What Are We Conserving? Truth and the Aesthetics of Scripture
Scott Aniol

We are living in a time when traditional lines of institutional cooperation are being redrawn, and this has come as a result of several factors. First, some groups within the broader evangelicalism have begun to apply what historic fundamentalists have called the doctrine of separation, refusing to recognize as Christians those who deny the gospel, strongly condemning the most egregious errors such as the prosperity gospel,[1] and even insisting that some so-called secondary doctrines are important enough that they affect the degree to which Christians can cooperate.[2] On the other hand, some groups from what might be called historic fundamentalism have begun to reject a binary practice of separation, recognizing that not every doctrine affects the ability to cooperate on every level.[3]

These realities have created what we might call a "Together for the Gospel" *via media*, a coalition focused on perpetuating fundamental doctrines at the core of biblical orthodoxy including the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, penal substitution, and the omniscience of God, and even other secondary matters that have impact upon orthodoxy, such as emphasizing expository preaching, rejecting pragmatic methodology, and upholding complementarian gender roles in the family and church.[4]

Absent from any of the core commitments of these groups, however, is any statement concerning philosophy of culture or worship, which strongly implies that these not be permitted to affect cooperation. To give an explicit example of this, according to a 2007 article in *SBC Life*, the official journal of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, "By not addressing the issue of worship style in the *BF&M 2000*, Southern Baptists have already decided that worship styles and methodology are not a condition of cooperation."[5] And, in fact, this reality has been made explicit by some, who insist that one's philosophy of culture, beauty, or worship is not a "gospel issue." We are supposed to be gospel-centered, and so anything that goes beyond the gospel, the argument goes, should not be a measure of fellowship.

To be "conservative," in this way of thinking, is limited only to theological and moral fidelity to Scripture; some even might call themselves "conservative evangelicals," meaning they believe in the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, and even complementarian views concerning gender roles. However, when it comes to culture and worship, to be conservative is to go beyond Scripture. For example, Mark Driscoll proudly

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[1] For example, see John Piper, "Why John Piper Abominates the Prosperity Gospel," *The Gospel Coalition* (blog), accessed July 25, 2018, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-john-piper-abominates-the-prosperity-gospel/.

[2] For example, see Al Mohler's proposal for "Theological Triage" in Andrew David Naselli and Collin Hansen, eds., *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 77–80.

[3] See Kevin Bauder's chapter in ibid., 19–49.

[4] See "Together for the Gospel Affirmations and Denials" (http://t4g.org/about/affirmations-and-denials/) and "The Gospel Coalition Confessional Statement" (https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/about/foundation-documents/#confessional-statement). See also "The Baptist Faith and Message 2000," the official summary of faith for the Southern Baptist Convention (https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/about/foundation-documents/#confessional-statement).

[5] Bill Curtis, "Working Together for the Sake of the Gospel," *SBC Life*, February 1, 2007, http://www.sbclife.net/article/1482/working-together-for-the-sake-of-the-gospel.

claimed to be "theologically conservative and culturally liberal,"[6] and while others might not put it quite so bluntly, they would affirm the underlying sentiment.

One of the reasons most often cited for rejecting a conservative philosophy of culture is evangelism. We must "contextualize" God's truth into the culture of our target demographic in order to reach them with the gospel. We are faithful to Scripture doctrinally, but the cultural forms we use to communicate truth are neutral and entirely flexible. This is often taken a step further with the claim that Christians must be free to worship using the artistic expressions of their surrounding culture in order to be authentic.

So, the question I am addressing in this paper is this: What does it really mean to be conservative Christians? What are we really conserving? Is being conservative only about preserving particular theological propositions, or is there more to it? Are culture and aesthetics really irrelevant to what we are trying to conserve?

A Conservative Philosophy of Culture

So, what, then, is conservative Christianity?[7] Conservatism has, of course, a long tradition in the history of Western philosophy. From the perspective of the history of Western thought, Christian conservatism might be considered a subset of classical conservatism or "Realist Conservatism." One of the more influential philosophers key to a resurgence of this intellectual conservatism in the twentieth century, Richard Weaver, describes Realist Conservatism in this way:

> It is my contention that a conservative is a realist, who believes that there is a structure of reality independent of his own will and desire. He believes that there is a creation which was here before him, which exists now not by just his sufferance, and which will be here after he's gone. This structure consists not merely of the great physical world but also of many laws, principles, and regulations which control human behavior. Though this reality is independent of the individual, it is not hostile to him. It is in fact amenable by him in many ways, but it cannot be changed radically and arbitrarily. This is the cardinal point. The conservative holds that man in the world cannot make his will his law without any regard to limits and to the fixed nature of things.[8]

Weaver's definition summarizes two core pillars of classical conservatism, which provides a helpful structure through which to explore Christian conservatism.

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[6] Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 138.

[7] This summary will necessarily be simplistic. For a more thorough exposition of conservative Christianity, see Scott Aniol et al., *A Conservative Christian Declaration* (Religious Affections Ministries, 2014).

[8] Richard M. Weaver, "Conservatism and Libertarianism: The Common Ground," in *In Defense of Tradition: Collected Shorter Writings of Richard M. Weaver, 1929-1963*, ed. Ted J. Smith III (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 477. Weaver further developed this definition in Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (University of Chicago Press, 1962).

Belief in Transcendent Absolute Principles

First, according to Weaver, Realist Conservatism holds that there is an absolute order of universals that defines the nature of things and exists apart from human "will or desire." Defined this way, Christianity can be no less than Realist, affirming an absolute and unchanging reality that governs all nature and reveals its meaning and value. As T. David Gordon observed, "Christian Theism is unabashedly Realist, and that so from the opening words of the Bible."[9]

Generally speaking, classical conservatives divide the absolute order of universals into three categories, as summarized by another important philosopher of conservatism, Mortimer Adler. These three "Great Ideas," as Adler calls them, by which we judge meaning and value in the world are Truth, Goodness, and Beauty.[10] Where Christian realism progresses further is in rooting such transcendent, absolute principles in the sovereign will of the self-existent Creator. These principles are revealed to us in creation (Ps 19), in our consciences (Rom 1), and mostly perfectly in the written Word of God (2 Tim 3:16–17).

God as the source. Belief in these transcendent principles is rooted in a conviction that God is the source, sustainer, and end of all things. The Bible clearly proclaims that God is self-existent and self-sustaining, and all things come from him (Rom. 11:36). Everything that is true is so because God is True. Everything that is good is so because God is Good. And everything that is beautiful is so because God is Beautiful. There are no such things as brute facts apart from God; they are facts because God determined them to be so. Moral standards are not merely conceived out of convention apart from God; actions are moral or immoral based on how they compare to the moral character of God. And in the same way, beauty is not in the eye of the beholder; something is beautiful because it reflects God's own beauty. With this in mind, Christians as image-bearers of God must be committed to thinking God's thoughts after him, to behaving in certain ways that conform to God's moral will, and to loving those things that God calls lovely. Conservative Christians are therefore concerned with orthodoxy, orthopraxy, *and* orthopathy.

Scripture as the expression. Conservative Christians also believe that Scripture itself communicates absolute truth, goodness, and beauty, not just discursively, but aesthetically through its various literary forms and devices. This belief is rooted in the doctrine of verbal-plenary inspiration. The Holy Spirit of God inspired every word in the original autographs of Scripture. This implies that while the word choices, grammar, syntax, poetic language, and literary forms were products of the human author's writing style, culture, and experiences, we must also affirm that these aspects of the form of Scripture are exactly how God desired his truth to be communicated. Kevin Vanhoozer is helpful here:

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[9] T. David Gordon, "Finding Beauty Where God Finds Beauty: A Biblical Foundation of Aesthetics.," *Artistic Theologian* 1 (Fall 2012): 17.

[10] Mortimer J. Adler, *Six Great Ideas* (New York: Touchstone, 1981).

> It has been said . . . that poetry is "the best words put in the best order." Similarly, because we are dealing with the Bible as God's Word, we have good reason to believe that the biblical words are the right words in the right order.[11]

Those who hold to verbal-plenary inspiration rightly insist that what words biblical authors chose are important, as are how those words were put together into sentences and paragraphs, as well as literary forms, and how we interpret the meaning of biblical passages is directly dependent upon our understanding of the historical, grammatical, and cultural context. Verbal-plenary inspiration, therefore, requires that we understand the nature of truth expressed in Scripture as more than correct doctrinal statements condensed from God's Word. Rather, truth includes particular sentiments, affections, moods, and imaginations that God communicates *through* the aesthetic forms he inspired.

Any good text or seminary course on biblical interpretation gives some attention to the fact that the Bible comes to us in various literary forms.[12] However, while exegetes give lip service to the aesthetic aspects of Scripture, at best they acknowledge the literary forms as a means to aid them in drawing out what they believe to be the more important "propositional content" of the text. They view the form as something they have to "get through" in order to "get to" the revelatory content and then "restate symbols and metaphors in terms of univocal statements."[13] With this view, understanding what the literary form communicated to the original audience is important for interpretation, but not much more. The aesthetic forms don't influence the way Scripture is read or preached—every sermon is structured as if the text were epistolary. It is unfortunate that most pastors today have little if any appreciation for poetry or music or knowledge of how art works, and few if any seminary courses or resources are made available to educate pastors in these skills.

Allow me to offer a couple illustrations of this. A respected seminary professor once even told a friend of mine that he really didn't have any place in his thinking for appreciating poetry or music, and this was a professor with expertise in the interpretation of the Psalms! I have been told by at least four or five pastors that they would never sing "In the Bleak Midwinter," because, you know, Jesus wasn't really born in the winter, and there wasn't really snow on the ground, having no clue of what Ms. Rosetti was saying poetically. These are just some examples

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[11] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture, and Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society.* 48, no. 1 (2005): 96, 100. Leland Ryken expresses it this way: "*We can rest assured that the Bible as it was written is in the form that God wants us to have. . . . If the writers of the Bible were at some level guided and even 'carried along' by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21), it is a logical conclusion that the Holy Spirit moved some biblical authors to write poetry, others to imagine prophetic visions, and so forth. The very forms of biblical writing are inspired*" (Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002], 129–30. Emphasis original.). I am aware that Ryken states this as an argument in defense of a more formal rather than functional translation of the Bible, and I agree with Decker, who argues that transmitting the *meaning* of the original form with sometimes requires putting it into an entirely different form in the receptor language. Nevertheless, Ryken's underlying point is correct and supports my overall argument about aesthetic form in Scripture.

[12] "To interpret properly the 'then and there' of the biblical texts, one must not only know some general rules that apply to all the words of the Bible, but one needs to learn the special rules that apply to each of these literary forms (genres). And the way God communicates his Word to us in the 'here and now' will often differ from one form to another" (Gordon D Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Second Edition [Zondervan Publishing Company, 1993], 18).

[13] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 87.

of how ill-equipped current pastors and scholars are in matters of aesthetics, and so it is no surprise that claiming the aesthetic forms of Scripture should regulate contemporary art forms in worship seems outrageous.

What this betrays is a modernistic understanding of the nature of truth and human knowing and in effect denies the authority of what God inspired. As Kevin Vanhoozer notes, I think, correctly, "Evangelicals have been quick to decry the influence of modernism on liberal theology but not to see the beam of modern epistemology in their own eye."[14] Leland Ryken similarly observes, "It is one thing to recognize that parts of the Bible are literature. It is quite another actually to approach those texts in a literary manner."[15] This perspective fails to recognize that "everything that is communicated in a piece of writing is communicated through the forms in which it is embodied."[16]

It is critically important to recognize that truth in Scripture is more than merely scientific fact statements. Christianity cannot be boiled down into a set of doctrinal propositions. The Bible contains many statements of theological fact, much of its content can be summarized in theological propositions, and doctrinal affirmations remain important for defining various aspects of biblical orthodoxy.

Nevertheless, God cannot be known fully through mere statements of theological fact. God is known through his Word, and his Word is more than a collection of fact statements. These aesthetic forms of Scripture provide a way of communicating God's truth that would be impossible with systematic statements of fact alone. Since God is a spirit and does not have a body like man, since he is infinite, eternal, and totally other than us, God chose to use particular aesthetic forms (to the exclusion of others) to communicate truth about himself that would not have been possible otherwise. These aesthetic forms are essential to the truth itself since God's inspired Word is exactly the best way that truth could be presented. Thus, the truths of Scripture are not Scripture's propositional content that just happens to be contextualized in certain aesthetic forms. Truth in Scripture is content plus form, considered as an indivisible whole. Clyde S. Kilby asserts that these aesthetic forms of Scripture are not merely decorative but part of the essential presentation of the Bible's truth: "We do not have truth and beauty, or truth decorated with beauty, or truth illustrated by the beautiful phrase, or truth in a 'beautiful setting.' Truth and beauty are in the Scriptures, as indeed they must always be, an inseparable unity."[17]

Each of the core principles of the traditional historical-grammatical approach to biblical interpretation are important, but they must be extended beyond grammar and history to aesthetics as well. Context is king, but part of the context includes the aesthetic form of the original text. Interpretation of Scripture requires understanding authorial intent, but part of what the author intended is aesthetic. The text can never mean what it never meant, but it also can't mean less than what it meant.

To reduce God's truth, then, only to doctrinal statements does great injustice to the way God himself has chosen to reveal truth to us. But there is a reason the Bible calls God a "king" rather than simply asserting the doctrinal fact of his rulership. There is a reason the Bible calls God a shepherd, fortress, father, husband, and potter rather than simply stating the ideas underlying these metaphors. These images of God paint a picture that goes far beyond mere

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[14] Ibid., 26.

[15] Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1993), 20.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., 21.

doctrinal accuracy. They communicate something that could not be expressed in mere prose. They shape our imagination of who God is, both expressing and shaping right affections for God, which are central to Christianity.

The point is that the Bible itself uses forms of beauty to express God's truth and moral standards in a manner that accurately shapes the way in which people perceive the truth. Most true Christians desire to preserve God's truth and moral standards as expressly stated in the Word of God. Where conservative Christianity goes a step further is to also commit to preserving the *way in which the Bible expresses truth and moral standards*—in other words, conservative Christians do not consider the aesthetic aspects of Scripture as merely decorative or simply cultural contextualizations; rather, the aesthetic forms of Scripture are just as inspired and authoritative as the theological ideas contained therein. Each of the core principles of the traditional historical-grammatical approach to biblical interpretation are important, but they must be extended beyond grammar and history to aesthetics as well. Context is king, but part of the context includes the aesthetic form of the original text. Interpretation of Scripture requires understanding authorial intent, but part of what the author intended is aesthetic. The text can never mean what it never meant, but it also can't mean less than what it meant.

Translation. This perspective affects translation of Scripture as well. Unlike Islam, which teaches that the Koran must not be translated into other languages, Christianity has always encouraged the translation of the entire Bible from its original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek into new languages as Christianity spreads to new civilizations. But, as Rod Decker argued in his 2006 *DBSJ* article, "If we accept the Bible as inspired and inerrant in the original autographs, then we will be very concerned to represent it accurately in translation."[18] "The goal of Bible translation," Decker argues, is "accurate communication of an objective, historically-rooted, written divine revelation."[19]

However, if verbal-plenary inspiration requires attention to the very words, grammatical structures, and historical context of the original texts, then it follows that it also requires equal attention to the aesthetic forms and devices biblical authors used in their writing as well. Leland Ryken expresses it this way:

> *We can rest assured that the Bible as it was written is in the form that God wants us to have.* . . . If the writers of the Bible were at some level guided and even 'carried along' by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21), it is a logical conclusion that the Holy Spirit moved some biblical authors to write poetry, others to imagine prophetic visions, and so forth. The very *forms* of biblical writing are inspired.[20]

Therefore, just as determining the meaning of texts of Scripture requires knowledge of the language, grammar, and history of the original text, so it requires knowledge of the aesthetic forms of the text as well. And, just as the original grammar and context provides regulation for

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[18] Rodney J. Decker, "Verbal-Plenary Inspiration and Translation," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 11 (2006): 41.

[19] Ibid., 33.

[20] Ryken, *The Word of God in English*, 129–30. Emphasis original. I am aware that Ryken states this as an argument in defense of a more formal rather than functional translation of the Bible, and I agree with Decker, who argues that transmitting the *meaning* of the original form with sometimes requires putting it into an entirely different form in the receptor language. Nevertheless, Ryken's underlying point is correct and supports my overall argument about aesthetic form in Scripture.

translating the text into a new language, so the original aesthetic forms and devices likewise regulate how the Bible's texts are translated into new aesthetic forms. The important factor is that the *meaning* of the original text is accurately rendered in the new translation, and meaning is found in words, grammar, syntax, history, culture, *and* aesthetics.

How do conservative Christians propose to preserve the way the Bible has expressed God's truth? This leads to the second pillar of conservative Christianity.

The Importance of Form and Tradition

In exploring Richard Weaver's impact on the resurgence of classical conservatism, philosopher Edward Feser summarizes the core of such a realist conservatism:

> "Realist Conservatism," as we might call it, affirms the existence of an objective order of forms or universals that define the natures of things, including human nature, and what it seeks to conserve are just those institutions reflecting a recognition and respect for this objective order. Since human nature is, on this view, objective and universal, long-standing moral and cultural traditions are bound to reflect it and thus have a presumption in their favor.[21]

Feser's summary helpfully states the second pillar of conservatism, namely, a commitment to conserve those cultural institutions and aesthetic forms that best reflect a recognition and respect for the universal, transcendent order.

Affirmation of this second pillar is why conservative Christianity places a weighty emphasis upon tradition and insists on discernment when employing cultural forms from outside Christian tradition to express biblical truth. Conservative Christianity recognizes some forms of expression were designed to communicate transcendent truth, goodness, and beauty, while other forms were by nature designed to do something entirely opposite. What art forms are chosen to express God's truth—in corporate worship or in other contexts—are of utmost importance since they express not just theological facts, but those facts imagined in certain ways. What is at stake here is the very knowledge and worship of God. If works of art express particular ways of imagining God, then it is quite possible to express through art an imagination of God that does not correspond to how he chose to communicate himself in Scripture, even if the propositional content of the work of art is technically accurate.

Most evangelicals today view cultural forms as simply pretty packaging for truth or at best a way to "energize" the truth. Worship music, for example is just a way to make truth interesting and engaging in worship. But imaginative forms are not incidental to truth—they are essential to the truth, expressly because they are fundamental to the way Scripture expresses truth. Therefore, art forms help to express the imaginative aspect of truth in ways that propositional statements alone cannot; they communicate not just the *what* of biblical content, but also *how* that content is imagined.

Thus, the kinds of imaginative forms God chose to communicate his truth should shape our cultural forms. Choices of what cultural forms we will use to express God's truth and worship him are not merely about what is pleasing, authentic, or engaging; what forms we choose for our worship must be based on the criterion of whether they are true—whether they

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[21] Edward Feser, "The Metaphysics of Conservatism," *TCS Daily*, January 12, 2006.

correspond to God's reality as it is imagined in his Word. Conservative worship is essentially a desire to preserve the kinds of aesthetic forms contained in Scripture in our worship.

This means, then, that conservative Christianity is interested in the preservation of certain cultural forms to the exclusion of others. Such an assertion that some cultural expressions are better than others may sound elitist until we remember that culture is never created in a vacuum. Unlike those with a progressive philosophy, conservative Christians do not believe culture is neutral. Culture, according to Roger Scruton, is "a shared spiritual force which is manifest in all the customs, beliefs, and practices of a people"; it is "a demonstration of a belief system."[22] This follows closely T. S. Elliot's classic argument that "no culture can appear or develop except in relation to a religion."[23] Cultural forms are nurtured in value systems as ways of expressing those values. All of the various cultural institutions, forms, artistic expressions, media, languages, and systems of thought are what they are today based on hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of years of nurture and development within particular value systems, and therefore they are products of human imagination intended to propagate that particular imagination.

This understanding becomes no more important than when we attempt to preserve the absolute, transcendent values of God's character and nature. We have been given a truth deposit to protect (and remember, "truth" involves more than mere propositions), we are the pillar and support of that truth (1 Tim 3:15), and it is our responsibility to pass those values and ideas to future generations (Acts 20:27). The way in which we accomplish this goal is by fostering the cultural traditions God's people have modeled on Scripture and nurtured through the centuries rather than simplistically adopting the cultural traditions of the unbelieving world in the name of relevance, contextualization, or authenticity.

So, at the core of conservative Christianity is a belief in absolute, transcendent principles of truth, goodness, and beauty and a commitment to preserve those values and pass them on to future generations. And it is a recognition that certain ways of expressing those transcendent principles are better at preserving and accurately passing them on than others, particularly those forms nurtured within Christian tradition, which most correspond to the kinds of aesthetic expressions that God inspired in his Word.

The Evangelical Progressive Philosophy of Culture

The opposing position to a conservative philosophy of culture is what we might call a "progressive" philosophy.[24] Such a philosophy suggests that, instead of beginning with some notion of universals we wish to conserve in determining our posture toward culture, especially in our worship, the church's foundational missional impulse requires prioritizing contexualization in the contemporary culture. As missional author Craig Van Glender explains,

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[22] Roger Scruton, *Modern Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 1, 286.

[23] T. S. Elliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1949), 100.

[24] I struggled with what term to use here. Technically, I could have used "liberal," "pluralist," "missional," or even just "evangelical."

> Since everyone lives in culture, the church's careful study of its context will help the church to translate the truth of the gospel as good news for the society to which it is sent.[25]

He insists that churches "should reflect the full social mix of the communities they serve, if they are truly contextual."[26] He elaborates:

> We need to exegete . . . culture in the same way the missionaries have been so good at doing with diverse tribal cultures of previously unreached people. We need to exegete . . . the themes of the Rolling Stones . . . , Dennis Rodman, Madonna, David Letterman, Rosanne, Seinfeld, and "Tales from the Crypt." We need to comprehend that the Spirit of the Living God is at work in these cultural expressions, preparing the hearts of men and women to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ. We have to find, in good missionary fashion, those motifs and themes that connect with the truths of the gospel. We need to learn how to proclaim, "That which you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you." This is missionary vision at its best.[27]

This perspective, they argue, is a correct application of passages like 1 Corinthians 9:22 and Acts 17, insisting, "Paul is the model for us in that he made himself a slave to the preference and cultures of others, rather than a slave to his own preferences."[28]

Making contextualization the central feature of their philosophy of culture affects methods of evangelism to be sure, but it perhaps even more poignantly shapes their worship philosophy and practice. Worship expressions must reflect the dominant cultural forms of the target group. Darrell Guder argues that worship services "must be substantially changed in many settings in our world."[29] Ed Stetzer likewise insists that "worship must take on the expression that reflects the culture of the worshiper if it is to be authentic and make an impact."[30] He sees this contextualization as a self-evident reality in which all churches take part when they use the common language of the people to whom they minister. Specifically addressing musical styles, Stetzer suggests that a church should seek to discover what styles are dominant in its target "focus group" and "adapt [its] own tunes and styles to the preferred styles of [its] focus group."[31] Alan Hirsch argues that "worship style, social dynamics, [and] liturgical expressions must result from the process of contextualizing the gospel in any given culture."[32] Mark Driscoll based his entire church planting strategy on the principle of contextualization, arguing that churches must be willing to change regularly their worship forms "in an effort to effectively communicate the

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[25] Craig Van Gelder, "Missional Context: Understanding North American Culture," in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell Guder (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 18.

[26] Craig Van Gelder, "Missional Challenge: Understanding the Church in North America," in *Missional Church*, 70.

[27] Craig Van Gelder, *Confident Witness—Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 14–15.

[28] Ed Stetzer and David Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 52.

[29] Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 96.

[30] Stetzer and Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code*, 100.

[31] Ibid., 64.

[32] Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 143.

gospel to as many people as possible in the cultures around them."[33] Likewise, according to Lepinski, "The need for the Church to remain effective in speaking the 'current language' and to successfully engage all people and age groups is a practice that can be seen in the life of Jesus. Christ's earthly life manifests the importance of relevancy."[34]

Likely the most thorough articulation of such a philosophy remains Harold Best's 1995 *Music Through the Eyes of Faith*, a book that remains the most frequently cited by contemporary authors and speakers[35] defending what Best called cultural "pluralism."[36] Best places a hard distinction between truth and beauty; truth, he argues, "transcends time, culture, and human invention." Beauty, on the other hand "is a simple quality which has degrees"; in other words, standards of beauty differ from one culture to another, or even between different kinds of things.[37] He explicitly claims that "there is no such thing as absolute beauty" and "no such thing as centralized perfection."[38] Based on this fundamental philosophy, Best insists that "art and especially music are morally relative and inherently incapable of articulating, for want of a better term, truth speech. They are essentially neutral in their ability to express belief, creed, moral and ethical exactitudes, or even worldview."[39]

Best's pluralistic philosophy is the default position of most in evangelicalism today, including those writing and speaking on topics of culture, worship, and music. This philosophy rejects the idea of universal standards and makes cultural choices for worship rather on what is indigenous or authentic to a particular people group. For example, Constance Cherry argues, "For it to be authentic, musical style must arise from within the community as a true expression of its culture, not borrowed from another culture."[40] Like Best, Bob Kauflin claims that cultural pluralism in worship "communicates God's heart for all generations, cultures, and races."[41] They deny any universal principles or meaning in cultural forms, such as Robin Harris, who insists "Music may be a universal phenomenon, found in virtually every culture around the world. But it is definitely not a universal language!"[42]

A fundamental assumption beneath this practice of contextualization is the belief that content and form have no intrinsic connection and are therefore easily separable. These conservative evangelicals admirably repudiated emergent leaders who argued that both content

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[33] Mark Driscoll, *The Radical Reformission: Reaching Out without Selling Out* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 80.

[34] Jon Paul Lepinski, "Engaging Postmoderns in Worship: A Study of Effective Techniques and Methods Utilized by Two Growing Churches in Northern California" (D.Min. thesis, Liberty Theological Seminary, 2010), 6.

[35] For example, see Barry Liesch, *The New Worship: Straight Talk on Music and the Church*, Expanded (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001); Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008); Mike Cosper, *Rhythms of Grace: How the Church's Worship Tells the Story of the Gospel* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2013); Matt Boswell, ed., *Doxology and Theology: How the Gospel Forms the Worship Leader* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2013); Bob Kauflin, *True Worshipers: Seeking What Matters to God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2015); Constance M. Cherry, *The Music Architect: Blueprints for Engaging Worshipers in Song* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

[36] Harold Best, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 63–85.

[37] Ibid., 42.

[38] Harold Best, *Think: Worship Conference - General Session 6 Part 2,* accessed July 25, 2018, http://equip.sbts.edu/event/conferences/think-worship-conference-general-session-7-part-2.

[39] Best, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith*, 42.

[40] Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 183.

[41] Kauflin, *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God*, 105.

[42] Robin P. Harris, "The Great Misconception: Why Music Is Not a Universal Language," in *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook*, ed. James R Krabill et al. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013), 89.

and form must be contextualized; they insist that since God's Word is inspired and inerrant, God's truth transcends culture and must be preserved intact. But since they consider culture as entirely neutral in itself, the form in which Christians communicate truth is fully fluid. This is seen in David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen's distinction between cultural contextualization that is "true to . . . indigenous culture" and theological contextualization that is "true to . . . the authority of Scripture."[43] Ethnodoxologist Ron Man argues for applying this perspective to cultural choices for worship, claiming, "It is a reasonable assumption that the virtual silence of the New Testament writers on the matters of form and style for worship means that the Lord intends for us to have considerable latitude and flexibility in these areas."[44] Therefore, Christians must defend the unchanging theology of Scripture, while the contextualized cultural forms through which that theology is expressed remains relative.

Similarities and Difference

Proponents of each of these philosophical postures do share much in common, distinguishing them from theological liberals, for example, and contributing to the blurred lines of cooperation to which I referred at the opening of this paper.

First, both philosophies affirm the inspiration, inerrancy, and absolute authority of Holy Scripture. Second, both philosophies affirm the absolute nature of truth and morality as rooted in God's nature and expressed in his Word. Third, both philosophies affirm the necessity that corporate worship should be rich with doctrine, Scripture, and expository preaching. They both reject the "attractional model" of worship popularized by the church marketing movement, which softens doctrine, minimizes Scripture, and seeks to meet "felt needs" in the preaching. When comparing worship services that result from applying each philosophy, one might expect to find in both a deep respect for Scripture, songs with doctrinally rich lyrics, and similar preaching based on careful exegesis. Contrary to some extremes and caricatures, both philosophies even agree that cultural forms in worship will change over time and differ to some degree between groups in different cultures.

However, although these philosophies share some similarities, fairly significant differences emerge, especially when observing the cultural and aesthetic elements of worship. First, each philosophy begins from a different starting point. In determining what kinds of cultural forms a church might use, the conservative philosophy begins with absolute principles and the assumption that Scripture regulates even aesthetic factors, while the progressive philosophy begins with the prevailing culture with the assumption that culture and aesthetics are relative. Second, the driving goal of the conservative philosophy is that cultural forms chosen to express truth and facilitate worship be biblically faithful, while the aim of the progressive philosophy is that they be culturally intelligible. Third, when assessing meaning in cultural forms, such as music, conservatives determine meaning primarily based on its relationship to universals, with secondary consideration given to conventional associations within a certain cultural context, while progressives almost exclusively determine meaning based on individual or cultural factors, largely denying universal standards or meaning. Fourth, while the progressive philosophy sees truth, morality, and beauty as separate ideas, the first two absolute and the latter

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[43] David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2003), 55.

[44] Ron Man, "The Bridge: Worship Between Bible and Culture," in *Worship and Mission for the Global Church* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013), 17–18.

relative, the conservative philosophy considers all three to be interwoven strands of a single cord. For the progressive, form and content are easily separable; for the conservative, meanings is found in the union of form and content. Progressives are comfortable calling themselves theologically conservative and culturally liberal, while conservatives believe conservatism to be an indivisible whole. To describe the difference simply, for a conservative, cultural forms in worship have limits based on absolute standards rooted in God and expressed through Scripture, while for a progressive, there are virtually no limits for what forms are used to express truth, or what limits exist are rooted only in finite and changing conventions within a society.

Aesthetic Correspondence

So a truly conservative Christianity will concern itself with preserving both *what* the Bible teaches and *how* the Bible communicates. A conservative philosophy does not mean, however, that when we express God's truth, we may only do so in the exact words (or even forms) in which that truth was originally expressed. We may put God's truth "in our own words" as we teach, preach, catechize, and formulate doctrinal confessions. Nevertheless, even these extra-biblical expressions of biblical truth must accurately correspond to Scripture. This is not quite the same as translating Scripture into new languages, but the principle is very similar. What we say about God and his truth in our own words must *mean* something consistent with what the Bible means, and this implies more than mere factual correspondence; it must also include aesthetic correspondence.

This is true for creeds and confessions, and this is certainly true of hymns that are meant to express God's truth and/or responses of worship toward God. Neither belief in verbal-plenary inspiration nor the regulative principle means that we may only sing the exact words of Scripture—otherwise, we should be singing only in Hebrew and Greek. Nor does belief in these doctrines mean that we may only sing exact translations of Scripture. We may—indeed, we must—compose hymn texts that put God's truth "in our own words," but these new expressions must accurately correspond to Scripture.

This is fairly straightforward with regard to *what* the Bible says. Any theologically conservative Christian will insist that the texts of hymns accurately correspond to the truth of Scripture. However, I am extending this further to the *way* the Bible expresses truth. We may— and should—express God's truth in new ways, but the aesthetic way we choose to newly express biblical truth should accurately correspond to the aesthetic way God chose to express truth in his Word.

I am not arguing that we must take a "formal equivalence" approach to transmitting the aesthetic forms of Scripture into modern worship forms. In am not arguing, for example, that since the psalms employ poetic parallelism and that they don't use meter or rhyme, then our hymns should use parallelism and not meter or rhyme. Rather, what I am arguing is that if we recognize what aesthetic form does, and if we believe in verbal-plenary inspiration, then the *meaning* of the aesthetic forms we employ in our contemporary worship must accurately correspond to the *meaning* Scripture's aesthetic forms had in their original context.

Fittingness

What we need to concern ourselves with is what both Kevin Vanhoozer and Nicholas Wolterstorff call "fittingness."[45] Wolterstorff defines fittingness as "similarity across modalities."[46] Modalities are different forms of expression—literature, music, rhetoric, architecture, drama, visual arts, etc. What he means by fittingness is that the character of one aesthetic expression can be similar to the character of another aesthetic expression, even across kinds of art forms. Far from being something only philosophers of aesthetics can do, we observe these kinds of similarities across modalities instinctively. This is why we can describe the character of music using terms more regularly associated with other art forms such as the visual (like color) or the tactile (like soft or hard) or qualities of taste (like sweet) or spatial measurement (high, low, short, or long). Music is not really blue or soft or sweet or low, but we naturally recognize similarities across these modalities. And, by the way, Wolterstorff also cites studies that show that these kinds of judgments are consistent across culture as well.

We can also recognize similarities with regard to emotional expression, mood, and tone. Because art communicates most naturally by reflecting common human experience, especially human physical expressiveness, with a bit of effort we can fairly instinctively discern what art forms across modalities similarly express joy, lament, sobriety, reverence, or fear.

This is how we can take the character of aesthetic literary devices and forms in Scripture and compare them to the character of other kinds of art forms (like music) in contemporary culture. We can determine the meaning specific aesthetic forms or devices in Scripture had for their original audience, and then discern aesthetic forms—literary and musical—in our current cultural context that are fitting to Scripture, those that have similarity in meaning.

This kind of emphasis requires that biblical interpreters, pastors, and church musicians have both a thorough understanding of what various art forms in Scripture are expressing (or at least be equipped with resources to help them understand this) and a thorough understanding of the art forms of their current context so that they can make the proper judgments concerning correspondence. There is a reason aesthetics was part of the quadrivium in premodern education and Luther said he would not ordain a man to ministry who did not understand music. Theologians in the premodern era understand that a healthy understanding of aesthetics was necessary for biblical interpretation, biblical preaching, and biblical worship.

Seminaries today expect their graduates to have a thorough grasp of the grammar and historical context of Scripture in order to correctly interpret, explain, translate, and apply it to contemporary Christianity; why do we not also expect pastors and Bible scholars to understand the aesthetics of Scripture? And I mean more than a cursory discussion of how to preach various biblical genres. I mean giving careful consideration to what the Bible's poetic forms, narrative structures, literary devices, and rhetorical strategies *mean*. We also teach pastors how to best preach and explain the meaning of Scripture and apply it to contemporary life; why do we not also equip them with how to parse the meaning of contemporary art forms and make judgments about what art forms today express sentiments similar to what the art forms of Scripture express?

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[45] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 108ff; Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Towards a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987).

[46] Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*, 99.

Conclusion

This just scratches the surface of what I think needs to be a continued discussion, and it is something I hope to further develop in the days to come. There are some scholars, by the way, who are beginning to have discussions like these, although they are mostly looking at how the aesthetics of Scripture affect interpretation, translation, and preaching. Nevertheless, they are trying to carve out an evangelical position that doesn't fall into the traps of higher critical cultural-linguistic philosophy or what one author calls the "dedramatized propositonalism"[47] that characterizes most forms of the historical-grammatical philosophy. For those interested, I would direct you to the work of Kevin Vanhoozer, Leland Rykan, Tremper Longman, and Abraham Kuruvilla, among others. These scholars are asking not just what does the Bible *say*, but also what does the Bible *do*, and how can we faithfully interpret and communicate that. I would like to extend that biblical authority even to our worship: If we believe that Scripture must regulate our worship, and if we believe that God inspired every word of Scripture, then we must be sure that how we express God's truth aesthetically today is similar in meaning to how Scripture expresses God's truth.

And this is not to say that with this perspective we will easily come to consensus and finally prove a conservative approach to worship. There is a lot of work to be done here, and there are some difficulty questions for even conservatives to answer.

Nevertheless, I do believe this is a way forward for conservative Christians. Far from appealing to esoteric philosophy or even tradition, and contrary to charges of ignoring *Sola Scriptura*, conservative Christians should root our convictions regarding worship aesthetics in a commitment to regulate our worship by the inspired, authoritative Word of God.

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[47] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 87.