

The Need For Artistic Excellence and Authenticity in Christian Arts

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“Pull me from the gallows of this fiber-optic nation. I cannot compute why we celebrate this mediocrity. ‘Just let me download my latest update right now. Just give me access to my latest opinion. Now! Now! Give it now!’ I cannot compute why we celebrate this mediocrity.”¹ These opening lyrics to the song “Digital Veil” by The Human Abstract, a secular, highly technical metal band, explain a sad phenomenon that is occurring in modern music. Their music, being heavy and aggressive in nature, is not pleasing for everyone which means that they are a band with a very small following. Because of this, very few people will hear these lyrics that cry out to a disinterested world that is consuming music more for the quantity and less for the quality. However, even if this song by The Human Abstract falls on deaf ears, it does not diminish the profound message of the lyrics that are accompanied by flawless, intricate music in a constantly changing meter and mode.

A great travesty that has been, and is still occurring, is that music of this caliber and depth goes nearly unnoticed. This phenomenon is not only happening with modern pop or rock music, but also with classical and jazz music. From 2013 to 2014 alone, classical music sales dropped by 13 percent.² One must understand that this is not an outcry for progressive metal or classical music to be the most popular genre in the world. That is simply unrealistic. The majority of people today like to listen to easily accessible pop music. However, something very

¹ “The Human Abstract Lyrics: Digital Veil,” *Dark Lyrics*, accessed February 25th, 2016, <http://www.darklyrics.com/lyrics/thehumanabstract/digitalveil.html#3>

² “2015 and 2014 NIELSEN MUSIC U.S. REPORT,” *Business Wire*, accessed February 26th, 2016, <http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20150107006534/en/2014-NIELSEN-MUSIC-U.S.-REPORT>.

concerning is happening in the world of popular music, and The Human Abstract communicated it right with their lyrics.

What is so alarming in the state of today's music industry is that secular artists are the most popular. They are making the best, most authentic, excellent, innovative music. Yes, some secular music is incredibly profane and stunningly empty-headed. Yet even so, it is almost *always* the secular musicians who put out records that contain musical excellence and authenticity. Whether it is in the production, engineering, performance, arranging, staging, lyrics, or song-writing, secular music is the vessel that allows the artists to bare their soul in a vulnerable, excellent, musical way. Sadly, these traits are noticeably absent in the world of popular Christian music. Without artistic substance and performance excellence, Christian music has diminished to become nothing more than a form of mediocre entertainment, lacking substance and purpose.

In songwriting and in musical performance, Christian musicians, more than anyone, are called to produce music that is written, arranged, and executed with the highest degree of excellence and with the most genuine showing of honest, unabridged, authentic artistic expression.

This paper will argue that every musician should be authentic in their musical expression while simultaneously striving for the highest degree of excellence in their chosen area of musical output, especially musicians who are of the Christian faith. It will show the absence of artists who are Christians in the secular, popular music industry and explain the church's contributing

role in that absence.³ It will highlight the misguided role of music in the church and the poisonous way the modern day church has come to suppress the creativity and the God-given role that artists have in the world. It will explain what excellence and authenticity in music looks like, how secular musicians achieve it, and how Christians can follow suit. Finally, it will encourage Christian musicians to be excellent and authentic in their craft by showing the strength that comes from art with a provocative edge and by spotlighting the Christians who *are* making excellent, authentic, substantial music that influences the whole world.

The Problem

While there are some negative things that could be said about the lifestyle or lyrical content of today's most popular musicians (Adele, Kanye West, Drake, The 1975, Bring Me The Horizon, Taylor Swift, Katy Perry, Beyoncé and more), all of these artists have found a specific, sonic niche which they fit into extremely well. Each of them has won multiple music awards and has put out some of the best-selling albums worldwide over the past five to ten years.⁴ This does not just happen by chance. Adele, especially, has music that is filled with tremendous musicality and she is widely considered a virtuosic vocalist. Others on that list have teamed up with talented studio music producers, writers, and engineers to make the artist and their songs sound so different and unique that audiences will flock towards them because the music sets a certain

³ Unless specified as the physical building that Christians congregate in for services, “the church” that is referenced in this paper is a term meant to speak to the Christian community as a whole.

⁴ Rob Cobsey, “Official Biggest Selling Albums of the decade so far revealed”, *Official Music Charts*, accessed on February 25, 2006, http://www.officialcharts.com/chart-news/official-biggest-selling-albums-of-the-decade-so-far-revealed__9787/.

mood that immediately draws the listener in. Even if these artists are lacking in some areas, none of them are completely void of musical excellence and artistry in their albums and performance.

One curious aspect about the above list of the world's most popular artists, is that there are no "Christian" artists listed. This would seem odd to anyone who knows about the Christian religion. Christianity's sacred religious text, The Bible, is filled with verses and charges about being excellent.

For example, Philippians 4:8, "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."⁵ This passage is urging members of the church to dwell on and do things that are beyond reproach. This Bible verse is most typically used by Christians when in moral situations. Yet, when those same Christians are listening to music, they listen to Contemporary Christian Music or CCM, which provides a good message, but is not often done excellently nor is it executed in a way that is "praiseworthy." CCM is a whole new genre of music that has come about over the last thirty years, but the music itself is often far from excellent.

Another example is in Titus 2:7 which says, "In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness."⁶ This call to Christians says to set an example to the rest of the world in what they do. Again, this verse is another call to be excellent and to succeed in whatever one's occupation may be. In this way, Christians lead by example and have the platform to tell others that the reason they are so diligent, committed, and have such

⁵ Phil. 4:8. NIV

⁶ Titus 2:7 NIV

a good work ethic is because they do it for the glory of Christ. 2 Corinthians 8:7 furthers this point even more in the New Testament by saying, “But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.”⁷ This increases the need for Christians to excel in their craft and to give back. The “grace of giving” that is referred to here is something that Christian artists could do very well if they had the social and monetary platform to do so.

In 1992, Jay Howard of Butler University wrote on the topic of Contemporary Christian music at a time when it was something very exciting for audiences and even more so for Christians. The popularization of Christian rock and pop was an exciting new possibility for reaching people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Howard is specifically addressing the debate about rock music and its place in the church. Many fundamentalist Christians still today think that “rock and roll” music has no place in the Church. Others will go so far as to say that “rock and roll” music is of the devil.⁸ In Howard’s 1992 essay, he writes with a passion and a voice of excitement for CCM music to bring the gospel to youth. Contemporary music was a new way to speak the truth of the Christian gospel in the language of the youth by having music that sounded similar to the popular secular artists of that generation, with lyrics about God that also carried positive, Christian messages.⁹

⁷ 2 Cor. 8:7 NIV

⁸ Jay R. Howard, “Contemporary Christian Music: Where Rock Meets Religion”, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 26:123-130, accessed February 28th, 2016, http://www.digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/595/.

⁹Jay R. Howard and John M. Streck, “Apostles of Rock: The Splintered World of Contemporary Christian Music,” (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, Feb 5, 2015), 8.

The excitement and promise that Howard wrote about in 1992 must be contrasted with his more recent book, *Apostles of Rock: The Splintered World of Contemporary Christian Music*. Howard is still a strong advocate for the good that CCM music can do but admits that it has become “splintered” by overcrowding and lack of artistry in the industry.¹⁰ Howard’s writings detailed things that CCM music has done that have been good for the message of Christ and for the music scene as a whole. However, excluding groups that were considered pioneers during the beginning of the CCM era, everything since then has been a steady decline into music that, while developing renown for great production and sound quality, is boring, campy, predictable. Even though it is sonically impressive, it still is disingenuous and mediocre at best.

The Scene

The first problem is that CCM has grown into a separate genre just like jazz or metal, but artists that are in the CCM ‘scene’ tend to vary greatly. There are pop artists, gospel groups, metal bands, rock bands, and many other genres. When CCM first began, it was exciting and new, but over a period of about thirty years, it has become its own music market.¹¹ Record labels, writers, and even performers have realized that there is a lot of money to be made writing CCM music. An important separation that needs to be made is the difference between contemporary Christian music and worship music. Even though worship music has long been considered a part of CCM, and is now being commercialized, it should be viewed differently. Worship music is meant solely for the Christian community during times of prayer, celebration, and communion. It is written as a direct cry to God, for God, or it is meant to bring a community

¹⁰ Ibid, 13-18.

¹¹ Ibid, 30-78

of believers closer to the Lord through song. However, CCM is written and intended for different purposes. CCM is supposed to sound similar to secular music, only that it is written from a Christian perspective. CCM, by nature, will mostly provide some kind of hopeful message in the end, and it will not have explicit lyrics, evil themes, or anything that would go against the Christian religion.

While being different entities, worship music and CCM music still share some of the same problems because the lines between the two different genres become blurred so often. A problem that has largely gone unaddressed is the problem of money in the Christian music industry. Since the Christian music scene has nearly separated itself completely from the secular music world, one must wonder why. Contributing to this phenomenon is the fact that Christian artists do not participate in the Grammy's and instead host their own award show called The Dove Awards. The Christian music charting system is separate from the regular Billboard Top 200. And furthermore, it is becoming increasingly rare to see a Christian artist show up in the Billboard Top 200. If Christians are supposed to care about culture, then they should not be so obviously absent from it. Christians should represent the best of the culture. That way, they can change it for the good. But right now that is not happening. Christians are failing to bring the world to Jesus because they are not participating and excelling in the culture they live in.¹²

A lot of these phenomena can be explained by one word: money. By creating CCM into a separate industry that is apart from the secular music world, there are fewer people in control and

¹²C.S. Lewis, "Christianity in Culture," in *The Christian Imagination: Essays on Literature and the Arts*, ed. Leland Ryken, (Grand Rapids: Baker House Books, 1981), 23-67

therefore, there is more money to made.¹³ While some of the bigger CCM artists and labels are offshoots of legendary, secular labels, there is an increasing number of labels and artists that only operate inside the CCM scene. Scottie Flint, CEO of Pando Records and manager of the band Random Hero, said that CCM is “a huge business scheme.” He explained that what happens is people will start a CCM record label, which is meant for and marketed only towards a specific CCM market. Then, before finding artists, that record label will find similar record labels to their own and create relationships with them. Once an up-and-coming record label has created relationships with other, more established record labels, and then the two record labels will make an unofficial deal to almost exclusively use the same producers, engineers, and mastering engineers. By doing this, they will get discounts on creating the music due to the frequency with which they are giving the work to the producers and engineers. That way all of the labels are able to cut down on expenses. “The enticing thing in CCM business is that amount of money one can make is due to how easy it is to save money.”¹⁴ Scottie describes this easy process:

Keep it all in your church. Start a label, find a good studio to record with, and then get startup funding from your church. Once you make your label part of your church ministry, get your worship leader as your first artist. Have them write an album with at least a few worship style songs for their album. Once they have those songs, introduce them to the church and play those songs during Sunday service. Every time that song, or songs, is played in your church, the label and artists get paid. Then expand and start playing at other churches, see if those churches will play your artists songs, and try to even recruit their worship leaders into your label. Keep doing that until you have a lot of people on your label and then, boom! You have a CCM label and you’re generating income through normal music sales, gigs, merch, and whatever, but you also have the potential to make money every Sunday when the songs are played at churches.¹⁵

¹³ Scottie Flint, interviewed by Nathan Johnson, sit down talk at The Marquis Theatre in Denver, Colorado, March 3, 2016.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

The CCM way of building labels that Scottie talked about is a fairly solid business plan, and with the right heart and intentions, a label like he described has the ability to do a lot of good. With this business plan in mind, it is easy to see how the CCM community may not be interested in delving into the record labels, management, and politics of the secular music industry. There is a smaller group of businesses, more trust, and more like-minded people to work with in the Christian community. However, not only does this neglect the Christian's call to be in the world, but it also creates an environment in which the creativity of Christian artists is not allowed to blossom and grow. All the artists write and record with the same small pool of producers who make music for church services and Christian radio stations. The avenues that the music is distributed through are very narrow, causing many of the songs to sound the same. This kills artistic authenticity; and if the artists know that their album will sound similar to everything else in CCM, then there is no room to grow, which then snuffs out the artistic drive for excellence and creativity.

These circumstances can also be seen by coming to terms with the fact that a large portion of the pop/rock worship music that is performed in Sunday church services around the world is not executed well. Some church musicians are volunteers and this is not meant to bash them, but it seems that Christians performing music in church for God should strive for nothing but the best. When this happens on Sundays, it also sets a precedent in Christian music for mediocrity, which then evolves into an overarching model of Christian music that is lacking not only creativity but is also void of any gusto, passion, or sorrowful lament. In this way, the church has seemed to diminish the artistic and spiritual value of music. Even the music that is played during church services seems to be an unsubstantial place-holder, simply meant to hold the

attention of the congregation while they get seated and greet their neighbor before the sermon starts. Robert Elmore, even in 1981, felt passionate about this as well. He digs deeper into this unfortunate phenomenon and illuminates the call for churches and Christians to view music and art with much more reverence.

What is the ordinary gospel hymn? Is it a noble melody, well harmonized, wedded to a text expressed in words of beauty and power? To ask the question is to answer it, regrettably, in the negative. Worthy hymns are, like everything that is worthy, in the minority. I have the distinct impression that a good many of our popular Christian songs are written to sell, not to save; for their bounce, not their blessing. There seems to be a feeling in some Christian circles that if music is truly deep, it is suspect and perhaps subversive and therefore not to be used in church. There are even ministers who feed their congregations with the strong meat of the Word and at the same time surround their preaching with only the skimmed milk of music. . . It is my conviction that many Christians are missing much blessing and inspiration by leaving great music out of their scheme of living. The deprivation may well be more significant today than in the past.¹⁶

Another reason that popular Christian artists are not in the same, well-respected ranks of the best, popular, secular artists is simply because of the way they describe themselves: as Christian. There will always be some amount of backlash to those who proclaim the name of Jesus Christ in the midst of a secular world that does not fully understand the Christian worldview.¹⁷ Audiences can pick up on an artist's beliefs from lyrics or even from their personal life, but when an artist labels themselves as "Christian artists," they immediately relegate themselves to the market of CCM and usually forego any chance of impacting the secular music

¹⁶ Robert Elmore, "The Place of Music in Christian Life," in *The Christian Imagination: Essays on Literature and the Arts*, ed. Leland Ryken, (Grand Rapids: Baker House Books, 1981), 429-435

¹⁷ Brooke F. Westcott, *Social Aspects of Christianity*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1900), 46.

industry.¹⁸ Very few artists labeled as “Christian musicians” still have a place in the secular music industry.

Other artists have taken a different approach to escape the trap of being labeled a Christian artist. Bands who are most notable for this are Switchfoot and Needtobreathe. Both of these bands started out their careers as heavily involved CCM bands. After gaining notoriety in the Christian scene, headlining festivals and playing massive conferences, they drifted away from that scene, dropping the Christian label that was held to their band, and continuing their careers in the direction of making a mark on the secular world.

Even though it seems to be more beneficial for a musician’s career that they not label themselves as “Christian”, without that label, many people in the Christian community get upset.¹⁹ An odd stigma has emerged in the modern church, and amongst the Christian community as a whole, against any type of artists who are Christians, but choose not to make “Christian” art. Francis Schaeffer challenges this logic by saying, “A Christian should use these arts to the glory of God, not just as tracts, mind you, but as things of beauty to the praise of God. An artwork can be a doxology in itself.”²⁰ For centuries, music has been an integral part of the church. Music has even been solely confined to inside the walls of the church. However, now that all types of music are everywhere and ever accessible in daily life, the church has started to relinquish its hand in the musical arts, which is the exact opposite of what the church should be doing. The church should be pushing all believers to be the most excellent in their field and this includes artists

¹⁸ John J. Thompson, *Raised by Wolves: The Story of Christian Rock & Roll*, (Toronto: ECW Press, 2000), 105

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 33

²⁰ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1973,)

such as musicians. By failing in the musical arts, the church, without realizing it, is missing an opportunity to show the true character of Christ.

The Artists

The modern church now finds itself stuck at a crossroads. The secular world, due to immediate alienation by the label of “Christian” as well a history of terrible music, seems to no longer be interested in musicians who label their work as “Christian music.” Conversely, the church does not want to forego the Christian name because they feel as though they would be acting as Peter did, denying that they know Christ.²¹ But therein lies the problem. What is creating this problem is the notion that, by a musician not branding their art and their career as “Christian,” they are somehow doing a disservice towards God and His purpose and will for their life. Aside from simply being false, this notion is hypocritical from those who are not musicians or artists.

According to the National Bureau of Labor and Statistics, the number of career and working musicians in the United States is approximately 63,000.²² That number is extremely difficult to come to and to judge accurately due to how many people can play or write music, write, record, and perform in a free-lance environment, and those who simply play music on the side. Also there are nearly one million registered BMI and ASCAP accounts in the United States, which shows that more than 63,000 people are trying to make money in the music industry.²³

²¹ Luke 22:54-62, NIV

²² Kristin Thompson, “How Many Musicians Are There,” *Future of Music*, last modified May 23, 2015, <http://money.futureofmusic.org/how-many-musicians-are-there/>.

²³ Ibid.

Whatever the real number is though, it is definitely lower than the number of more common careers, such as business, real estate, home improvement, fitness, etc. So, even though there are more people working in these careers than in music, there is no opposition to be heard against a Christian person whose profession is described as a “real estate agent” instead of a “Christian real estate agent.”²⁴

For example it would be fairly odd for a electrician to strictly market himself as a “Christian electrician.” This would only be done if he wanted to confine his electrical work solely to the Christian community and no one else. This is rarely ever the case with such a profession because it creates an unnecessarily low ceiling of potential growth that said electrician could have in his business and in his personal life. Additionally, it severely nullifies any chance for him to spread the gospel through his work. This example illustrates why it is so bewildering that Christian musicians will do exactly the same thing with their own profession. This is a huge factor as to why the popular Christian music scene has begun drifting further and further away from the rest of the musical world.

So, why then are artists pressured into creating careers that carry the “Christian” label? Most of it has to do with the fact that being an artist is unlike other occupations. Artists do not follow a manual or solve problems; artists create. They have the freedom to create anything, with any message, and that creative freedom sometimes frightens the church. Christians have become scared of freedom, even though that is one of the main principles of the Christian life.²⁵ While a vital part of the Christian doctrine is the understanding of humanity's fallen and sinful nature, the

²⁴ Harold M. Best, “Music Through The Eyes Of Faith.” (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers), 1-183

²⁵ Francis A. Schaeffer, “Art and the Bible,” (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1973.), 1-94

dogma of the modern church clings so tightly to this that it has begun to cause an outbreak of fear and guilt to spread through the minds of believers. This fear delays the comprehension of grace, callouses hearts, and it undermines the importance of God's atoning sacrifice. Through this, the church has become so afraid of freedom that it has confined artists into a small, religious box that does not allow for true expression, whether that is praise or lament.

The church does not widely approve of songs that have grit or a provocative edge that is written in by the artist for the sake of being honest and authentic. True authenticity commonly does contain a provocative edge because real life is not always "family friendly." If this provocative edge is communicated effectively in a song, it gives the song the ability to pull the listener into a place that can be uncomfortable. It is then that a song can more accurately and effectively relay the artist's message. This authentic grit can take a song from simply being enjoyable, to being a life changing piece of art for the listener. In this attempt to control the musical content and keep everything "family-friendly," the church stifles excellent, authentic artistry.

When it comes to popular music, the majority of Christians have started to push their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who are artists to only make music in a way that would fit into a church service. They are told to do this for God's glory, which is a good thing, but the problem is that the term "glory" is misunderstood, due to different culture and personal connotations.²⁶ This misunderstanding has created two sides in the world of the arts; "Christian" and "secular." While labels such as these are inescapable in some ways, the strict criteria that has

²⁶ Steve Turner, "Imagine. A vision for Christians in the Arts," (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press: 2001) 9

emerged for what Christian music can, and cannot, be has contributed to the lack of excellence and authentic artistry.

The Substance

The best way to see this phenomenon clearly is not to look at what is wrong with the music in the Christian world. Instead, it is to examine what artists *are* doing it right. For artistic growth to become a reality, one must look deeply into the kind of work that these successful artists do and then understand how Christians can approach their music the same way.²⁷ While there are many examples of honest and authentic music that is performed to the highest degree of excellence, this paper will focus mainly on the artists who excel in the areas that Christian artists fall short.

Since the lack of vulnerability and honesty is possibly the most glaring blemish on the face of popular music made by Christians, the first artist to highlight is Noah Gundersen, a singer/songwriter who has made his heart-wrenching and, at times, uncomfortably personal lyrics the foundational pillar of his work. Noah was born in the state of Washington in 1989 into an extremely fundamentalist, Christian family. Noah grew up, as all of his siblings did, being homeschooled by his parents. As a child, Noah's family very much frowned upon secular music, so he grew up with only praise, worship, and CCM music.²⁸ Noah began playing guitar and piano at a fairly early age and by the time he was 16 years old, he was playing gigs at local

²⁷ Frank E. Gaebelien, *The Christian, The Arts, and The Truth*, (Portland Oregon, Multnomah Press, 1985), 79-108

²⁸ Noah Gundersen, post-show conversation at the Bluebird Theatre in Denver, Co. September 20th, 2015.

coffee houses and churches. From there on out, his musical pursuits continually increased. Noah teamed up with his sister Abby, who is a fantastic violinist and backup vocalist, to add a country/Americana feeling to his sound. In 2008, Noah recorded and released his first EP. After, he and his sister played shows in their hometown and nearby cities, then repeated the process.²⁹ The second EP, released in 2009, not only showed an improvement in song structure and musicality, but it also contained the song “Jesus, Jesus”.

“Jesus, Jesus” showed those who knew about Noah that he was something special. Just one year out of his teens and Noah had written a Bob Dylan-esque, acoustic ballad detailing his struggle to understand Jesus. The song is structured in a way that allows Noah to begin each question or feeling he has by saying, “Jesus, Jesus.” The song’s third verse is the most impactful.

Jesus, Jesus, there are those that say they love you
 But they have treated me so goddamn mean
 And I know you said ‘forgive them for they know not what they do’
 But sometimes I think they do
 And I think about you
 If all the heathens burn in hell, do all their children burn as well?
 What about the Muslims and the gays and the unwed mothers?
 What about me and all my friends?
 Are we all sinners if we sin?
 Does it even matter in the end if we're unhappy?

 Jesus, Jesus, I'm still looking for answers
 Though I know that I won't find them here tonight
 But Jesus, Jesus, could you call me if you have the time?
 And maybe we could meet for coffee and work it out

²⁹ Paige Richmond, “An Incomplete History of How Noah Gundersen Became The Courage From Counting Crows and dreads to Guitarville and Fearful Bones.”, *Seattle Weekly*, published September 7th, 2010, <http://www.seattleweekly.com/2010-09-08/music/an-incomplete-history-of-how-noah-gundersen-became-the-courage/>

And maybe then I'll understand what it's all about.³⁰

The intent of this paper is not to explain, nor correct, any existential and theological questions or issues that a song might highlight. Similarly, for a listener, what is important in hearing this song is that one's first response is not trying to answer Noah's questions; it is to listen, and to truly hear them. If Christians will listen and hear words like these instead of being offended due to the swear words or the lack of holy reverence, then they will be able to understand the questions that their mission field is asking.³¹ Furthermore, on top of hearing the words, Christians need to be able to learn from them and become able to employ the same musical and artistic tactics in their music. Noah's lyrics in this song are personal questions and struggles that deeply trouble him, yet he shares them openly, seemingly apathetic towards the impending judgment of others. Additionally, knowing the kind of upbringing Noah had not only makes the song even more intriguing, but it also shows what an incredible act of courage that writing and releasing this song was. Most people have trouble baring their soul to those they hold most dear, but Noah offers up the most intimate regions of his soul to whoever will listen. "Jesus, Jesus" resonated with so many and became a YouTube hit.

"Jesus, Jesus" helped Noah gain popularity that led to the release of his third EP. Songs from this EP were featured on nationally televised shows such as *One Tree Hill*, *The Following*, and *Sons of Anarchy*. This solidified his stake as singer-songwriter of the highest caliber, capable of capturing audiences instantly. Noah's career continued to blossom with the release of

³⁰ "Noah Gundersen Lyrics", *AZ Lyrics*, accessed March 28th, 2016, <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/noahgundersen/jesusjesus.html>

³¹ Ryan Murphy, "Atheism," In-class lecture from *Worldviews: Winter Term*, Lakewood, Colorado, January 5, 2016.

his first full-length album, *Ledges*.³² This album added songs with a full band that allowed the songs to be more dynamic in volume and instrumentation. Adding this also allowed Noah's brother Jonny to join the band and tour as their drummer. With the release of *Ledges* in 2013, it became clear that Noah's ever-growing following was largely due to him giving a voice to the voiceless by way of his intimate lyrics, but also because his music made this lyrical intimacy possible.

By this time, Noah's musical craft was becoming more and more mature. He learned how to allow the roots of American, country/folk music into his chord progressions without making his music sound predictable. From writing songs with just guitar, to writing songs for a whole band, to even writing an *a cappella*, spiritual song sung only by Noah and his siblings, Gundersen showed how dedicated he was to his sound, and his creativity was able to shine through. He perfected the use of slow tempo and light, acoustic instrumentation to make way for his baritone voice to be front and center of the music, giving the lyrics the focus that they deserve. Musically, while his chord progressions do not have borrowed harmonies, his songs each sound unique on their own. All of these characteristics put together made him not only someone who audiences could enjoy, but his vulnerability made him an artist who allowed his fan base to see his growth and allowed them to grow with him.

Upon the release of his second and most recent album, *Carry The Ghost*, it was clear that Noah had reached a pivotal point in his life. His music and lyrics showed how he was still maturing and what adult independence looked like for him.³³ But the sound and instrumentation

³² Steve Leggett, Rovi, "Noah Gundersen", *Billboard*, accessed March 28th, 2016, <http://www.billboard.com/artist/5862542/noah-gundersen/biography>

³³ "Biography", *Noah Gundersen Music*, accessed March 27th, 2016, <http://noahgundersenmusic.com/biography/>

did not change all that much; the dark and more matured sound still came through which showed his growth from the last album. The songs on this album were his emotionally heaviest yet, dealing with breakups, existentialism, loss of faith, and guilt-ridden sexuality.

In an interview with Chorus.fm, Noah speaks openly about the overall theme of the album, inspirations for songs, and the place he is at in his life. This interview is mesmerizing, thought provoking, and contains thoughts and comments from the artist that help further explain his music and message. In this interview, Noah is doing almost exactly what Francis Schaeffer was advocating for when he said, “Christian art is the expression of the whole life of the whole person as a Christian. What a Christian portrays in his art is the totality of life. Art is not to be solely a vehicle for some sort of self-conscious evangelism.”³⁴ It is clear that Noah is doing this, but since he is not a Christian anymore, the message of Christ is not the main focus of what he is doing. Interviews and music making of this intellectual depth paired with this type of honesty, even in dealing with subject matter that is hard to talk about, is exactly what young, Christian musicians have been called to implement in their careers as artists. This showing of authenticity and creative excellence in his latest album is best described in the words of Noah himself:

Noah talks about his newest album by saying, “It’s something we carry, our experiences, and something we live with every day, and you know, we make decisions on how we respond to our experiences, but they are what shapes us... [*Carry The Ghost*] is more just an exploration of, ultimately, existentialism.”³⁵ Further on in the interview

³⁴ Francis A. Schaeffer, “Art and the Bible,” (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1973,)

³⁵ Interviews: Noah Gundersen.” *Chorus.fm*. September 2016.
<https://chorus.fm/interviews/interview-noah-gundersen/>

Noah is asked about his views about God. This is another great showing of what Francis Schaeffer was talking about in the above quote about the Christian artist. Noah says,

...At this point, I'm not religious. I'm not even sure if I really believe in God at this point. But, the verdict's still out on God. But I think a lot of the topics on this record are based around trying to understand what are the ethical guidelines in my life now that they're not dictated by a religion or by belief in a god? And that's a scary thing, and that's a place of vulnerability. Because I think people want to be told how to live, ultimately, because it's easier...So that's kind of the place that I'm at now. I'm not so much grappling with faith as I am with understanding my own personal ethics and why I live the way I live, or what is the quote-unquote "right way to live."³⁶

The next example of a secular artist that exemplifies traits of excellence and authenticity in their music is a band called The 1975. This English pop/rock band is known for their catchy hooks and their unique, retro 80's sound mixed with modern digital landscapes. The 1975 was formed by a few friends who all played separate instruments. After years of practicing, writing, and honing in on their sound, the band was finally able to start playing shows and releasing demos. Very soon after this, The 1975 was picked up by Interscope who realized the genius of these kids and their music.³⁷ The 1975 has a unique draw not only because of their specific sound, but because of the themes in their music, which is driven by their polarizing front man, Matt Healy. Healy has touched on many heavy topics since the band's first music releases. However, this is so interesting because the easy-going, pop sound that attracts a younger audience does not always suit itself well to lyrics about cocaine, sex, and failed hope in religion.

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Michael Hann, "The 1975: 'No one's asking you to inspire a revolution. But inspire something,'" *The Guardian*, last modified November 18, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/nov/15/the-1975-matt-healy-no-ones-asking-you-to-inspire-revolution-interview>.

While the lyrics might be quite promiscuous, the openness of Healy in his struggle with these things captivates fans all over the world.

On their first release, a self-titled album that was a huge success, the songs were mainly about girls, love, youth, and relationships, but from the one-of-a-kind mind of Healy. In the song “Girls,” Healy talks about dealing with groupies. Instead of using typical, AC/DC type lyrics that one would expect from a rock band, Healy takes a different approach, giving his fans insight into themselves. This shows just part of what makes this band so gripping to audiences. In one song, Healy will talk about how much he enjoys the party lifestyle, but in the next he makes observation such as the following. This lyric is dialogue between Healy and a groupie that is in love with him and wants him:

I said, "No!"
 "Oh give it a rest, I could persuade you."
 "I'm not your typical, stoned 18 year old."
 "Give me a night, I'll make you."
 "I know you're looking for salvation in the secular age,
 but girl, I'm not your savior."³⁸

The 1975 released their long awaited sophomore album in 2016. The title of the album is *I like it when you sleep, for you are so beautiful, yet so unaware of it*. Even from the title it seemed that this album would provide even deeper lyrical insight from Healy, and that is exactly what it did. This album is an incredible work of art in every aspect. The musicality is some of the most excellent and innovative that pop music has seen in years. The band, in interviews, has

³⁸ “The 1975 Lyrics”, *AZ Lyrics*, accessed March 28th, 2016, <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/1975/girls.html>

stated that their songwriting process has evolved to become a well-oiled machine.³⁹ They program the rough skeleton of the song digitally first, then arrange it with live instruments as a whole band, then for the final stages, they will add in lots of electronic and digital sounds around it. This gives them their unique sound, but they say it also helps them create the best songs possible. This shows in the grooves that their music has. They have said that they have always been fascinated with the syncopation of instruments; having one sound on the beats that another sound is not playing. This allows them to write short, catchy grooves for each instrument that, when all put together, creates a huge sound that is not cluttered. Doing this digitally on a grid, helps them see this visually and compose from there.⁴⁰

The new album, *I like it when you sleep, for you look so beautiful, yet you are so unaware of it*, contains many different kinds of songs while still maintaining the integrity of their unique sound. The album has fast, catchy pop-songs, slow, somber ballads, a gospel style track, instrumental tracks, and even an acoustic song that details a woman's story of poverty and drug addiction. All of these songs include many different elements that keep the listener engaged, on edge, and interested to hear what will come next. One song on the album will be a fun, piano driven pop song, yet the very next song is slow, predominantly digital, and nearly atonal. While many of their fans were upset that they took three years to write, record, and release their new album, all those negative feelings have since disappeared since the February, 2016 release of

³⁹The 1975, interviewed by Nic Harcourt, "The 1975 - Interview with Nic Harcourt -HD-," Youtube video, 33:54, posted by "Jazz and Blues," January 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTdZfgcza7w>

⁴⁰ Ibid.

their album.⁴¹ Since the album's release, it became clear that the reason for the long wait for the new album is because making music of that kind of caliber takes time.

The song most worthy of highlighting is a gospel track entitled "If I Believe You." This song, written by Healy, who is on record as being an atheist, is a personal cry directed towards Jesus. The directness, honesty, and intellectual depth that are employed in this song are something that should be carefully examined by Christian musicians. Also, the excellent musicality and creative, original take on what a gospel track can be comes through as an incredible showing of creativity. While this song is a treat to listen to, it will also sadden listeners because of Healy's gut-wrenching cries for help. Furthermore while the Christian listener should feel the same things, it should also upset them to know that a secular pop band created a song that cries out for Jesus's help in a way that severely outdoes the same attempts done in the popular Christian music scene.

To show this contrast clearly, here are the lyrics to a song about struggling faith from the top Christian album on iTunes. The song is called "O' Lord" by Lauren Daigle. This is a slower song with block piano chords accompanied by a saw, synth lead and claps as the percussion. The chord progression is vi-IV-I-V through the whole song. The lyrics are as follows:

Though times it seems
Like I'm coming undone
This walk can often feel lonely
No matter what until this race is won
I will stand my ground where hope can be found

⁴¹ Michael Hann, "The 1975: 'No one's asking you to inspire a revolution. But inspire something,'" *The Guardian*, last modified November 18, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/nov/15/the-1975-matt-healy-no-ones-asking-you-to-inspire-revolution-interview>.

Oh, O'Lord O'Lord I know You hear my cry
 Your love is lifting me above all the lies
 No matter what I face this I know in time
 You'll take all that is wrong and make it right
 Whoa...⁴²

To contrast Lauren Daigle's song is the previously mentioned song, "If I Believe You," from The 1975. Just as Lauren Daigle's album was at the top of the Christian charts, The 1975's new album *I like it when you sleep, for you look so beautiful, yet you are so unaware of it*, is at the top of the international music charts on iTunes. This song deals with nearly the exact same subject matter as Lauren Daigle's song. However The 1975's song is written from a non-Christian perspective. In the song, Healy, confesses that he is in need of Jesus' help, but also admits to being an atheist. This lyrical paradox beautiful describes the frustration and instability of theistic, existential doubt. This track also sounds completely different from Daigle's track in a good way. The song is a digitally driven, gospel style track featuring a choir in the choruses, multiple jazz harmonies between the instruments, and even an acoustically recorded saxophone solo that gently cuts through the digital mix in a gentle and understated way. The lyrics are as follows:

I've got a God-shaped hole, that's infected
 And I'm petrified of being alone
 It's pathetic, I know
 And I toss and I turn in my bed
 It's just like I lost my head (lost my head)

And if I believe you, would that make it stop?
 If I told you I need you, is that what you want?

⁴² "Lauren Daigle Lyrics," *AZLyrics*, accessed April 7, 2016, <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/laurendaigle/olord.html>

I'm broken and bleeding, and begging for help
And I'm asking you Jesus, show yourself

I thought I'd met you once or twice but that was just because the dabs
were nice

And opening up my mind
showing me consciousness is primary
in the universe and I had a revelation

I'll be your child if you insist

I mean, if it was you that made my body you probably shouldn't have made
me atheist

I'm a lesbian kiss

I'm an evangelist

And "If you don't wanna go to hell then, Miss,
you better start selling this"

And if I believe you, would that make it stop?

If I told you I need you, is that what you want?

I'm broken and bleeding, and begging for help

And I'm asking you Jesus, show yourself

If I'm lost, then how can I find myself?⁴³

While there is nothing wrong with Lauren Daigle's song, it is simply boring. The lyrics are full of Christian clichés that are only relatable to audiences because they are so broad. Also, Daigle's song begins by talking about struggles with faith and the trials of life, but so quickly comes back to wholehearted faith in God without mention of any turmoil. While there is absolutely nothing wrong with encouraging audiences to trust in God and to come back to Him in times of trouble, coming back to Him so quickly is not always common to the Christian life. Furthermore, it can alienate a secular listener, making them feel as though Christians do not experience the same things that others do. Furthermore, the previously mentioned structure and

⁴³ "The 1975 Lyrics", *AZ Lyrics*, accessed March 28th, 2016,
<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/1975/ifibelieveyou.html>

instrumentation of the song is astonishingly uninteresting as well as being predictable. It is exactly what any music listener would expect from the CCM genre.

In stark contrast to that is The 1975's song. Their song is interesting, innovative, edgy, and it slightly pushes the listener outside of their comfort zone, both musically and lyrically. By doing this it keeps the listener engaged, which means they are more likely to pay more attention to the lyrics. By keeping audiences slightly on edge, the band is able to persuade listeners to keep coming back for more, opening their minds further and further to the music and lyrics.

This is just one of many possible comparison examples of popular secular music far outdoing popular Christian music. Examples such as these underscore the vital importance of excellence and authenticity in music making. Part of what also makes the previously highlighted secular music so good is that along with excellence and authenticity, it also contains a certain lyrical edge to it that allows the music to hit the listener harder than it would if it was toned down. That grit and that edge come from being transparent and honest about struggles and experiences. Instead, popular Christian music has resorted to being chock-full of positive songs that are almost always about God's grace or goodness.

Again, there is a vast need for music like this in the world and this paper in no way means to demean music that glorifies God in a family friendly way. There is a need for easily accessible, positive, easy-going, Christian music in the world. That is what radio stations like K-Love and WayFM are for. However, the issue this paper brings to light is that there is a severe gap between Christian music and secular music because Christian, CCM type music does not have the same sound quality, innovative standard, or have the same authentic, lyrical discernment that is often seen in secular music.

The Hope

The state of popular Christian music may, now, seem bleak, but in reality it is not. Yes, the popular, CCM music done by Christians is mediocre at best and needs major improvements. However, those who strive to fix that must look at Christians who are excelling in their field, bringing glory to God, and producing excellent, authentic art. One great example of someone doing great work outside of the popular, CCM world is the American composer Charles Denler. Denler is an outspoken Christian who serves on faculty at Colorado Christian University. He has composed many scores for all different types of film and he most recently released an incredibly moving and beautiful symphonic album entitled *Moment At Dawn*, which won a 2016 Gold Medal at the Global Music Awards.⁴⁴

Another great example of Christians making impactful art that allows for a secular audience is the band Penny and Sparrow. While they are in no way associated with CCM, a good amount of their fans know that they are Christians. This acoustic duo has been able to begin and carve out a nice career for themselves. Starting out by just playing acoustic songs, they have eventually matured into something very unique. By pairing their breathtaking voices and harmonies with novel, experimental post-production of odd sound effects, dripping wet reverb, minimalist string arrangements, and lo-fi soundscapes, they created a sonic niche that they execute exceptionally well.

Lyrically, they possess extraordinary insight and profound questions dealing with love, relationships, and life through an authentic Christian viewpoint. The most interesting ways that they do this is by personifying mysterious people and by using deep, long-winded analogies.

⁴⁴ "Home," *Charles Denler*, accessed April 7, 2016, <http://www.charlesdenler.com/>

While these are sometimes hard to understand, it sets them apart by being different and is intensely creative. Using this technique has allowed for their music to persuade listeners into listening to songs over and over again as they dig into the profound meaning of the songs. Once these analogies and characters are fully realized and coupled with the magnificent music, the listener becomes incapable of hearing the song without being overcome with emotion. For instance, in the song "Honest Wage," the lyrics are sung from the viewpoint of the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son. Not only do they personify him, but at the same time that they do this, they also draw a parallel to the feelings of the older brother watching his younger brother, the prodigal son, being celebrated, to the feelings of a bitter ex-lover having to watch the one they love with someone else. Unfortunately, Penny and Sparrow seem to stand nearly all alone in the ranks of Christians making excellent, universally accessible popular music.

In conclusion, the state of popular Christian music needs help. There is a great and immediate need for Christian musicians to break free from the artistic shackles that have been put on them by the church and by themselves. Breaking free can only come from a radical change in artistic theology that has been recently skewed by the Christian community. Christian artists and church leaders must revisit the writings of figures like Schaffer and Rookmaaker so that they may open their minds to God's true calling that He has given to musicians and artists of all kinds. Christians are called to be in the world, but not of it. Following that call can be especially difficult as a musician, but just because it is difficult does not mean that Christian musicians are to not be present in the secular world. Moreover, Christians are called to excellence for Christ. But by very often being outdone by secular musicians in popular music, Christians are failing to show Christ to the world. Falling short in this area of popular music has shown that it is *necessary* for Christians to make music that is even more intricate, innovative, authentic, and

excellent as the best secular artists. By continually doing this, Christians will be able to, once again, take a hold of the arts by enabling them to show the world Christ's true character through excellent, authentic, musical expressions for His glory.

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