

“Hearing” Biblical Worldview in Musical Motifs

by Mark S. Sooy
www.MarkSooy.com

The idea of worldview – that is, the way we view the world – is an important topic of discussion during our interesting times. The whole concept can sometimes get very philosophical, but really it should be a description of both our beliefs about the world (philosophy) and the reality that we actually find in the world around us. Everyone has a view of the world, in spite of whether a person can clearly identify or explain his or her own view.

Christians seek to have a worldview that reflects the Biblical truths about God and His creation (including man), and the relationship between the two. I like to describe it as a filter. Our worldview acts as a filter to help us make sense of what we see around us and interpret what is going on. Our goal is to see reality as God sees reality, and to understand His interaction with all that He created.

One of the ways Christian theologians and philosophers talk about worldview is in the ideas of *Creation, Fall and Redemption*. This three-fold description of the overall picture of the Christian worldview helps us to see people and events in a way that makes sense. Let me explain these concepts first in a basic format, and then draw some parallels with music as a way to “hear” Biblical Worldview.

Creation as described in Genesis, and referenced throughout the rest of Scripture, was an act that God declared as “good” (Genesis 1 & 2). Goodness is inherently part of God’s creative activity, and Christians recognize this fact. When God made the heavens and earth, the trees and the fields, the fish and the birds, and everything else, He regarded His creation and was satisfied. When He created man, Adam and Eve, He was satisfied. Man was God’s glory in the garden, and he was given dominion over all of creation – and this was good and right – for God made it that way. This was to be “normal” for God’s creation.

What we call the *Fall* is that instance in which Adam chose to honor himself and his wife over and above God. Temptation came, Adam considered his own wisdom superior to God’s (pride), he disobeyed, and sin entered the world. Using the term *Fall* is descriptive for us in that Adam at that time became separated from God. With that decision Adam not only subjected himself to death and separation, but all that was under his dominion (all of creation) was subjected to the “imprisonment,” so-to-speak, of his sin. This is what Paul means when he says that all of creation was “subjected to futility” (Romans 8:20). Adam’s sin affected everything, and now everything is askew. It is bent. It’s no longer right. This is the common human experience. What we experience as a result of the *Fall* is no longer “normal.”

Thankfully, God provided a way to restore His original intention for His creation. This is what Christians call *Redemption*. It is more than Christ’s provision for us on the cross in taking our sin and giving us His righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21). While we recognize that Christ’s work is a key and the central part, *Redemption* provides more than salvation for the soul. It stretches into creation itself to restore it to God as He had intended at first. Again, Paul refers to this in Romans 8:18-23. The benefits of Christ’s redemptive work are both present and future. We are secure in His grace now, and yet wait for the final redemption of our body, and ultimately the redemption of all creation. *Redemption* is God’s great correction for the effects of sin and for returning to the “normal” He had planned.

So *Creation, Fall and Redemption* is one way to think about and consider the Christian Worldview. Now that I have given a quite short synopsis of these ideas, I find it interesting that we can “hear” a parallel in God’s gift of music. There are some general characteristics of well-written music that can give us an aural (i.e., pertaining to the hearing) perspective on these theological ideas. We can actually hear *Creation, Fall and Redemption* motifs in music.

I use the word *motif* in the sense of a musical idea or phrase. Often, in carefully crafted music, a motif is introduced at the beginning of the piece and repeated, re-used, altered, and re-shaped in numerous ways. One of the most famous may be Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony*, which uses a quite simple, but powerful, four note phrase as its first motif. (If you are not familiar with this symphony, stop and ask someone nearby to hum the first few notes. You’ll remember it after that.) Beethoven developed this motif and then established as the central figure of the whole movement. The parallel I find with the *Creation* idea is that this motif establishes the “normal” part of the music.

Next, the motif is generally altered and changed. This may be slight – in the changing of the notes or keys; or it may be quite dramatic – like turning the phrase upside down or even playing it backwards. More often than not, the musical phrase is re-worked in a minor key. This generally gives it a “darker” and more ominous feeling. The musical term that could be used is *dissonance*, which is a kind of tension that the composer places within the music. I would relate this tension in music to the *Fall* – although we hear the motif in one way or another, it has been distorted and changed. It is no longer “normal.”

Finally, the composer draws the original motif out of the dissonance, or tension, and causes a *resolution*. This is a return to the original musical phrase, but it is often embellished and made even more beautiful and creative. Other notes and phrases jump and dance around the original motif. Sometimes called a *recapitulation*, the composer reminds us of the original “normal” motif and builds on it, makes it grow, and develops it into something not yet imagined. This resolution of the musical conflict reminds me of *Redemption* – just as God in Christ is restoring His creation to what it was meant to be, and beyond.

You would probably miss this type of musical development if your musical diet consists primarily of music found in popular culture (on radio and TV), whether “Christian” or not. I would encourage you to find Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony*, or listen to Bach’s *Chorales*, or Mozart’s *Requiem*. These composers, and many others, utilize various motifs in their music. Some, as in the case of Bach, did so as a devoted Christian, while others did so simply as God’s image shown through them as human beings. Either way, their creativity shines through as a reflection of God’s own creative image.

Music is a great gift of God and in it He has given us a way to experience *Creation, Fall and Redemption* through our ears. For him who has ears to hear...

Mark Sooy is an author, pastor, theologian and musician – and Commissioned member of the 2008 Centurions Program. He has written two books: *Essays on Martin Luther’s Theology of Music* and *The Life of Worship: Rethink, Reform, Renew*. He also writes a weekly blog on worship and music at www.WorshipThink.com. To find out more about Mark and his ministry, books, CDs and other stuff visit www.MarkSooy.com.