

A Limitless God:
How God Moves through Secular Music

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Many Christian organizations, including churches, radio stations, and other associations, would encourage musicians who are Christian to use their gifts for God. Too often this is presented as being accomplished exclusively through Christian worship music. Indeed, often times artists who participate in secular music are assumed to have “fallen away” from their faith or turned their back on God. Seemingly, it is frowned upon to use the talents God has bestowed for purposes other than direct service to Him within the church.

This paper will argue for the ability to serve God in the realms of Christian or secular music. Secular music is still in the service of God, and it can be an even more powerful service to Him than is Christian music. God participates in both Christian and secular music, and so can the musician who is a Christian.

The goal of a Christian musician should perhaps be to create a breadcrumb ministry, so that as lost people find an artist's music, they stumble onto the source of inspiration, and find the faith of the artist. In the following paragraphs, the argument for God's presence in secular music will be presented.

This subject first came to be of interest to me when I was twenty years old. I was working as a breakfast chef in a hotel. After I had prepared most of the breakfast bar, if no guests were up early, I would sing in the kitchen as I cleaned. One day, a good many drunk people stumbled in from the previous night and heard me and loudly demanded I sing for them. Figuring they would not remember much anyway, I did so, and this led to the hotel management suggesting I wear a badge that said “ask me if you would like a serenade.” That is how I started singing to guests, occasionally bringing along my ukulele. Then one day I served a couple their blueberry

pancakes, and both of them were staring downward when the gentleman caught sight of my badge. He asked me for a serenade, and I sang a little ditty from the 1930s called “Good Morning Glory,” written by Mack Gordon and Harry Revel. A few minutes later, the lady showed up at the kitchen door asking for me. Tears were streaming down her face as she explained that their son had been missing for two days, and that they had all but given up hope when her husband had asked for the song. She went on to say that she could not explain why, but the song had somehow awakened them, and reignited their hope of finding him, and that everything could still be okay. She told me that her husband was also crying in the room from relief, and thanked me again heartily. I was so moved by this experience, and it got me thinking about the power God has given us with music. The song I sang had no Christian lyrics, no obvious bearing on their situation, and yet God used it to help this grieving couple. I never found out the conclusion of their story, whether or not they found their son, but I thank God for what He did that day, both for that couple and for me.

To argue for the idea of God's presence in secular music, this paper will address the following: acknowledging God as the giver of the gift of music, the fact that secular music conveys the human condition, how effective secular music can be as an evangelistic tool, and how God can be glorified through the life of an artist. This is not an exhaustive list of God's participation in secular music, but presents some facets of how God interacts with it.

How Christian and Secular Music Differ

The only notable discrepancy between popular Christian music and secular music is the lyrical content. The quality of the music itself (melody, harmony, rhythm, form, and other aspects) is another topic entirely, and although a relevant one, will not be addressed at length.

Therefore, in order to begin with a clear understanding, definitions of the terms used in this argument must be made. For the purpose of this paper “Christian music” will be used in reference to music that has specifically Christian lyrics, lyrics that mention God with names by which He is known. “Secular music” is simply defined as music with lyrics that do not expressly mention God. Using this understanding of music, there is a strong case for the idea that God can be, and is, glorified through secular music. Just because God is not expressly referenced in the lyrical content, it does not mean that He is not present there, or able to work through the composition.

Glorifying God through Music

Before going further, an obvious concern needs to be addressed: what is not glorifying, or that which is offensive to God. Scripturally, there are guidelines for what God's people should stay away from, one of them being perverse speech. This is found according to Proverbs 4:23-24, which gives instruction on how to guard one's heart.¹ This passage says: “above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk from your lips.” (Barker, 2002) Perversity is derived as meaning depraved, corrupt, or wicked, or to be turned away from what is right or good (Merriam-Webster)². Behaviors that are Biblically defined as perverse include sexual immorality, drunkenness, and idolatry. It is said that it is “shameful even to speak of what the disobedient do in secret” (Ephesians 5:12).

John Calvin considered music that is unfit for the praises of God as abuse of music, God's good gift for our pleasure and recreation (Calvin).³ Brown accurately represents and summarizes

¹ Barker, Kenneth L. *Zondervan NIV Study Bible: New International Version*. Fully Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002.

² Merriam-Webster. Accessed November 15, 2015. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary>.

³ Calvin, John "Foreword to the Psalter", 1565

Calvin's stance:

“We need to be musically moderate and to avoid licentiousness. We must not allow our use of music to make us (as he says, in provocatively gendered language) "effeminate in disordered delights." [...] For when a melody is combined with evil words, Calvin observes, it "pierces the heart that much more strongly and enters into it; just as through a funnel wine is poured into a container, so also venom and corruption are distilled to the depth of the heart by the melody."⁴

Calvin's point about lyrical content is quite valid and is well conveyed. Plato also addresses the power of music to disorder a man's passions, stating that if one's spirit is weak, the effect of smooth melodies may render a warrior useless; that the warrior may melt and soften so as to make him ineffective in his purpose.⁵

By stating that God is glorified through secular music, it is not being suggested that Christian musicians should sing songs that encourage these things that are abhorrent and offensive to God. One small example of a song that promotes sexual immorality would be Bruno Mars' "Gorilla." The lyrics will not be inserted in this paper, but in the first four lines alone, it unabashedly promotes drug use and explicit sexual intercourse. Therefore, there is certainly some secular music that is truly not glorifying to God, and participation in such explicit music is not being promoted in this paper.

Giver of the Gift

With that said, the first manner in which God is glorified through Christian and secular

⁴ Brown, F. Burch. "Religious Music and Secular Music: A Calvinist Perspective, Re-formed." *Theology Today*, 2006, 11-21.

⁵ "The Internet Classics Archive | The Republic by Plato." The Internet Classics Archive | The Republic by Plato. Accessed November 15, 2015. <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.4.iii.html>.

music alike, is the fact that He is the giver of the gift. Music is unmistakably a beautiful gift. The Bible clearly states that “every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the father of lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” (James 1:17)⁶ God is not partial in the distribution of gifts, for they are seen among believers and undoubtedly in unbelievers as well. Matthew 5:45 says that God “causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.” Similarly, musical talents and excellence are displayed in both Christians and non-Christians, and God is pleased to give these gifts and to have them speak of Him. Indeed, all creation speaks of God, as in Psalm 19:1 “the heavens declare the glory of God. Day after day they pour forth speech, night after night they display their knowledge, there is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.” Again, in Colossians 1:16, the Bible says “For by Him all things were created: things in in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him.” Even if the gift is not acknowledged by the recipient, it is no less from God, and testifies to the goodness of the Lord.

The quality or timbre of an artist's music can cause us to worship the giver of the gift. Does not everyone have one artist whose mere voice captures and puts them in a state of awe? This is the sensation that is being referenced. Therefore, an artist does not even have to be a Christian in order for God to be glorified through their music. The wording of this phrase is intentional. An artist does have to be a Christian in order to glorify God personally, however, in order for God to be glorified (or to glorify Himself through the music, to use it) the artist does

⁶ Barker, Kenneth L. *Zondervan NIV Study Bible: New International Version*. Fully Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002.

not have to be Christian. The act is one of God, rather than the intentional act of the artist performing the material.

The Human Condition

The second way secular music glorifies God is by speaking to the human condition. Not only does secular music seem to speak to the human condition more frequently than Christian music often does, but it seems to speak more eloquently, and certainly more honestly. This aspect tends to make secular music a more fertile environment for God to work. An obvious example is found in the blues.

The blues, as a genre, is addressed in detail in Christian Scharen's book *Broken Hallelujahs* (Scharen, 2001)⁷. Scharen delivers the history of the blues rising up out of black spiritual music, as a groaning to God; a groaning which is strewn throughout the Psalms. Psalm 88:1-2 says “oh Lord, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before you. May my prayer come before you, turn your ear to my cry.” Psalms 9:12 says God does not ignore the cry of the afflicted. God does hear the cries of His creation. A cry is exactly what the blues is. All of creation groans to God over our fallen state, as it states in Romans 8:22. More specifically, Romans 8 references redemption, which implies a fallen state to make redemption necessary. The blues as a genre frequently supplies the cry of the fallen or downtrodden, and as in the blues, when we admit that life has got us down, when we acknowledge that we are not enough, that we cannot continue without help, it is at that point that God has room to move, to supply our need, to comfort us. Secular music meets people where they are at because its creators are not afraid to

⁷ Scharen, Christian. *Broken Hallelujahs: Why popular Music Matters to Those Seeking God*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2011.

convey hopelessness.

Restated, secular music does not censor the struggles humans face. All humanity is tempted by sexual immorality, all are scared of mortality and finitude, and all are searching for meaning and reason. These struggles are common to man. While Christians should not condone sexual immorality, it would be counterproductive not to acknowledge that it is a battle everyone fights. These subjects are nearly taboo in the popular Christian genre, rarely, if ever affording mention. However, they are addressed at length in the Bible! The subject of finitude alone is the primary subject matter of Ecclesiastes. If basic human desires and how to respond to them are never addressed, then the secular world becomes the only source talking about it, and the world will be the teacher of how to appropriately handle these confrontations with temptation. This is surely not as God intended. God addresses these things in depth in His word, such as the section on sexual immorality in I Corinthians 6; why are these relevant subjects addressed so much more in popular secular music than in popular Christian songwriting?

Inversely, Christian music also frequently seems to omit the lighter side of humanity. There are few frivolous or simply lighthearted songs presented. John Calvin would argue that this is as it should be. Calvin was the creator of the psalter hymnal of approved songs suitable for Christians. He put such weight on the gift and power of music that he stated to trivialize it was to dishonor God.

The only references to secular music in Calvin seem to be to tunes (and words) that he immediately criticizes in one way or another as "in part empty and frivolous, in part stupid and dull, in part obscene and vile, and in consequence evil and harmful..." Calvin seriously overestimates the capacity of a narrowly limited repertoire of musical styles to

express a full range of human experience, and indeed to do justice to the full capacity of worship itself. In this regard he is overly fearful or negligent of God's gifts in secular culture. (Brown)⁸

Calvin was convinced that every human emotion was adequately represented in the Psalms, and seems to be blatantly afraid of the power of music. However, we as humans are sometimes frivolous and shallow. For example, the Beatles' song "I Want to Hold Your Hand," talks about a simple desire of a person to hold another's hand. This is a hit song, even today. Christian music as a whole is far too narrow in subject matter. There are not many songs about wildflowers or summer breezes in the popular Christian category. This lack of diversity makes Christian music not widely relatable.

Secular Music as a Mission Field

This brings up another major point about why Christians should be engaging in the production of secular music. Not only is the ground often more fertile to foster God's hope, but it is also a larger field! Evangelistically, Christian music is not a wide net. When Christian music is played, it is heard primarily by Christians. The lost do not tune their radios to the local Christian station. Secular music is a much larger platform with which to reach the lost. In Mark 2:17, Jesus responds to the Pharisees, who are condemning him for eating with sinners, by saying "it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but the sinners." This message is repeated many times over, as with the great commission passage in Matthew 28, which extends this calling past Jesus himself to his disciples. Again in Luke 4:18-19

⁸ Brown, F. Burch. "Religious Music and Secular Music: A Calvinist Perspective, Re-formed." *Theology Today*, 2006, 11-21.

it says “the spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” While reaching the lost is not the sole reason for engaging in writing secular music, it can be a byproduct of glorifying God through this particular avenue; and when the lost are ministered to, this also brings glory to God.

Understandably, there is some reticence on the part of Christians to acquire or exercise fame in a secular realm, perhaps because it seems contrary to the servanthood preached in the Bible, as in Philippians 2:7-8. However, servanthood is not always congruous with a lack of power or platform. The subject of the power of culture and the power to affect change is taken into consideration in Andy Crouch's *Culture Making* (Crouch, 2008)⁹. Key figures such as Joseph and Moses are mentioned: leaders who changed the living circumstance for their entire people group by holding positions of influence in the places God had put them. As Christians, there is a fear that fame is an enticement, a barrier to humility. Again, acknowledging God as the giver of the gift is the cure for this feared idolatry. Knowing that God has put His servant in a specific position for God's fame, not the fame of the messenger, is submissively obedient to the Lord. In *The Weight of Glory*, C.S. Lewis asserts that fame is a word that should be used as meaning having good report with God rather than with men. He says "I was shocked to find such different Christians as Milton, Johnson, and Thomas Aquinas taking heavenly glory quite frankly in the sense of fame or good report. But not fame conferred by our fellow creatures, fame with God, approval or appreciation by God. And then, when I had thought it over, I saw that this view was scriptural; nothing can eliminate from the parable the divine accolade, 'Well done, good and

⁹ Crouch, Andy. *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2008.

faithful servant.' " (Lewis, 1942)¹⁰. Lewis concludes that there is no room for vanity, then, but only innocent rejoice in being just as God intended. No matter how large an individual's influence becomes, or how high one ascends in power, that leader is still under God. Aristotle talks about virtue being the means between two extremes (Aristotle)¹¹. Building on this, Miller identifies humility as "knowing one's place in the world" (Miller 1987)¹², neither being in excess of pride, nor deficient in self-worth and purpose. If a Christian's identity is in God, then he or she should rest securely in whatever position God puts him or her in, including the stage of secular music.

Not only does secular music fall on the ears of the lost, but it is also heard by many Christians. There is a small contingent of Christians that listen exclusively to Christian music. Most also participate in country western, jazz, blues, and pop. Nearly gone are the days when the church rigidly declared anything but hymns to be the devil's music (Scharen, 2011)¹³. Even if there are some who still hold to this opinion, any grocery store frequented is likely playing Top 40 hits. There is little ability to be secluded anymore, nor should one try.

Broken Hallelujahs addresses the issue of Christian limitations and seclusion by referencing the Christian organization *Focus on the Family* and their grading system to judge whether or not something is to be considered wholesome or acceptable for consumption (Scharen, 2011)¹⁴. To counter this, Scharen's book looks at C.S. Lewis's *Experiment in Criticism*

¹⁰ Lewis, C.S. *The Weight of Glory*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1942

¹¹ Aristotle, "The Internet Classics Archive | Nicomachean Ethics by Aristotle." The Internet Classics Archive | Nicomachean Ethics by Aristotle. Accessed November 15, 2015. <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html>.

¹² Miller, Ed. L. *Questions That Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy*. 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987.

¹³ Scharen, Christian. *Broken Hallelujahs: Why popular Music Matters to Those Seeking God*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2011.

¹⁴ Ibid

which suggests that before judging art, the judges should allow it to speak. (Lewis, 1961)¹⁵. To allow art to speak is important to do, because the world will look different depending on where someone stands. Lewis suggests trying to get outside oneself to view these things, even to empty oneself, to listen and see if the art speaks any small truth. Perhaps in standing in someone else's perspective, value can be seen. Scharen sums this up beautifully by saying “[i]f hundreds of thousands of people are buying songs or watching a show in TV, is it worth asking what they are finding there that is meaningful, and how they are being shaped by their attention: how does such and such help them to see the world in a certain way?” (Scharen, 2011)¹⁶

More attention is given to this in the third chapter of *God's Wider Presence* (Johnson)¹⁷. It addresses the idea of revelation through film, and contrasts the division of secular and faith-based movies, concluding that more people have had revelatory spiritual experiences in the secular genre than in the sacred category. Johnson points out that God's movement through movies is not dependent on the creator's intention, but rather on the viewer's perception. This echoes what Scharen said, about perspective changing based on the position in which an individual is standing. It is impossible to predict what will affect one human being or another. Based on the individual's lens of experiences, a particular piece of media may or may not move them closer to a relationship with God, and Christians are not called to be the judges of what is incapable of so moving people. In Johnson's book, a poll was referenced regarding what movies had in some way spiritually inspired poll participants. The movies listed in answer to the poll

¹⁵ Lewis, C. S. *An Experiment in Criticism*. Cambridge: University Press, 1961.

¹⁶ Scharen, Christian. *Broken Hallelujahs: Why popular Music Matters to Those Seeking God*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2011.

¹⁷ Johnston, Robert K. *God's Wider Presence:Reconsidering General Revelation*.

included *Fight Club*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Toy Story 3*, and *The Dark Knight*. To be sure, it is an unlikely group, but there are common threads. All of these films were award nominees winning multiple awards each, suggesting that quality has something to do with media's ability to stir the hearts of people, in film as well as in music. The point is not what a person can get from these particular films, but that God is the ruler of the entire universe and will use anything He pleases to stir people's hearts. Humans cannot limit God to anything. A profane song may convict, a violent movie may inspire. Half of the effect of these things in bringing revelation of Christ may be that these are the places where He is least expected to be seen. The Almighty God commands everything; even evil spirits have to obey Him (Mark 1:27). All of creation is subject to God, and that is why it is narrow to attempt to constrict Him in moving only through avenues of media that meet the *Focus on the Family* Christian checklist of approval. The checklist is helpful for determining age group appropriateness, but not in determining worth to the general public. Not only is constricting God narrow, but may even be considered sinful. Indeed, to limit or deny God's ability to use secular arts may be sinful, because all glory and honor and power belong to God (Jude 1:25), and to deny the Lord what is due Him is against God, and being against God is sin.

While the secular film and music industry may not be directly winning people to Christ, it provides an artistic platform that tills the field for purpose such as that. Artistic presentation spurs on creative thought, addresses human need, confronts how people tend to fill their needs, and presents possible measurements of the effectiveness of the attempt to satisfy the need. For example, a protagonist who is trying to fill a need for love may turn to relationships, sex, drugs or alcohol, or Jesus. The conclusion of the story presented tends to measure the success of the

adopted method. When these ideas or stories are presented poetically or creatively, and when they are well done, it does provoke human thought. With social media so accessible, media in general is dominating the millennial generation. The impact media has on culture is at an all-time high, and those who lead in this industry direct much of the thought in culture. Therefore, as a musician, the best thing to do is to write good and compelling music.

All of this is said to urge Christian participation with God in these secular arts, specifically music. Not only does it reach Christians, but non-Christians, including other artists. What better way can be proposed to affect culture for God? If the leaders of the culture are impacted, the product of their leadership is changed.

The Power of Music

I recently volunteered at a Christian camp, on work crew preparing meals, and the entire staff knew every song that came on, all of which were secular and only some wholesome. They recited every word from songs that were decades old. I can think of no one who can do that with the sermon they heard last week. This adds another dimension to consider about music: it is catchy!

Science has attempted to explain what makes a song catchy, with varied inconclusive results. A few factors are said to contribute, however (Anuta)¹⁸. The first aspect is familiarity, which is why songs from other cultures or generations often do not connect as well as music from one's own culture or age group. Repetition is another strong contributor, whether it is the repetition of a complete song, how often one is exposed to it, or repetition within the song, such

¹⁸ Anuta, Joe. "Probing Question: What Makes a Song Catchy? | Penn State University." Probing Question: What Makes a Song Catchy? | Penn State University. 2006. Accessed November 15, 2015. <http://news.psu.edu/story/141354/2006/06/05/research/probing-question-what-makes-song-catchy>.

as a repeating phrase, theme, or hook that lodges itself in the brain. Another factor of catchiness is the environment in which music is heard. An impressive performance can add to the memorability of the music presented. Similarly, a memorable occasion accompanied by a certain song may also add to its ability to be recalled. For example the song played at a graduation or wedding ceremony holds more prominent placement in the memory. (Anuta)¹⁹

A song's memorability getting embedded in culture may shape mood or thought. There are some songs that have truly changed the culture by causing people to think about the state of the world. Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," which was released in the year 1930, called attention to the fact that negroes were being unjustly lynched and left hanging in trees. The song was so poetic and haunting that its popularity grew such that people could not avoid hearing it, and it called for revolution. In 1964, Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come" became the soundtrack for the civil rights movement. John Lennon sang "Imagine" in 1971, regarding the Vietnam War. Lennon's song has maintained enduring relevance, even today. Recently, and to the lament of the Christian community, "Same Love" by Mackelmore has furthered the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender movement. These songs have held power in culture.

Whether these songs were inspired by the culture, or whether culture was inspired by the songs is irrelevant, as it is circular. The culture encourages a song and the song reciprocates, or vice versa. The fact remains that music matters in culture shaping, for better or worse. The more important observation is that all of the songs listed here (and all the songs researched on this subject for this paper, in fact) are from the popular genre of music. If Christians are called by God to affect culture and to reach the lost, they are obligated to take a hard look at the impact of

¹⁹Ibid

popular music and respond.

This seems to exemplify what Calvin was afraid of. He and other prominent church leaders surmised that the power of music could turn people's hearts and morals quite easily. Even Plato, who was not of the Christian faith, observed that there is "scarcely anything in the world which is more capable of turning or moving morals this way and that." (Plato)²⁰ Calvin agrees that music "has a secret and almost incredible power to arouse hearts in one way or another."²¹ Burch concludes that "We must not employ music thoughtlessly, therefore. As the ancient doctors of the church warned repeatedly, people can easily become addicted to unseemly and obscene songs."²² The question this raises is, if music is so powerful a tool, why did these leaders treat it with such reticence, rather than using its full capacity to forward the kingdom of God, for the benefit of those who are members of the family of believers, and as a method of outreach to those who do not yet possess salvation?

Augustine also acknowledges the power of music, fearing that it will cause him to sin by enjoying the music more than the message of the sacred text, or worse, to enjoy music that attempts to lead him astray to sin against God.

the delights of the ear had more powerfully inveigled and conquered me, but You unbound and liberate me. ... But with the words which are their life do they, that they may gain admission into me, strive after a place of some honour in my heart; and I can hardly assign them a fitting one. Sometimes I appear to myself to give them more respect than,

²⁰ "The Internet Classics Archive | The Republic by Plato." The Internet Classics Archive | The Republic by Plato. Accessed November 15, 2015. <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.4.iii.html>.

²¹ Calvin, "Foreword to the Psalter"

²² Brown, F. Burch. "Religious Music and Secular Music: A Calvinist Perspective, Re-formed." *Theology Today*, 2006

is fitting, as I perceive that our minds are more devoutly and earnestly elevated into a flame of piety by the holy words themselves when they are thus sung, than when they are not; and that all affections of our spirit, by their own diversity, have their appropriate measures in the voice and singing, wherewith by I know not what secret relationship they are stimulated. But the gratification of my flesh, to which the mind ought never to be given over to be enervated, often beguiles me.... Thus in these things do I sin unknowing, but afterwards do I know it. (Sheed, 1942)²³

In this passage, Augustine states that the meaning of sacred texts is magnified when set to music. If text is indeed magnified by melodic additions, it stands to reason that good wholesome music is needed also in the secular realm. Among these great leaders there is much fear about the destructive ability of music to cloud good judgment or the soul, but they are seemingly so fearful of music as a weapon that they do not employ it in order to counter such things. If the enemies of the church are debasing music in such a way, why not return fire and penetrate secular music with good messages that promote the basic teachings of Christ?

The Choir Still Needs a Preacher

Not all people are called to minister or participate heavily in secular music. There are those who are well suited to minister in the church through worship music. This paper is not at all belittling this role, merely arguing for an acceptance that God can move through secular music as well. There is still great need for good Christian music in the world. The people who have already been adopted into the family of Christ still need to be led to sing songs of praise to

²³ Sheed, F. J. "Book X, Chapter 33." In *The Confessions of St. Augustine: Books I-X*. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1942.

God, to be encouraged and built up in their faith through music and many other facets. There are countless Biblical references about singing praises to the Lord and how many purposes this fulfills in the Christian walk. The main reasons Christians are instructed to sing praises are: to acknowledge God for who He is, to foster joyfulness, to be thankful, and to encourage one another. Scripturally, these are supported by the following verses. “Sing joyfully to the Lord, oh you righteous ones; it is fitting for the upright to praise him” (Psalm 33). Psalms 103:1 says “Praise the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.” Psalm 22:3 says that God inhabits the praises of his people. Finally, Ephesians 5:19 instructs Christians to “build one another up in the Lord by singing spiritual songs and making music in your heart to the Lord.” The Lord's praises must still be sung, not replaced by secular music.

Crossover

There is another issue in culture that bears addressing: the segregation between secular and Christian music. As the industry now stands, musicians have a choice to make as to what type of album they will produce: wholly faith-based, or wholly world-based. A mix between the two is only largely found in country western music, where an album may have a song referencing sexual temptation, another song regarding revenge, and also a stirring spiritual on the same album. We see this in Carrie Underwood's *Some Hearts* album, which features “Before He Cheats” and “Jesus Take the Wheel.” The former talks about the destruction of an adulterous man's truck, the latter about giving life over to God. While some would suppose this is a horrible breach in mixing the sacred and secular, it is more accurately representative of human life. Christ's gives people the ability to be righteous through grace, but all are still human, faced with thoughts including anger and revenge. Both songs speak to the human condition.

In country music, such mixing of faith and flaws is common. Why is it so rare in the rest of music, specifically pop? Indeed, many artists have been condemned for attempting to participate in both genres, others have been rebuked for going back and forth in their songwriting. U2 was abandoned by a large portion of their fan base when they neglected to put a faith themed song on one of their albums. When asked in 2006 why the music of U2 did not proclaim Christ, Bono (the lead singer) replied simply that, "...it does. Creation has its own proclamation of God, and I'd like to think our music has the same qualities to it" (Scharen, 2011). The band's following album had the expected spiritual song and their fan base returned.

Amy Grant had the opposite experience when she crossed over from Christian music to pop. Her *Unguarded* tour was largely protested because of her secular turn and her cheetah print outfit. People were convinced she had lost her faith and they revolted. Eventually the crossover was made, amidst great opposition.²⁴ Amy Grant has resurfaced in both genres, one of her popular hits being "Better than a Hallelujah" released in 2010. The lyrics in the first verse include "God loves the drunkard's cry, the soldier's plea not to let him die, better than a Hallelujah sometimes."

John Calvin is not a proponent of mixing musical styles and blending music of faith and worldly music (Burch, 2006)²⁵ He surmises there are four distinct categories of music:

music intended for church; explicitly religious music outside the church; secular music that, while meant for entertainment, can still be enjoyed "in God"; and thoroughly

²⁴ "Amy Grant." - Biography. Accessed November 15, 2015. <http://www.billboard.com/artist/278956/amy-grant/biography>.

²⁵ Brown, F. Burch. "Religious Music and Secular Music: A Calvinist Perspective, Re-formed." *Theology Today*, 2006

worldly music that potentially "perverts good morals," as he says, and that leads away from God. In the process, Calvin states or implies several criteria for what would be good music from a Christian point of view—good for church and good for use in the wider world. ²⁶

While these are good observations, and seem to accurately describe divisions of sacred and secular genres, Calvin proposed to categorize accordingly and to keep all the musical types separate. His views are nicely restated by Burch:

Both directly and indirectly, therefore, Calvin's approach to music can help us remember that music does not in reality divide neatly into just two kinds, religious and secular. There is church music, such as the singing of psalms. And there is music that employs religious texts and serves religious ends in the world outside the church, such as in the home or in concert. There is also music that is indirectly religious (or spiritual) in that it enhances and enriches our enjoyment of life in a manner blessed by God, but without specific religious words or goals. Such music we enjoy "in God," without addressing it to God. Finally, there is music that has little or no connection with the religious ends of life and that, in some circumstances, can indulge emotions and inculcate attitudes in conflict with the life to which God calls us. ²⁷

This is helpful for diagnosing what type of music an individual is engaging in, but it is not representative of the human condition, which has been previously discussed. The mixture found in country music is more representative of the variation of human emotion. In struggles,

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

there should be ballads, in joy, songs of praise (James 5:13-14)²⁸, and they should all be able to exist on the same album. If this was a widespread cultural standard, there would be no need for Christian musicians to be at odds with the label of their genre, or what shelf their album goes on in the near extinct music stores. The fear, it seems, is that if Christian music is allowed to cross over to secular albums, then the division would be disintegrated and secular music would also intrude on Christian albums, polluting what Calvin attempted to keep so separate and clean.

Historically, crossover has gone both ways. Martin Luther arranged sacred hymn lyrics to well-known tunes from pubs (Bonds, 2006)²⁹. He did this because of the aforementioned catchy aspect of music. Since printing was just becoming available in Luther's day and age, the songs needed to be memorable. His view stood opposite of John Calvin's; Luther desired to use all for the glory of God, including melodies. In that time period, music was not so original, but frequently borrowed from well-known previous texts. Luther applied this with secular music as well as using sacred tunes or texts. This impacted music going from reformation to renaissance.

Inversely, Ray Charles took tunes from spirituals and supplemented lyrics about women (Lydon, 2000)³⁰. Some of these hits included "I got a Woman" which borrowed the tune from "It Must Be Jesus" by the Southern Tones. "This Little Girl of Mine" was a parody based on 'This Little Light of Mine', a civil rights song first recorded in 1950 by the St. Paul Baptist Choir Church of L.A. In 1956, Ray Charles released "Hallelujah I Love Her So," a revamping of Dorothy Love Coates' gospel song 'Hallelujah! I Love Him So'. These are only three examples

²⁸ Barker, Kenneth L. *Zondervan NIV Study Bible: New International Version*. Fully Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002.

²⁹ Bonds, Mark Evan. *A History of Music in Western Culture*. 2nd Ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006

³⁰ Lydon, Michael. *Ray Charles: Man and Music*. New York: Riverhead, 2000.

of Ray Charles' crossovers. Some would say this was sacrilegious, and it certainly may be so, but perhaps Mr. Charles wrote these because that is where he saw God's love being displayed. Is it possible to behold the light of God in a little girl, or to find an example of God's love in the love of another human? While they are imperfect examples of God's love, they are most often what are used for reference in order to understand how to be relational with God; the matter of sacrilege lies wholly in the heart, for the artist and the audience of the songs. It is possible to honor God in spirit by pointing out good examples of His love in their human messengers. These are speculations on how Ray Charles' take on spirituals may be perceived, but historically, spirituals were part of his cultural background and he wanted it present in his music. The point in these observations is that crossover happens both ways, and that (while disputed) both can be used of God. The lines will get even more blurred when looking further into the idea of the "undercover Christian band," and its effects.

There are, without a doubt, many songs that are decidedly Christian, but are peddled unknowingly to the masses as rock music. People from a Christian background may recognize themes readily, but the average adolescent may pass it by without knowledge of what is being presented. This is a good thing! Positive messages are being laid as groundwork for revelation. Jon Foreman of Switchfoot is such an artist.

Switchfoot is a Christian band who has had a couple songs make it over to the pop charts. An example would be "Meant to Live." The lyrics to the chorus are "we were meant to live for so much more, have we lost ourselves, somewhere we live inside." This is one of the best kinds of music, glorifying God and helping the masses of the lost with its message. Jon Foreman is an example of someone who is participating in both genres. As a solo artist his music is not

considered Christian, but has nothing profane in it. If a teenager were to take up an interest in his music, he would also find Switchfoot, which is not so carefully disguised, but is more outwardly Christian. Essentially the people involved in Switchfoot have created a breadcrumb ministry, wherein if someone was to follow the music, it would lead them to the artist's faith.

There are some artists that are so carefully shrouded that it is nearly impossible to distinguish where they stand in their faith, but God can be heard in their music, and that is sometimes enough. An example of this is Good Charlotte. Formerly, they were a popular rock band, but after a tour with Reliant K (a well-known Christian band), their status was not as clear. The events leading up to this were that Reliant K had a pop hit, which propelled them to tour with Good Charlotte. After touring, Good Charlotte's next hit was called "The River." The lyrics are "baptized in the river, I see a vision of my life and I want to be delivered. In the city was a sinner, I've done a lot of things wrong but I swear I'm a believer." Nothing was ever said about a possible correlation, but if the breadcrumbs are followed, there are connections that give great hope for the salvation of these musicians, and possibly, some of their followers.

One of the strongest arguments for the impact of God in secular music comes from lyrics from a band called Simple Plan. Nothing is readily known about their religious affiliation, but they founded the Simple Plan foundation, which emphasizes helping teens with addiction and suicidal problems. They performed in Warped Tour six consecutive years, a notoriously wild punk rock festival. This is an excerpt from one of their songs, called "This Song Saved my Life."

I was broken, I was choking

I was lost, this song saved my life

I was bleeding, stopped believing

Could have died, this song saved my life

I was down, I was drowning,

But it came on just in time

This song saved my life.

There is no doubt that there is someone out there whose life was actually saved by a song, and statistically, chances are it was not Christian, though it may have been. Music is powerful. God created it and God uses it in powerful ways. Our labels of secular and Christian do not matter to the Lord. He will be glorified in all things. To be so narrow as to acknowledge the power of music, including secular music, and only to fear it rather than recognize its ability to carry a message of hope and thus honor God is at best limited and at times disgraceful and judgmental. There is value here as a ministry to God, to please Him with songwriting in secular circles. The songwriting acknowledges the struggles, the human elements, and it provides hope. This is how secular music can be direct service to God. To quote Luther:

For whether you wish to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate, or to appease those full of hate- and who could number all these masters of the human hearts, namely, the emotions, inclinations, and affections that impel men to evil or good? - what more effective means than music could you find?(Luther)³¹

Glorifying God through Personal Life

The final point that remains to be addressed is that secular music glorifies God through the life of the one who sings it. The essential piece in a breadcrumb ministry is who the artist is

³¹ Luther, Martin, and Ulrich S. Leupold. *Liturgy and Hymns*. American ed. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965.

and how they behave. The artist, and indeed anyone in the service of God, should live in such a way that the non-existence of God does not make sense (Engle, 1980)³². This is not an uncommon theme in Christianity. St. Francis of Assisi's most renowned quote is "Preach the gospel always. When necessary, use words." The life of a Christian musician, indeed any mature Christian, should exemplify the fruit of the spirit, which include love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These qualities are especially important in the entertainment industry, as they are seemingly rare. The point is that while there are times to preach the gospel blatantly, the way in which a life is conducted is the biggest testimony of God. While secular music has already been defined as music that does not expressly mention God, it does not mean God is not exemplified in the life of the musician creating it. The strongest example of this is found in the Bible itself. The book of Ruth never mentions God, so by the definition given, it would be considered a secular book. God appears exemplified in the lives of the characters within Ruth.

Society does not demand faith statements from other professions like it seems to of music. There is no distinction required between a Christian bakery and a non-Christian bakery; the bakers just bake bread and live their lives in whatever religious fashion they ascribe to. It is their personal lives, and the way they conduct business, that ministers to those around them. The quality of the bread speaks of their professional qualifications, and the quality of their treatment to employees and customers speaks of their beliefs. Neither lawyers nor barbers have to label their products or services as Christian or non-Christian. Why then is music bound by genre related to the artist's personal beliefs? Ministry in music should be able to take place the same as

³² Engle, Madeleine. *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art*. Wheaton, Ill.: H. Shaw, 1980.

the other professions referenced: by making a good product and living for God.

Conclusion

In short, there is a vast need for Christian musicians, both in Christian worship and Christian radio, and in secular music. Musicians can serve the Lord in the secular genre as effectively as in the Christian category, because God is present in both. Service to the Lord in secular music can be accomplished by writing great music, abstaining from perverse songwriting, presenting good messages, and acknowledging God as the giver of the gift. Service to God can be done by speaking to the human condition, writing honest music that is about the hurts and the joys. As musicians, it is important to realize the power God has blessed us to wield, and to use it for the betterment of this world, to diffuse hate as Luther said. It is also important to initiate crossover, to leave breadcrumbs to faith, to never deny God, and above all, to walk in obedience and to honor God with the life given, on and offstage.

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