art is characterized by the despair brought about from modernism's failed trust in humanity, what kind of response can sentimental art offer? It performs the same function as an anesthetic, giving consumers the feelings they want to feel but doing nothing to answer the deeper, nagging questions of human existence and purpose.[46] One may as well wave a white flag as the nihilist suggestion that the answers we so desperately seek are nowhere to be found.

Not too long into the discussion on sentimentalism, another glaring problem grows apparent: during his time on earth, Jesus was the very antithesis of a sentimentalist. As contemporary artist Makoto Fujimara discerns, one might even call Jesus a realist; he warned that "these things must happen" in Matthew 24:6[47] in reference to the evils to come.[48] He also gives fair warning to his disciples in Matthew 10: "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves: so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves . . . You will be hated by all because of my name."[49] In addition to his confrontational nature discussed earlier, he did not shy away from the problem of evil and death, but willingly died arguably the most painful and humiliating death attainable in order to overcome the most glaring problem in all of human history. He sets the very model for "taking appropriate costly action."[50] Sentimental art fails to follow the Biblical mandate to bear

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[45] Ibid., 48.
[46] Ibid., 54.
[47] Matthew 24:6, CEB.
[48] Makoto Fujimara, *A Bugle Call for Artists* (Makoto Fujimara, Dec. 17, 2012), http://www.makotofujimura.com/writings/a-bugle-call-for-artists/
[49] Matthew 10:16, 22, NASB.
[50] Begbie, "Beauty, Sentimentality, and the Arts," 47.

witness to the Incarnation and call opposing worldviews into question.

Begbie also briefly addresses worship music, conceding the value of its simplicity in the last thirty years or so as devotional music written to the risen Jesus, but questioning at the same time whether "this kind of song exhausts the possibilities of 'singing to Jesus' or if these sentiments are isolated from other dimensions of relating to God."[51] He cites the less-than-pleasant aspects of devotion to Jesus as conspicuously missing from worship services: being changed "into his likeness by the Spirit," "discovering the embrace of Jesus' father, Abba," whom we are called to obey as he loves us, and following the Holy Spirit's nudging to action.[52] The real value of his assessment as it relates to modernity comes with his description of common experience in church:

> Most of us have attended services where we were invited to experience through music what Colin Gunton used to call "compulsory joy" – perhaps authentic for some on this or that occasion, but often disturbingly out of touch with what some have to endure in a world so obviously far from its final joy, he very world Christ came to redeem. Most have known services where music has been deployed as a narcotic, blurring the jagged memories of the day-by-day world, rather than as a means by which the Holy Spirit can engage those memories and begin to heal them.[53]

If men and women living in postmodern society face the dire hopelessness and meaninglessness of nihilism and relativism in their foundational beliefs every day, how does it naturally follow that an authentic interaction with the living God would revolve around happy conversation only? One only needs to peruse the many Psalms for examples of brutally honest conversation with God, not least in Psalm 88, which ends,

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[51] Ibid., 56.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid., 57.

"My only friend is darkness."[54]

The gravest misuse of sentimentality in corporate worship music is not in its lyrical content so much, which is often Biblically based although at times painfully repetitive, but in the way the music is used. Take, for example, the sixth most popular worship song in the United States reported during the last 6 months to the CCLI: "One Thing Remains (Your Love Never Fails)," written by Brian Johnson, Christa Black Gifford, and Jeremy Riddle, and performed by *Jesus Culture*.[55] The song's chorus is a simple repetition of the words, "Your love never fails / It never gives up / Never runs out on me / Your love."[56] The first three lines are repeated at least three times before moving on to "Your love." While it is true that God already knows his love is sufficient for us, singing this chorus represents an acknowledgement and praise of God's faithfulness as seen in Psalm 136: "Praise the Lord! He is good. / God's love never fails. / Praise the God of all gods. / God's love never fails. / Praise the Lord of lords. / God's love never fails."[57] In this way, there is nothing wrong with singing such a thing to God, as long as God remains the "Subject and Object, the Infinite Center, of our worship."[58] However, one wonders, amid the monotonous topography of every song in many worship sets, whether the congregation sings this for God's benefit or for their own emotional indulgence in comfort. There is strong potential for the multitude of true declarations about the goodness of God to become twisted in our favor, to such a degree we now

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[54] Psalm 88:18, Common English Bible.

[55] "CCLI's Top 25 Songs," *Christian Copyright Licensing International*. 2015. Accessed December 7, 2015. http://us.ccli.com/worship-resources/top-songs/

[56] "One Thing Remains," *Song Select, by CCLI*. 2015. Accessed December 7, 2015. https://us.songselect.com/songs/5508444/one-thing-remains-your-love-never-fails

[57] Psalm 136:1-3, Contemporary English Version.

[58] Marva Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 8.

ignore the burden of obeying his commands and seeking to build his kingdom on Earth.

While the primary focus of this essay is music in general and not corporate worship music, much can be gleaned about the state of the Christian's approach to art by looking at his or her contributions to the most direct form of musical witness and worship possible. In a sense, sentimentality poisons the well: the same pitfalls affecting Christian musicians in their interactions with God will no doubt infect their music elsewhere, as the Christian musicians are commissioned and sent out by the very same God that they struggle to meet authentically in church. Marva Dawn prescribes an antidote sympathetic to our cause:

> The Truth that the Church has to offer to people caught in the postmodern condition must be shared in all its wholeness . . . Furthermore, our worship must contain nothing but the truth. If we use shallow (I did not say *simple*) worship materials, they will not reveal the truth about God. Instead, these shallow materials will shape shallow theology and form us superficially. Songs with cheap or sentimental lyrics or banal music belie the coherence and integrity of God . . . Only by God's grace and in the context of prayer and the whole Christian community can worship leaders prepare services that present as much truth as possible.[59]

Shortly before this, Dawn points out two "wrong turns in the face of modernity and the postmodern condition" that illustrate the effects of sentimentalism in corporate worship.[60] (1) "With the proliferation of amusements and diversions in the U.S.-driven world monoculture, some worship leaders sacrifice content for entertaining form and confuse worship with evangelism and evangelism with marketing."[61] (2) "In response to the increasing clamor for choice, some congregations foster consumerism according to 'felt needs' instead of embracing what is truly needful . . . Another result is that, in our

[59] Ibid., 67-68.
[60] Ibid., 63.
[61] Ibid., 64.

therapeutic society, everyone thinks he or she 'needs' emotional coddling, whereas God has repeatedly taught us that Christians can *know* better."[62] The musician who wishes to engage postmodern people in a conversation must steer clear from these two temptations, for the radical skepticism with which unbelievers approach the church demands all the meaningful content and tenacity in the face of hardships that one can muster.

This is not to say that our primary goal as Christian musicians is to cultivate darkness in our art for darkness' sake, nor are we championing the macabre. As redeemed sons and daughters of the living God, we inherit incomparable joy alongside the suffering that comes from loving sinful humanity and dying to ourselves daily. It would not do to combat sentimentalism in music with a disproportionate heavy-handedness that creates an opposite problem. The artist seeks to understand reality and interact with it as experiential beings in conversation with one another. Music is a means of expression that transcends the limitations of spoken language and brings new perspective. Whereas postmodern thought attempts to give equal value to every artist's perspective as it pertains to the truth about reality, Christian art attributes the value of each artist to his or her role as God's image-bearer, while at the same time conceding nothing which is false about creation.

Where the Bow Meets the String

We have so far focused on the problem at large that has worked its way into much of Christian music. Now, God willing, we can dream of formulating a solution. The suggestion at hand is not revolutionary, radical, or by any means new; it becomes apparent upon perusing the music library of history that one can only hope to write something half as good as those musical greats, affiliated with the body of Christ or not.

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[62] Ibid., 65.

The intent is instead to employ a broad change in focus, from music that shies away from the world's problems to music that seeks after life's toughest questions and wrestles them to the ground.

Having discussed the need for apologetics, music's ability to convey truth, and the failure of sentimentalism as a valid response to postmodern confusion, we can now investigate the practice of creating confrontational music. Assessing how to accomplish this level of discourse as Christian musicians requires more than sorting out a specific style of literary or musical involvement, because the truly great composer does not segregate lyrics and instrumentals into watertight compartments. He or she uses both to effectively translate the whole idea that he or she has in mind. If a musical work calls for lyrics, these can aid in the ideas being conveyed or, just as easily, the words can detract from that which the music has already delivered to its audience. An artist should begin with an idea he or she wishes to communicate and use the media of verbal language and musical vocabulary as tools together.

Lyrical content has the advantage of communicating to the listener explicitly, but this does not bypass the issue of authorial intent. The various degrees of separation between writer and reader make it difficult for listeners approaching music with their own presuppositions to accurately glean the original point the artist had in mind. Aaron Copland writes that "it is difficult enough to say precisely what it is that piece of music means, to say it definitely, to say it finally so that everyone is satisfied with your explanation. But that should not lead one to the other extreme of denying to music the right to be 'expressive.'"[63] Works of art will always be reimagined and interpreted

[63] Aaron Copland, *What to Listen For In Music* (New York: Mentor, 1988), 12.

differently, but not to such a degree that they lost their original meaning, as the deconstructionists would have us think.

We should not take for granted even absolute music's potential as a vehicle for expressing truth about our existence, when it is used resourcefully. Imagine taking a graffiti artist's use of "installment," a kind of appropriation that changes something's meaning based on its environment, and applying this to instrumental music. The Nazis employed this technique for evil, welcoming prisoners to Auschwitz with a band playing Shubert marches to give the Jews the impression they were arriving at "some kind of pleasure camp."[64] Perhaps one could utilize the power of association to make some insubordinate musical protest against relativism utilizing the most innocent Beethoven sonata. This brings with it a slew of ethical considerations, but Christian musicians should consider strategic possibilities to make an artistic statement. The musician who thinks like a whole artist is free to revise or mix and match any number of mediums to suit his or her vision, hopefully guided by the lordship and heart of Jesus.

This is where we need to put our heads together as members of the body of Christ. It would be a worthwhile discussion to examine all the different ways of making music that could witness to the Incarnation; for now we will analyze only two pieces to see how they qualify as "confrontational music". We will see how these artists both avoid sentimentalism, as well as how they effectively begin a redemptive conversation with postmodern humanity.

A rapper in the underground music scene named Felipe Andres Coronel, known as *Immortal Technique*. His song, "Dance With the Devil" constitutes one of the most

[64] Begbie, *Beauty, Sentimentality, and the Arts*, 54.

disturbing pieces of music one could encounter lyrically speaking, with its graphic realism. Coronel makes use of artistic appropriation – the act of taking somebody else's work and reinstalling it elsewhere for one's own purposes. He takes the instrumental from the 1970's film "Love Story," a romanticized flourish of sweeping strings and piano, and pairs it with an electronic backbeat.[65] *Immortal Technique* tells the story of a young man, named William (or Billy), trying his best to climb the ranks of his ghetto to wealth and notoriety as a gangster. Billy works his way from selling marijuana to crack and cocaine. Eventually, to prove his mettle to the "real" thugs and earn their respect, he agrees to rape and murder somebody. One night with his new posse, he captures a woman walking alone, covers her head with her shirt, and drags her up to a rooftop, where Billy proceeds to rape her violently. When his new cohorts hand him a gun to finish her off, he pulls back her shirt to find that the woman is his own mother. [66]

What song better epitomizes the despair of postmodern life?. Immortal Technique closes with haunting words illustrating man's failed struggle for significance:

> And he remembered how his mom used to come home late
> Working hard for nothing, cause now what was he worth?
> He turned away from the woman that had once given him birth
> And crying out to the sky cause he was lonely and scared
> But only the devil responded, cause God wasn't there
> And right then, he knew what it was to be empty and cold
> And so he jumped off the roof and died with no soul
> They say death takes you to a better place, but I doubt it
> After that, they killed his mother and never spoke about it
> And listen, cause the story that I'm telling is true
> [Because] I was there with Billy Jacobs and I raped his mom, too
> And now the devil follows me everywhere that I go
> In fact, I'm sure he's standing among one of you at my shows
> And every street cypher listening to little thugs flow

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[65] Felip Andres Coronel, "Dance With The Devil / Untitled Hidden Track," on *Revolutionary Vol. 1*, Immortal Technique, Viper Records, MP3, 2001.

[66] "Dance With The Devil Lyrics." *Genuis Media Group*. 2015. Accessed December 7, 2015. http://genius.com/Immortal-technique-dance-with-the-devil-lyrics

> He could be standing right next to you, and you wouldn't know
> The devil grows inside the hearts of the selfish and wicked
> White, brown, yellow and black; color is not restricted
> You have a self destructive destiny when you're inflicted
> And you'll be one of God's children that fell from the top
> There's no diversity because we're burning in the melting pot
> So when the devil wants to dance with you, you better say never
> Because a dance with the devil might last you forever[67]

Here we have a picturesque modern young man, looking for autonomy and mastery over his circumstances and finding nothing in the end but tragedy and despair, making the crux of this song decidedly nihilistic. Billy's attempt to start from himself as the center from which he derives a unified explanation for reality ends in tragedy, and the lyrics dismiss his death as meaningless because there is no God.

"Dance With the Devil" is written in such a way that the compassionate listener will be jolted into a desire to take action. *Immortal Technique* laughs in the face of sentimentality; his lyricism contains graphic and realistic depictions of evil from a brutally stoic perspective that eschews emotional self-indulgence. Musically, the track he raps over produces an eerie, haunting effect. The acoustic piano sound invokes an almost Romantic or Classical dignity with its trills and flourishes, producing a jarring juxtaposition with Coronel's aggressive, unapologetically brash and percussive vocals.[68] The music is indispensible; it creates the whole melancholic atmosphere in which the listener *feels* the weight of Billy's dreams, decisions, and terrible fate. This unity of lyricism and sonic creativity is what enables *Immortal Technique* to effectively communicate his implicit claims upon the nature of reality and their existential significance to his audience.

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[67] Ibid.

[68] Felip Andres Coronel, "Dance With The Devil / Untitled Hidden Track," on *Revolutionary Vol. 1,* Immortal Technique, Viper Records, MP3, 2001.

To confront darkness, we have to understand what people are dealing with on a normal basis. In this song we find nothing but horror and hopelessness, and the grief that accompanies a life of terrible decisions in pursuit of wealth and power. From "Dance With the Devil", one learns much about what it might feel like to grow up in "the hood", with the pressure to assert one's dominance and make something out of oneself – indeed, this seems the only option left to a modern youth who understands he must generate his own sense of significance.

Many will ask what business a Christian has listening to such morally depraved, crude language. For some, especially children in their formative years, the consumption of art this dark can be detrimental. However, music that penetrates the heart of its listener and changes the way we think is worth encountering. It challenges us to see the world from a perspective new to us and to adjust our lifestyles accordingly. The vulgarity is not what accomplishes this – in this instance, it will be a road block that some refuse to traverse. But to those Christians who are willing to get their hands dirty, a song like this presents an invaluable learning opportunity. Just as a good apologist cannot hope to communicate effectively and care for another without first listening and understanding where somebody is coming from, musicians cannot hope to stay relevant or earn anybody's ear without understanding the rich tradition of music made by people of all beliefs. Christian musicians need to take courage and boldly work towards a presentation of the gospel that is as startlingly raw as it is life-giving.

Dustin Kensrue and his rock band, *Thrice*, have never feared artistic experimentation, delving into a set of concept EP's titled *The Alchemy Index* and putting poetic spins on Biblical themes with genres ranging from electronic to country and

hardcore metal. Their title track from the album "Beggars" takes the listener down an angst-ridden slow crescendo, adding layers of various guitar tones while Dustin addresses modern humanity:[69]

> All you champions of science and rulers of men –
> Can you summon the sun from its sleep?
> Does the earth seek your counsel on how fast to spin?
> Can you shut up the gates of the deep?
> Don't you know that all things hang as if by a string over darkness,
> poised to fall?
> If there's one thing I know in this life, we are beggars all.[70]

Kensrue takes Schaeffer's concept of finding the point of tension, whether consciously so or not, and exposes humankind's precarious position without the aid of God. He takes the unfounded optimism of rationalistic humanism and traces its dependence on human-centric philosophy to postmodernity's sense of inevitable helplessness in the face of death. He exposes modern humanity's weakness so that people can begin to see their need for a hope beyond themselves. Having sung two more stanzas similar to the former in a soulful but ominous tone he ends with one last plea:

> Can you hear what's been said?
> Can you see now that everything's grace after all?
> If there's one thing I know in this life
> We are beggars all[71]

Just as Kensrue finishes singing the last line, the song rips into an unsettling guitar solo that characterizes the unsettling realization that we all have very little control over our own lives.[72] The instrumental dynamic takes a giant leap into an uncomfortably loud, pounding outro that speaks in emphatic agreement with Kensrue's Biblically inspired

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[69] Dustin Kensrue, *Beggars*, Thrice, Vagrant Records, MP3, 2009

[70] "Beggars Lyrics." *Genuis Media Group*. 2015. Accessed December 8, 2015. http://genius.com/Thrice-beggars-lyrics/

[71] Ibid.

[72] Dustin Kensrue, *Beggars*, Thrice, Vagrant Records, MP3, 2009.

lyrics reminiscent of God's answer to Job in the book's theophany at the end: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?"[73] Kensrue effectively clears the way for his listeners to comprehend their need and, in doing so, seriously consider the concrete hope of eternal life in Jesus.

The Christian musician needn't fear the darkness, because they carry in the Holy Spirit a light that can never be extinguished and which offers hope in the midst of humanity's confusion. Even if he or she fails, Schaeffer offers an appropriate closing thought, that "the man who really loves God, who is working under the lordship of Christ, could write his poetry, compose his music, construct his musical instruments, fashion his statues, paint his pictures, even if no man ever saw them. He knows God looks upon them."[74] The Christian musician proceeds, then, with patience, love, and tenacity, making the most of this great gift from God, this privilege of creation, conversation, and redemption.

[73] Job 38:4, Common English Bible.
[74] Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 37-8.

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