

Christian Scharen. *Broken Hallelujahs: Why Popular Music Matters to Those Seeking God*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011. 184 pages. \$17.99.

Broken Hallelujahs is another foray by Christian Scharen into the age-old question about the division between the sacred and the secular or, as the premise of the book might state, the divisions between culture and the cries of God. Building upon his previous work, *One Step Closer: Why U2 Matters to Those Seeking God*, Scharen drills deeper into the connection between God's cries through the culture and ways in which the church, particularly evangelical groups like Focus on the Family, have responded to the more difficult messages coming to us from and within the words, concepts, subjects, and visuals of popular culture.

Scharen writes that, "This book engages the space of interaction between faith and popular culture, especially through popular music, as a case study in this larger challenge of Christian imagination that can meet the challenges we face today." To accomplish this, he leans heavily on two English scholars. First, he acknowledges his debt to Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, particularly his work, *The Wound of Knowledge* for assisting him in understanding the meaning of Jesus' cries from the cross. In addition, he spends significant time with Christian writer and apologist C. S. Lewis' book, *An Experiment in Criticism* (albeit largely through the interpretation of Paul L. Holmer in *C. S. Lewis: The Shape of his Faith and Thought*). His use of Lewis is unusual because he uses Holmer to interpret Lewis' writings about literary criticism to bolster his argument about the value of culture. In the end, it remains up in the air whether his use of Lewis accomplishes this purpose.

Scharen is most successful when he identifies an approach to culture characterized as "constricted imagination" and its qualifier "checklist Christianity." He argues successfully for a view of culture that does not constrict either our imaginations or our engagement with only "worthy" cultural objects. He writes against the kind of approach to culture that will only engage and react to those things that embrace Christian principles or reflect Christian values. In the end he makes a convincing case that "Christians get off track in seeking to foster a faithful imagination" when they reject anything that does not fit the Christian paradigm. Three examples create his point. First, his opening story about being invited to a strongly conservative college and talking about Kanye West rap songs featuring decidedly non-checklist subjects and language is quite compelling. Second, he makes strong points in his withering critique of Focus on the Family and how they reject imagination and make a mere checklist out of cultural messages in their magazine/web site "Plugged In." Finally, his concluding chapter of examples concerning the *Harry Potter* series and introducing readers to the music groups Sigur Ros and Arcade Fire bolster his ideas by developing a strong and successful line of argument about the value of engaging culture as a prophetic voice of God to the church and the world. His examples, however, are all successful or popular notions of culture that have been adequately adapted by Scharen or the church. He has less to say about how to embrace those aspects of culture that are strikingly opposite of Christianity—or even where that line lies.

This may be why he is perhaps less successful in the second half of the book where it "aims to reorient Christian imagination." Reorient Christian imagination to what? How far? For Scharen, this reorientation is to reject any evaluation of the effects of culture on the church that seeks to justify the negative aspects of cultural influence (as championed by Focus on the Family and others) by attributing them to the cries of God. At the same time he does not think that all cultural voices speak for God. The weakness of the book is that he provides no framework for knowing where that line is except the interpretive filter of the person engaging culture.

He appeals to this framework through the odd choice of naming two of his chapters, *Grace and Karma* and *Surrendering to the Music*. By choosing titles filled with code words that are guaranteed to rile those he seeks to engage, he reduces the opportunity to engage the “other” in the Christian world—those he seeks to critique. As Scharen frequently does in his critiques, he provides adequate ammunition for his critics to reject what he writes before giving them ample opportunity to hear his views. He can alienate his “target” audience by the lengths to which he goes to accommodate the voice of culture as expressing the voice of God. Rather than engaging the other side of the fence, he seems intent upon merely prodding it.

One key point is when he admires the work of Andy Crouch and his call for Christians to “make culture.” However, he does not share Crouch’s need to influence, change, or affect the culture. Instead, Scharen notes that his work takes “a different tack.” For Scharen the issue is not whether Christians can create culture or that they should reject aspects of culture “from a moral code” but that we should “give ourselves away to the other, fully expecting to meet what God is doing in and through them.” His view seems to say that the modern-day prophets are in the culture not the church and that they have a way of communicating God’s message that the church needs to hear and heed. While an admirable position, it is quite clear that his critics in the Evangelical world will no doubt reject this premise, even though he seeks to use C. S. Lewis to soften the blow. As a result, this book speaks to its base rather than helping to further the dialogue between those who engage in checklist Christianity and those who desire to more seriously hear the voice of God speaking to the church through the culture.

In the end, it will be left up to the reader to determine if he makes the case for a reorientation of imagination that requires the church to hear God’s voice outside of orthodox settings (scripture, worship, preaching, theology) and hear it primarily from those in the music and artistic communities.

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