

Contemporary Christian Music:  
Falling Short on Life's Greatest Experiences

Alexandra Hamilton

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Professor Mark S. Dorn  
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### **Abstract**

This paper will argue the importance of portraying reality within contemporary Christian music. It will focus on the portrayal of suffering and how it can be represented musically and lyrically. The importance of expressing reality through music can be seen through aesthetic excellence. In order to achieve musical aesthetic excellence the full human experience must be accounted for.

The origin of suffering will be explored in order to emphasize the importance of expressing negative experiences. Along with the exploration of suffering itself, the Psalms will be delved into as an example. The Psalms sets the example of art representing the full human experience. David in the Psalms expresses the reality of life; therefore, this concept is worthy of imitation.

The evidence that there is need for a change will be shown through the analysis of lyrical and musical aspect of popular contemporary Christian music. The correct way of achieving aesthetic excellence will be surveyed in detail. In conclusion, this will show that the portrayal of suffering is essential for Christianity and the achievement of musical excellence. Articulating both the cruel and joyful parts of life, within popular contemporary Christian music, is necessary for validity of Christianity itself.

### **Contemporary Christian Music: Falling Short on Life's Greatest Experiences**

Before knowing Christ, I found myself avoiding the Christian radio stations due to the lack of reality in the music. I remember driving in my car flipping through channels. I knew exactly when I hit the Christian radio station because every song sounded similar. I stopped for a few seconds and listened. It always seemed to have the same bright and happy melody accompanied by the exact same instruments. Eventually, I would change the station due to the emptiness I felt while listening. It was as if I was listening to someone talk. I knew the person talking was suffering but they continued putting a happy front on their face. So, I switched back to the alternative channel. I noticed the difference. I felt emotions stirring while listening to some of the alternative songs. These artists portrayed my exact mood through lyrical and musical expression. They brought me back to specific memories of losing a loved one or having to say goodbye.

This façade of happiness that is often portrayed in popular contemporary Christian music does not correspond well with the world that exists. There is pain, suffering, and poverty. We all face the full spectrum of the human experience; my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ are missing aspects. The full spectrum of the human experience must be represented. It is fully represented throughout the Bible therefore it should be fully represented through popular contemporary Christian music.

When there is no relationship to the full human experience the entire aesthetic excellence of a work of art is compromised. Music does indeed have the power to evoke and portray the full human experience; the celebrating, the weeping, and the pleading. Music can present a certain color, timbre, or emotion within each individual, whether the

emotion is sadness, happiness, or even boredom. The composer can chose certain chords, melody lines, rhythmic patterns, modes, instruments, keys and lyrics (if there is a vocalist) to present these different emotions. I look back to this being displayed throughout my choir experiences. During my Casper College experiences, I was able to sing with the Collegiate Choir. In an unfortunate event, we were asked to perform for a funeral. We waited on stage and immediately after we began singing “Time to Say Goodbye” tears rolled out of the audience member’s eyes. This song seemed to provoke images and memories of a loved one lost. The fluid notes and delicate piano part helped aid in those images and emotions. There is emotion in music no matter what the situation. However, is this emotion alive in contemporary Christian music? Does it demonstrate each human emotion?

It can be argued that popular Christian music does not address the full human experience. Christian artists sing about having a breakthrough, trusting in God, and overcoming. While there is nothing wrong with this, the human experience is not always happy and victorious. God does not promise continual happiness for his followers but rather redemption. To be real, to touch our hearts, there must be a measure of happiness and sadness, just like life. The book of Psalms is a great example of realness, suffering, pain, and joy. A Christian can and will endure similar sufferings and joys. If much of the Bible is filled with suffering then there should be no reason to avoid this subject while proclaiming God’s truth through song writing. Christian’s responsibility in the art of music is to proclaim reality, even if the reality is suffering.

Christian music must represent the entire human experience and fit what is reality. “But also artists are workers of fittingness.”<sup>1</sup> Fittingness refers to the correspondence to reality within the arts. Christian artists need not pretend life is always perfect through lyrical content. In fact, doing so presents Christians a façade that is unattainable.

This paper argues that the reality of pain should be addressed in popular contemporary Christian music. The human experience consists of tragedies and victories, as shown throughout history and within the Biblical narrative. Popular Christian music should reflect and correspond with this evident reality of suffering and the full human experience.

While exploring the topic of suffering and popular Christian music, a few subjects must be addressed. The question of theodicy will be explored in order to reveal the knowledge needed to understand and voice the reality of suffering. The topic of fittingness within aesthetics will indicate the importance of addressing all aspects of life. Lastly, evidence will be shown that Christian musicians both lyrically and musically must express the realities of life.

### **Addressing the Hard Questions:**

Suffering scars the lives of each human being. My hometown church Emmanuel Baptist has a great pastor, Dr. Paul Jones. Last year Pastor Jones found out that his wife Tami has brain cancer. It seemed as if their lives were perfect, then out of nowhere pain and a diagnoses of a life ending illness. She is still going through experimental treatment, and the outcome is in God’s hands. Pastor Paul has dedicated his life to the teaching of

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<sup>1</sup> Wolterstroff Nicholas, *Art in Action* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing co. 1980), 88.

God's word and yet his family is going through tremendous hardship. Not only is there suffering, but it comes across as random and unfair. When looking at our broken world and going through the Bible, life sometimes seems the opposite of happy. The reality of life ending cancer, pain and loss should be addressed by Christian musicians. This aspect of life cannot be ignored.

Perhaps the reason Christian musicians avoid suffering is because they have yet to address the questions. Theodicy is a question many Christian theologians have struggled with. The question of theodicy is this, Why does a good God allow evil and suffering? Suffering is hard and it seems to happen to good people. That is when faith is either weakened or strengthened.

Deep suffering and trials truly do scar the memories of the human experience. Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether says this about suffering among Christians: "Traditionally the Christian response to suffering has been a complex synthesis of human self blaming and a view of God who is both omnipotent and yet a compassionate savior who intervenes in history, sending his 'own son' to suffer and die to rescue humans from their sinful condition."<sup>2</sup> She continues on saying, "Both God's power and goodness are vindicated in the face of suffering by teaching that God voluntarily takes on human suffering and pays for the primal sin that is its cause."<sup>3</sup> Ruether continues discussing the guilt Christians feel, that the only way to rid ones self of guilt is through Christ on the cross. She also points out that human sin is the reason for suffering such as unjust evils. Ruether explains the suffering we endure, because of the

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<sup>2</sup> Ruether, Rosemary. *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism* (1998), McGrath E. Alister (Edited). *The Christian Theology Reader*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Blackwell Publishing, 2011) 335.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

sin nature of humanity, is nothing compared to the suffering Christ endured while paying our debts on the cross.

Phillip Yancey presents a few ideas of suffering in his book *What Good is God*. In this book, he addresses many tragedies including the Virginia Tech massacre. While explaining his experience, he says this, “Remember that as you cope with pain. Do not simply try to numb it. Acknowledge it as a sensation of life, of love.”<sup>4</sup> The reason humans suffer when tragedy strikes is because of their strong love toward one another. Yancey goes on to tell the Biblical story of doubting Thomas seeing the resurrected Christ, “In a flashing of revelation Thomas saw the wonder of the Almighty God, the Lord of the Universe, stooping to take on our pain, to complete the union of humanity. Not even God remained exempt from pain. God joined us and fully shared our human condition, including its distress.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus’ pain and suffering is what gives redemption from eternal separation from God. Yancey says, “God is love. To love means to hurt, to grieve. Pain manifests life.”<sup>6</sup> Yancey concludes in this chapter that we as humans cannot answer why tragedies happen. He explains that God did not give an explanation to Job for his hardships. Christians should not expect an answer either. However, Christians know how God feels about tragedies. He is saddened. Jesus wept when Lazarus died, when he looked over the doomed city of Jerusalem, and when he was faced with his own personal suffering. “Where misery is there is the Messiah.”<sup>7</sup> Yancey reiterates. Jesus endured the ultimate suffering for sin. He went through a horrible death on the cross and was separated from the Father, which is an ultimate punishment for sin. Jesus showed his love

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<sup>4</sup> Yancey Philip, *What Good is God* (FaithWords Hachette Book Group, 2010), 26.

<sup>5</sup> Yancey, *What Good is God*, 27.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

for us through his hardships. Our love is also shown through suffering. When love is there, there is a higher risk for suffering. Attachment can cause pain. When Christian musicians express personal suffering, they are not doing harm but rather showing genuine love.

Augustine presented another view of theodicy. In Genesis God declares that everything he created is good, so why is there sin and suffering? Sin is only an absence of good. This is a theory that St. Augustine of Hippo presented<sup>8</sup>. He suggests that evil or sin is not an entity by itself but only an absence of something. This can tie into suffering because God does not permit evil things to happen; evil is the lack of good in people. We are imperfect people; therefore, our world is imperfect. Augustine says this about human nature and sin:

Human nature was certainly originally created blameless and without any fault; but the human nature by which each one of us is now born of Adam requires a physician, because it is not healthy. All the good things, which it has by its conception, life, senses, and mind, it has from God, its creator and maker. But the weakness which darkens and disables these good natural qualities, as a result of which the nature needs enlightenment and healing, did not come from the blameless maker but from original sin, which was committed by free will.<sup>9</sup>

Augustine is explaining how a good God can allow sin and darkness. Sin and darkness is only present because of our own free will. For God did not create sin and suffering but gave humans free will, which caused sin and suffering to enter the world.

One of the reasons that Christian artists may avoid writing songs about the emotions of suffering is because they do not venture into the question of suffering. Christian musicians would be able to portray hardship with a clear conscience if the

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<sup>8</sup>St. Augustine of Hippo, A Treatise “On Nature and Grace” (415 A.D.) McGrath E. Alister (Edited). *The Christian Theology Reader*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Blackwell Publishing, 2011) 335.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 335.



knowledge of theodicy were present. Knowledge of the origin and reality of suffering can bring about new musical ideas, and richer lyrical content. The more we know God the more we begin to understand the reality of human nature. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *The Cost of Discipleship* addresses the suffering that Christians endure while pursuing God's will through discipleship. He says this about knowing the Bible, "The Word of God will also give the messengers an unerring insight into human nature."<sup>10</sup> Knowing the word of God and exploring what it means is important to Christianity. If Christian artists are not able to portray the reality of human nature, then their faith does not correspond with reality. In the end, Christianity can lose validity.

### **The Example of the Psalms**

In the Psalms, David and other unknown Psalmists go through many of the emotions an average human would: sadness, anger, confusion, and joy. This is a great example of showing the spectrum of our reality. David does not merely mention suffering but he expresses it emotionally and explores it vividly. David went through situations that provoked each one of these emotions and he displayed those situations richly. Bob Kauflin, director of worship development for Sovereign Grace Ministries and author of *Worship Matters*, explains the Psalms this way; "The Psalms explores the highs and lows of human emotions and demonstrates how to express them before a holy, sovereign, and loving God. They suggest three categories in which we can magnify God's greatness: his words, his nature, and his works."<sup>11</sup> Kauflin suggests that we should fully express our worship and art. The Psalms is a good place to start. "The Psalms serve as our example

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<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer Dietrich, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Touchstone edition, New York, 1959) 215.

<sup>11</sup> Kauflin Bob, *Worship Matters* (Good News Publishers 2008), 770 (Kindle version).

in praising.”<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, he says, “The Psalms deal with our condition in a fallen world.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, if Psalms serve as this example, Christian musicians should be able to address and explore suffering and sin.

Following are two Psalms that display the idea of praise and suffering. These two Psalms show the contrast seen in the human experience:

The king rejoices in your strength, Lord. How great is his joy in the victories you give! You have granted him his heart’s desire and have not withheld the request of his lips. You came to greet him with rich blessings and placed crown of pure gold on his head. He asked you for life and you gave it to him, length of days, forever and ever. Through the victories you gave his glory is great; you have bestowed on him splendor and majesty. Surely you have granted him unending blessings and made him glad with the joy of your presence. For the king trusts in the Lord; through the unfailing love of the Most High he will not be shaken.  
Psalm 21:1-7 NIV

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest. Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises. In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame. But I am worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads.  
Psalm 22:1-7 NIV

These psalms represent greatly contrasting emotions. In general, most Psalms can be categorized by these three types; lament, praise, and thanksgiving. All of the emotions presented are acceptable and are a part of the human experience.

Lament presents what most people would consider negative emotions, such as sadness and anger. As seen in Psalm 22 David cries out “Why have you forsaken me?” This would be considered a lament and a messianic psalm. Psalm 22 is also prophetic.

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<sup>12</sup> Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, 797.

<sup>13</sup> Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, 797.

Warren E. Wiersbe's Psalm commentary says, "The intense suffering described here isn't that of a sick man in bed or a soldier in battle. It's the description of a criminal being executed! Numerous quotations from the psalm are in the four gospels, as well as Hebrews 2:10-12, indicate that this is a messianic psalm."<sup>14</sup> David expresses how he feels due to his circumstances. Blaiklock's commentary agrees, "Some awful experience of pain, bodily and mental had befallen David. As his habit was, he sought relief from the unbearable agony in poetry."<sup>15</sup> In Psalm 22 David does address his anguish but also points out that God has been faithful throughout time. Wiersbe continues through Psalm 22, "The first part (vv. 1-21) focuses on prayer and suffering and takes us to the cross, while the second part (vv. 22-31) announces the resurrection and expresses praise to the glory of God. An understanding of Messiah's suffering and glory is basic to grasping the message of the Bible."<sup>16</sup> Wiersbe continues, "*He was abandoned by the Lord* (vv. 1-5). The opening words of the psalm immediately transport us to Calvary, for Jesus quoted them at the close of a three hour period of darkness (vv. 1-2; Matt. 27:45-46; Mark 15:34)."<sup>17</sup> Again, the topic of suffering reaches back to Jesus' suffering for sin. As the psalm continues, David proclaims his trust in God. Psalm 22 does acknowledge that suffering is common and that voicing concern can be acceptable. However, trusting in God is what the psalm goes back to. This is a great example of suffering in poetry and song.

Psalm 22 drastically contrasts Psalms 21. Psalms 21 is a hymn of thanksgiving.

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<sup>14</sup> Wiersbe Warren, *Be Worshipful: Glorify God for Who He is*, (David C Cook Publishing, 2004), 90.

<sup>15</sup> Blaiklock E. M., *Commentary of the Psalms: Psalms for Living*, (A. J. Holman Company, New York, 1977) 60.

<sup>16</sup> Wiersbe, *Be Worshipful: Glorify God for Who He is*, 90.

<sup>17</sup> Wiersbe, *Be Worshipful: Glorify God for Who He is*, 90.

Wiersbe's commentary says, "This is probably the praise hymn David and his people sang after the victories prayed for in Psalm 20 as they celebrated a day of national thanksgiving. The psalm opens and closes with praise for God's strength granted to His king and the army."<sup>18</sup> Blaiklock's commentary says a similar thing, "The choir speaks for the king, returned in triumph, the nation saved, prayer answered."<sup>19</sup> This is indeed a psalm of praise. Wiersbe suggests three different categories within this Psalm: looking back celebration for past victories, looking ahead anticipation of future victories, and looking up exaltation for the Lord of the victories. Concerning verses one through seven Wiersbe says this, "The people and their king address the Lord and thank Him for what He did for them in answer to their prayers."<sup>20</sup> It also states how great is our salvation in verses 1 and 5. Wiersbe states this is a direct reference to deliverance and victory. God makes the follower happy with just His presence. Psalm 21 gives perspective to suffering: There are victories and tragedies. These psalms contrast however; they are an accurate representation of human existence. One day we are happy, thankful, and praising and the next day we are crying out to God for help.

This brief exploration of just two psalms gives a realistic representation of human nature and the world around us. Christian musicians need to take into account the Psalms and the reality it brings to the table and the human aspects it represents. The Psalms are poetry and songs. For the Christian artist, the Psalms set the example of a correct way of lyrical emotional expression.

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<sup>18</sup> Wiersbe, *Be Worshipful: Glorify God for Who He is*, 88.

<sup>19</sup> Blaiklock E. M., *Commentary of the Psalms: Psalms for Living*, 59.

<sup>20</sup> Wiersbe, *Be Worshipful: Glorify God for Who He is*, 88.

### **Proclaiming Reality Through Christianity**

An example of proclaiming complete human experience is Paul in the New Testament. Paul in all of his letters addresses each church in grace but tells them the truth about themselves and Jesus. In Acts Paul says this during his farewell to the Ephesian Elders, Acts 20:27 “For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.” Acts 20:20 says this, “how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable”. In each passage, Paul says he has shared everything that is profitable, and according to Romans, our suffering is profitable. Romans 5:3-5 “Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us”.

### **Fittingness and Aesthetic Excellence**

After looking at the psalms and Paul’s writings as an example of exploring the emotion of suffering it is appropriate to address why the portrayal of suffering is essential for aesthetic excellence in a song. Many listeners display boredom while listening to Christian radio. It does not move their emotions. This is due to the importance of fittingness. Aesthetic excellence calls for fittingness. “But also artists are workers of fittingness—all artists, inescapably, not indeed in the sense that their work is made out of fittingness, but rather in the sense that fittingness is a feature of the reality within which we all exist.”<sup>21</sup> Wolterstroff defines fittingness as follows, “Fittingness is cross-modal similarity. To say the large fits better with loud than with soft is to say that the cross-

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<sup>21</sup> Wolterstroff Nicholas, *Art in Action* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing co. 1980), 96.

modal similarity between large and loud is closer than that between large and soft.”<sup>22</sup>

Wolterstroff continues explaining in detail that music needs to match dynamically, melodically, and emotionally.

When evaluating a genre or artistic type, one has to deal with what makes music excellent. Allen Schantz says this, “There are three things that listeners, viewers, readers, artists, and critics the world over identify as characteristic of aesthetic excellence in the form and other elements of a particular work in the arts: 1) Unity, 2) Variety, and 3) Fittingness intensity.”<sup>23</sup> Fittingness is of importance when looking at excellence; without fittingness a work of art can seem pointless or without meaning. This is the empty feeling I had when listening to the majority of popular Christian musicians. Schantz says this about fittingness, “Fittingness-Intensity is how strongly the use of raw elements and form reflect patterns that are built into human experience (dramatic shape, emotions, senses, mood, sound, color, smell, taste, feel, balance)”<sup>24</sup>. Showing aspects of the human experience contributes to the entire aesthetic excellence of a musician or particular song. When fittingness is not present, the quality of the music is compromised. The human experience is powerful and contains a variety of emotions; music should express this. Without fittingness, a song will lack aesthetic excellence.

### **Representing Emotion through Music**

John A. Sloboda, author of *Exploring the Musical Mind* and professor (Guildhall School) and researcher of music psychology says this, “The reason that many people engage with music, as performers or listeners, is that it has a power to evoke or enhance

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<sup>22</sup> Wolterstroff Nicholas, *Art in Action* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing co. 1980), 99.

<sup>23</sup> Schantz, *Music Arts and the Bible*, 48.

<sup>24</sup> Schantz, *Music Arts and the Bible*, 50.

valued emotional states.”<sup>25</sup> In order to accomplish emotional movement, some composers will insert an unexpected chord or an ascending melody line. Sloboda explains that certain musical rhythms and notations signify different emotions. A fast rhythm can seem happy just as a slow rhythm can seem sad. Tears are often represented through appoggiatura, suspensions, or harmonic movement descending through the circle of fifths. Sloboda continues with the musical characteristics that portray shivers or heartbeats.<sup>26</sup> He has pointed out that variety within music is needed to show these emotional aspects.

Leonard B. Meyer, a philosopher, composer, and author, says this about emotion and aesthetic excellence. “From Plato down to the most recent discussions of aesthetics and the meaning of music, philosophers and critics have, with few exceptions, affirmed their belief in the ability of music to evoke emotional responses in listeners. Most of the treatises on musical composition and performance stress the importance of communication of feeling and emotion.”<sup>27</sup> Meyers continues on addressing moods, reality, and music: “Both music and life are experienced as dynamic processes of growth and decay, activity and rest, tension and release. These processes are differentiated, not only by the course and shape of the motions involved in them, but also by the quality of the motion.”<sup>28</sup> He gives a few examples of motion such as slow, calm, continuous, and sporadic. Meyers explains that Westerners carry connotations of this motion or tempo, such as death being represented through slow music. “Tones become associated with our

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<sup>25</sup> Sloboda John, *Exploring the Musical Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 215.

<sup>26</sup> Sloboda John, *Exploring the Musical Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 220-221.

<sup>27</sup> Meyer B. Leonard, *Emotion and Meaning in Music*. Chicago IL, The University of Chicago Press, 1956, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Meyer B. Leonard, *Emotion and Meaning in Music*. 261.

experiences of the world.”<sup>29</sup> Music indeed has the power to present emotions including happiness and sadness, joy and suffering. While listening to contemporary Christian music, one notices that the variety and deep emotion are missing.

### **The Power of Instrumental Music**

Instrumental music has the power to transport the mind. It can stir emotions. Musical film scores are a great example of the power of music. Film scores create and support the mood and provoke specific emotions. An audience can feel suspense before anything happens because of the minor chord structures and high violin suspensions. Instrumental music can bring about tears of joy and tears of suffering. A film that shows misery and has a great score is the movie *Remember Me*.<sup>30</sup> It is about a young man whose brother committed suicide. The main character eventually meets a girl who watched the murder of her mother and they confide in each other. By the end of the movie, more tragedy is experienced when both families are affected by the 9/11 tragedy in New York.

This heartbreaking movie is accompanied by music that portrays the tragedy. The song “Morning Montage” is led by a somber piano part. The cellos are sustaining bass notes, while the piano arpeggiates minor chords. On occasion, a flute is highlighted giving it timbral varieties. Eventually a high violin part is heard that signifies the tragedy of loss taking place. As the song reaches a release, a clarinet continues the three-note pattern previously shown by the piano. The ring of a vibraphone is heard at the high points of the song. The use of violins is purposeful; they are heard during the climax and the release. The strings sound as if they are crying and the piano is racing along with 8<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Coulter, Allen. *Remember Me* (film score by Marcelo Zarvos), (Summit Entertainment, 2011), “Morning Montage”.



notes the entire song, possibly to portray a sense of yearning or slight panic. At the latter part of the song, it is just the woodwinds and piano sustaining notes giving an ambient sound. The composer Marcelo Zarvos supported this story of suffering quite well; portraying the climax and the release of the tragedies taking place.

Zarvos uses a dark color palette melodically to portray the emotion. Jane Piper, author of *Musicians Guide to: Theory and Analysis*, teaching on major and minor keys says this, "If all music were composed in major keys, the palette of musical colors would be very limited."<sup>31</sup> That is probably why Zarvos uses a minor sound for "Morning Montage". Take the images away and some can still feel and see tragic images. Wolterstorff says this, "Osgood's experiments arose out of the context of studies conducted in the 1930's concerning *synesthesia*—the phenomenon in which stimulation in one sense modality produces a sensation or vivid 'image' in a different sense modality, as when upon hearing music a person has bright visual imagery."<sup>32</sup> He goes on to explain, "musical sounds produces various visual impressions: color impressions, two-dimensional pattern impressions, etc." In regard to synesthesia Schantz says this, "Synesthesia is translating one sense into another, one art into another—for example, translating sounds into their corresponding colors. Fittingness-intensity makes sense when relating the arts to each other as in Musical Theatre or Opera, which use all the arts. Each of the arts used in the work must fit precisely what is happening with the other arts...in a song, fittingness-intensity means that the tune must match the text to a tee."

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<sup>31</sup> Piper Clendinning, Jane. *Musicians Guide to: Theory and Analysis* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. (W.W. Norton and Company Inc. 2011). 88.

<sup>32</sup> Wolterstorff Nicholas, *Art in Action* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing co. 1980), 100.

That is to say, there is power in music, power to feel, to see events when there is no image at hand, and power to fit the emotions of the human experience.

“The stories and poems of the Bible exhibit fittingness-intensity in their dramatic shape. The Bible also contains numerous references to emotion and mood in the arts.”<sup>33</sup> One of the verses that comes to mind is Job 30:31, “My lyre is turned to mourning, and my pipe to the vice of those who weep.” Just as author Sloboda pointed out the sound of weeping can be represented musically through descending melody lines and appoggiatura. Even though Job wept, he also continually praised God. The dramatic shape of the Biblical narrative can be used through music. Schantz would represent this through rising tension, climax, and release. This portrays the human experience of tragedies and victories.

### **Musical Examples: The Excellent and Mediocre**

In order to show the importance of fittingness within music this investigation will proceed with musical examples. These examples will both show Christian artists who fail in portraying reality, and Christian artists who represent the picture of human experience. While exploring both the lyrical and musical content, it is important to note that not just the mention of suffering or sin is sufficient. This paper is highlighting suffering and the idea of pain within music. Just the mention of suffering through lyrics does not fully explore the topic of suffering and pain. Yes, we know that suffering exists but what about the experience of suffering? Exploring and developing an experience is different from the mere mention of it. Understanding suffering is important but there also must be a balance.

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<sup>33</sup> Schantz, *Music, Arts, and the Bible*. 52.

Just as Schantz suggests, we should address both the happiness and sadness in a tight balance that resembles reality.

One Christian artist who truly explores the topic of suffering is Jon Foreman and his song “Cure for Pain”. Jon Foreman is a well-known Christian musician that is mostly known for his band “Switchfoot”. In his band and on his own he talks about Christ’s love and happiness while also addressing hardship. “Cure for Pain” is one of the songs on Foreman’s solo albums entitled “Fall”. “Fall” is a part of the album series that addresses each season. Each season represents different stages of life. These albums show a unique balance of the human experience. In an article from *Christianity Today* Martin Moring says this about Foreman and his band “Switchfoot”, “They were simply playing the songs born in Foreman’s inquisitive mind, ‘I am interested in reading philosophy and trying to figure things out’ he says.”<sup>34</sup>

Foreman himself is exploring the pain and suffering he has felt through out his life and what it means. Moring continues explaining the album Fall, “The music is stark and sparse, rough and unpolished. Foreman and his guitar are everywhere, but it’s the creative inclusion of other instruments—trumpets, harmonica, tuba, and even Chinese guzheng.”<sup>35</sup> These instruments are important because they are not commonly used in popular music. Foreman also uses these instruments to portray a musical theme which is also unusual. This song reveals the sadness that comes along with life. Suffering is represented through melody, chord structure, and lyrics. Foreman in this song is voicing his frustration towards suffering. He uses the metaphor of water flowing from the sky to represent the never-ending suffering he feels. The lyrics are as follows:

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<sup>34</sup> Moring, Mark. “Figuring Things Out” *Christianity Today* Vol 52, Issue 11 (2008). 77.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

I'm not sure why it always goes downhill  
 Why broken cisterns never could stay filled  
 I've spent ten years singing gravity away  
 But the water keeps on falling from the sky

And here tonight while the stars are blacking out  
 With every hope and dream I've ever had in doubt  
 I've spent ten years trying to sing these doubts away  
 But the water keeps on falling from my eyes

And heaven knows, heaven knows  
 I tried to find a cure for the pain  
 Oh my Lord, to suffer like You do  
 It would be a lie to run away<sup>36</sup>

These lyrics proclaim reality in a poetic and eloquent fashion. Foreman acknowledges that there is pain. He also portrays the struggle of trying to get rid of this suffering and pain (“I’ve spent ten years singing gravity away”). At the same time, he says “Oh my Lord, to suffer like You do.” Foreman is bringing up aspects of the Christian life: the suffering, the realization, and the persevering. Musically Foreman uses interesting instruments: an acoustic guitar, the upper half of the piano, a trumpet, and a wailing electric guitar to portray these emotions. However, most of these instruments are common but the way he uses them adds variety that evokes emotion. The form is also common, it is: verse 1, verse 2, chorus, verse 3, chorus, tag, instrumental, and chorus. The chord structure is as follows in the key of B: verse: I-V-vi-IV, chorus: IV-I- V-vi-IV- I-V-IV. These chord progressions are not uncommon either. However, he leads with the IV chord and ends with the IV chord. This is a predominant chord, which makes it slightly unusual and also gives it an unresolved feeling. The topic that he is addressing lyrically is also unresolved. The trumpets at the end of the chorus follow a G#, F#, D#, B on the second, third, fourth, and first of the next measure. This sound represents

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<sup>36</sup> Jon Foreman, *Cure for Pain*, Fall (2007)

downward weeping. Going back to what Sloboda addressed about how to portray humanness: the downward melody represents tears. Jon Foreman overall did a great job incorporating unity, variety, and fittingness.

Popular contemporary Christian music is overall unbalanced in representing the human experience. A few popular artists that show this unevenness are Chris Tomlin and Hillsong's Young and Free artists. Chris Tomlin's "God's Great Dance Floor" and Hillsong's "Wake" are examples of a shallow representation of the human experience. Not only do these lyrics portray vague theology they also are repetitive and do a mediocre job of portraying happiness through Christ (which seems to be their intended purpose). Musically, both songs heavily use electronic sounds, electric guitar, and an upbeat tempo. Each song contains the same four chords the entire song. "God's Great Dance Floor" follows a I-IV- I-V chord progression while "Wake" follows an IV-V-iii-vi progression. Therefore, there is unity in these songs but a lack of variety. Chris Tomlin's "God's Great Dance Floor" repeats these lyrics:

I'm coming back to the start  
 Where You found me  
 I'm coming back to Your heart  
 Now I surrender  
 Take me  
 This is all I can bring

You'll never stop loving us  
 No matter how far we run  
 You'll never give up on us  
 All of heaven shouts: let the future begin

I feel alive, I come alive  
 I am alive on God's great dance floor<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Chris Tomlin, *God's Great Dance Floor*, Burning Lights, (2012)

As shown, these lyrics are vague in nature. The only clear theology that is presented is God's unconditional love. The main lyric "I am alive on God's great dance floor" lacks biblical evidence and can be heard as nonsensical. Overall, the lyrics lack in poetic form and vivid language. The lack of clarity and fittingness is obvious when listening and observing the lyrics. The popularity of this song is surprising with 4 million views on Youtube. There is an uneven representation of the human experience within popular Christian music, and it seems to have broad appeal.

The case is the same with Hillsong's "Wake":

With fire in our eyes, our lives a-light.  
Your love untamed, it's blazing out.  
The streets will glow forever bright.  
Your glory's breaking through the night.

You will never fade away, Your love is here to stay  
By my side, in my life, shining through me everyday.

You wake within me, wake within me.  
You're in my heart forever.<sup>38</sup>

Again, this popular Christian song proclaims that God will never leave and has unconditional love for His people, but what about the other aspects of God? The central lyric "You wake within me" is unclear because it does not address whom the "you" is. We assume they mean God but it is not explicit. The lyric also expresses the Christian life as a light. This would have been a great subject to shine clarity on in a poetic fashion. In this case, it is only touched on vaguely saying, "with fire in our eyes our lives a light". Christian's lives should be a light to the world, but on an everyday basis we fall short of this calling. This song is another example of the unevenness seen in popular

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<sup>38</sup> Hillsong Young and Free, *Wake, We are Young and Free*. (CCM, 2013)

contemporary Christian music, and the representation of the human experience as only being filled with light and joy.

### **Lyrical Content**

The top 10 contemporary Christian songs according to Klove radio station are:

1. "Soul on Fire" by Third day
2. "Because He Lives" by Matt Maher
3. "I am Not Alone" by Kari Jobe
4. "Drops in the Ocean" by Hawk Nelson
5. "Broken Together" by Casting Crowns
6. "One Day" by Matthew West
7. "Holy Spirit" by Francesca Battistelli
8. "More than You Think I am" by Danny Gokey
9. "Shoulders" By for King and Country
10. "The One I am Running to" by 7eventh Time down

Only one out of these top ten songs addresses suffering directly. "Broken Together" by Casting Crowns addresses the issue of a suffering marriage. Two out of ten address suffering in a more passive way: Kari Jobe's "I am Not Alone" and 7eventh Time Down's "The One I am Running To."

These numbers are uneven and present the lyrical problem of not addressing the reality of suffering. Charlie Peacock, a Christian songwriter and producer, says this in his book *At the Crossroads*, "It seems that Christians gravitate toward subject matter out of an intuitive feeling that Christian music is at its most relevant when its illumination, propagating, and defending subject matter easily associated with the most basic Christian fundamentals."<sup>39</sup> He continues to voice his thought, "Christians should speak to what they know and what they know should represent every aspect of creation."<sup>40</sup> Peacock addresses lyrical content and the reason some Christian artists only write straightforward

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<sup>39</sup> Peakcock Charles, *At the Crossroads: An Insider's look at the Past, Present, and Future of Contemporary Christian Music*, (Broadman and Holman publishers, 1999), 112.

<sup>40</sup> Peakcock, *At the Crossroads*, 116.

lyrics rather than writing about “every aspect of creation”. Peacock blames it partially on the industry itself, saying when the lyrics address basic subjects more money is made. Unfortunately, the topic of suffering must be considered a complex subject and may not sell as well as a basic subject. Peacock argues that this is wrong and that the Christian artists, producers, and publishers should prayerfully represent what is truly reality regardless of profit.

Peacock says this about lyrical content, “The subject matter is all of life, both the hellish and the heavenly. The same Scripture that brings us the good news of Jesus Christ also tells the story of a fat king named Eglon, who was murdered by a left-handed man named Ehud (Judges 3:22).”<sup>41</sup> Peacock exposes contemporary Christian music as a narrow range of reality. He brings up the thought of having to go to other genres to find songs of romance or conflict. He writes about teaching his children about Christ being Lord but also about other aspect of life and that those other aspects should be accounted for lyrically.

### **Creating Excellence**

Christian artist are obligated to write the full human experience, not to omit things they may not understand. Christians believe that everyone is inherently sinful; therefore, there is chaos and sufferings that God may permit. Or possibly, there is only a lack of goodness on this sinful earth that determines human suffering. Either way there is darkness and light. This sinful nature is something humanity must deal with. Expressing this frustration, like David, is considered acceptable. This is significant because expressing suffering is beneficial for Christians but is also beneficial to the growth of

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<sup>41</sup> Peacock, *At the Crossroads*, 143.



Christianity. Hence, my exhortation that Christian music must be real.

What does the secular world see when looking at Christianity? Do they see a constantly happy people who are shallow hearted or do they see the full human experience played out while accompanied by a deep trust in Jesus? Christians experience suffering therefore this façade of happiness that contemporary Christian music portrays a lie. Christian artists must face reality and understand that suffering can bring others to Christ. Accompanying the reality of suffering with an enduring faith is a witness to non-Christians. Suffering is powerful; it deserves to be addressed. When non-Christians view a Christian grieve, it takes that façade away and can bring both parties closer together.

There are three things contemporary Christian musicians must recognize: 1. They must contemplate and express suffering, 2. They must know the importance of fittingness through aesthetic excellence, and 3. They must realize that shallow lyrics ignore a central part of life.

Researching and grappling with theodicy is helpful to the artist. It gives depth to the music through knowledge. The discovery of suffering and God can give the permission needed to address the problem of suffering. Giving permission to address the negative parts of life can open up a new color palette and richer lyrical expression. In return, knowledge becomes excellence. Expanding an artist's knowledge gives new musical ideas. This is desperately needed in the contemporary Christian music industry.

When looking at theodicy and the permission to address all aspects of life, the Psalms are the perfect place to go; the psalms are put to music and are poetic. Besides the artistic qualities of the psalms, they also present the full human experience. They illustrate the rising and falling of emotion, the begging, celebrating, and the weeping.

Christian artists must recognize that the Bible itself is filled with negative emotions.

Seeking knowledge and appreciating all aspects of the Biblical narrative results in the expression of reality. An artist is able to write about the reality of suffering when it is understood. Achieving the expression of reality through musical elements helps the listener connect with the song and also contributes to aesthetic excellence. The importance of fittingness can be known through the features of aesthetic excellence. Schantz writes that the three features of aesthetic excellence are unity, variety, and fittingness-intensity. All of these aspects must be accounted for in order to achieve musical excellence. Without fittingness to reality, the entire aesthetic excellence of the piece is compromised.

Emotions are important within the arts. They help move the music and the audience. When music is impactful, it is remembered. Contemporary Christian music needs to talk about all aspects of life in order to demonstrate truths. Increasing the quality of contemporary Christian music will in return reach more people. Christian music must incorporate unity, variety, and importantly, fittingness. Christian music needs to be the example of great music because we are giving our talents as a sacrifice to an Almighty God. When hardships arise, Christians do not need to pretend they feel happy, we need to express our grievances. Suffering builds hope and therefore let us share this hope this suffering with the world around us.

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