

What is Christian Music - 1

Perhaps nothing is splitting the church today like the issue of music. Like never before, there is a growing divide in the church over what is acceptable as music and what is not. For some, the issues are about people not wanting to change their old music. For others, the issues are about people compromising with the world. Who is right?

At the end of the day, we have only one choice: go to the Word to find the Bible's Perspective on music. What according to the Bible is Christian music?

Before we answer that question directly, there are a number of objections that come up whenever Christian music is discussed. One of them is

- “Who are you to teach on music? With what authority can you teach on music?” What such a question implies is that you have to be a musician to either teach on music or evaluate music. Often, musicians use this kind of tactic to scare people into silence. “Well, I don’t know music, I’d better leave it to those who know”, says the intimidated Christian. But hang on. Do you have to know how to edit a movie to be able to evaluate it? Do you have to know the keys to lighting, sound, make-up and choreography to know whether a film was good or bad? No. You don’t need technical knowledge to evaluate something morally. So with music. You don’t need to know the difference between a sixteenth and an eighth note to know if a song is stimulating your flesh or not. Neither do you need personal experience of performing music to be able to understand if it is Christlike or not. So one teaching on music uses the same authority you have to evaluate music. It is the authority God gives us in I Cor 2:15 to evaluate all things according to the Word and by the Spirit. I Thessalonians 5 instructs us “Prove all things, hold fast to that which is good”. That leads us to a second objection.
- ‘Don’t judge my music. You have yours, I have mine You’re not supposed to judge me’. Now firstly, like I Thessalonians 5:21 tells us, we must test everything. I Corinthians 2:15 tells us the mature are to judge, and likewise Phil 1:9-11. So there is no sin in evaluating other people’s music. People who cannot make distinctions between good and evil are not “very tolerant”; they are spiritually immature. Hebrews 5:14 tells us this. But what a person like this is really saying is “You can’t judge my music! It’s personal!” as if you are judging his choice of lounge suite, or his brand of deodorant. Now if we were judging something totally inconsequential or amoral like that, his reaction is understandable. But when we are judging something that can be good or evil, it is not. If a teenager told you that pornography was his *personal taste* in movies and said you must not judge him for it, you would reject his reasoning. Moral issues are supposed to be judged. And as we will see, music carries moral messages, and must also be judged for its morality. Don’t be side-tracked by people saying music is all subjective. In fact, music can be evaluated very objectively: for its sensual appeal, moral content and so on. Music is not all about personal taste, it’s about holiness and sin too. The real question is not, do I like it, but, does God approve of it?

A third objection is

- “Music isn’t an issue. We mustn’t divide and fight over music. It’s a non-issue.” Well, that depends what you mean by “issue”. If you mean we mustn’t divide because you want to sing Psalms only and I want to sing psalms and

hymns, I agree. But if you mean that we can never scrutinize another's music because it will cause friction, then I disagree. Music is important. It's important to God. It is an issue. How important is this issue?

The biblical reason

Well, consider the fact that music accompanied the creation of the world according to Job 38:4-7. The Lord constantly surrounds Himself with the praise of the cherubim and seraphim according to Revelation 4:8 and Isaiah 6. No doubt much of this is musical. Music is prominent in Scripture: over 199 references to singing, over 50 to instrumental playing, and 48 of the Bible's 66 books contain direct reference to worship in a musical sense. God has commanded music (Psalm 150, Eph 5:19). He only commands what He sees as important to Him and His children. Music is indeed an issue.

The practical reason

Music will set the theology of your church, or your church will set the theology of your music. Music is a powerful influencing force. What you and your church think about God will come out in your music. Music is a language of its own, carrying unmistakable messages. It has been said that the first sign of a church going down will be seen in its music. Compromise generally begins musically and spreads to the doctrine of the church.

Finally, man's purpose is to glorify God. A primary means of doing so is in musical worship. So it is untrue to say that music is not an issue. It is a crucial issue, one that betrays what you believe about God and the Gospel.

Another objection:

- "The Bible is silent on music! It never mentions rock music once!:"

It's true, the Bible never mentions rock music or rap or any other form. The Bible never mentions Internet pornography either. But the Bible lays down very specific guidelines for judging everything that comes into our lives, by which criteria much of today's music fails. If the Bible gives you a guideline to judge your music, then don't hide behind the fact that God didn't mention your favourite style of music by name – He will not accept so poor an excuse at His Judgement Seat.

A final objection commonly raised is

- "You're just afraid of change. This stuff is new, relevant and it's what people relate to. There's nothing sacred about the old stuff, so don't try and make it seem better. You're just stuck in your traditions."

Now firstly, change is good. In fact, the Christian life is one of constant change. But please note, the kind of change we are to be desiring is a change into the image of Christ. We are not interested in changing to keep up with the latest trends, fashions and habits of the world. That is a violation of Romans 12:1. Now admittedly, there are some Christians who are nervous about anything new, and they defend something merely because it is familiar to them. Traditionalism can become deadly to spiritual growth, if you are relying on 'we've always done it this way' to guide you. We must rely entirely on Scripture. But having said that, Proverbs 22:28 says "Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set." That speaks of honouring what godly men in the past have established. It's one thing adapting to the circumstances, it's one thing dispensing with things because they are not biblical and merely tradition, but it's quite another to throw

out what's old merely because it's old. It is unwise to change merely for the sake of change. Furthermore, because something is new, doesn't qualify it as 'youth music' or as relevant to us. Everything, new and old, must line up with the Word of God.

There are many other objections that are raised, but those are the main ones, and we'll deal with others as we go along.

With those objections out of the way, let's get into the real heart of the issue. What is music? Before we can define what Christian music is, we must define what music is. Once we understand basically what music is, we can then take that formula and bring it under the lordship of Christ – which will constitute Christian music.

So let's begin. Music has a couple of components.

1) Music has structure.

Some people have split it up in different ways, but for clarity, I like to put music's structure in to four categories – melody, harmony, rhythm, and tone colour.

Melody is the tune, the main 'storyline' of the music. Melody should always be the focus of the piece, melody is truly the core of music.

Harmony is like a supporting tune. It is made up of notes and groups of notes that complement and help the melody. It provides colour and depth to music.

Tone colour is the voice being used – the particular class of instruments used.

Finally, rhythm is the energy and pace of a song. Rhythm should be the unseen glue holding a piece together.

2) Music has a message.

Music is a language by itself. People today in Christian circles say, just look at the lyrics, the lyrics determine the message of the song. But that is only partially true. Music, apart from the lyrics or the words, has a message. During a scary scene in a movie, what sort of music plays? Scary music! Are there words saying, "this is a scary scene, feel scared now"? No. The music carries that message. Why can't you play classical music in a nightclub? Because the message of that music differs from what is trying to be accomplished in the nightclub. Why can't you take rock instrumentals – no words – and play them in a library? Because the music has a message that is conflicting with what goes on in a library. There is a message that is intrinsic to the music itself.

Consider that the way you say something determines the meaning. You can say the words 'Open the door' and depending on your tone and inflection, you can make it a request, a command, a suggestion or even a question. *The way you say something affects the meaning.* Some think that if they take Bible words, put it on a worldly song, it will not change the meaning of the words. Impossible – the way you say something determines the meaning.

Some say – "Well it's just the associations which we build up. The music is neutral." Tell me, did you have to teach your two-year old to smile when he heard happy music? No, he reacted naturally to the message of the music.

The message of the music also affects you. Music is meant to evoke a response, and it does. It can excite, sadden, quieten, relax, disturb, frighten, cheer, or amuse. These things are knee-jerk reactions to the message of the music. Those who say it is all associations do not realize how many millions of hours we would have to all spend learning how scary music sounds, how happy music sounds if it was not

natural. Now, music then affects you, whether you like it or not. If music didn't have a message of its own, advertisers, marketers and sales people would not use it so such great effect. Hollywood would not use music to create mood if music didn't affect you. A company in the states called Muzak creates background instrumental music for shops, lifts, even offices. Depending on what the client wants, Muzak makes music which has been proven to cause shoppers to linger, shop faster, relax, workers to work harder or concentrate and so on. This music is instrumental: it has no lyrics!

See, music is so powerful because it is like a direct hit on your will and emotions. It bypasses the filter of the mind, and goes straight to your appetites, desires and decisions. If music does not have a message of its own which affect you, why then does the Bible record that Saul asked for David to come and play before him to soothe him when an evil spirit came upon him? Clearly music had an affect on him.

The way the music is put together – the melody, the harmony, the rhythm, and the tone colour all adds up to a message.

3) Music has morality

Now some laugh out loud when they here this. “Morality? Are you mad? Music is neutral!!” They laugh and say, “Which one of the notes on the piano is good? Which ones are evil?” Now the notes themselves are neutral indeed, like the letters of the alphabet. But put the letters of the alphabet together, and you create words. Words with meanings, or messages. Messages which are good or evil, right or wrong in the sight of God. If we agree that music can carry a message, then it is only logical that that message is governed by the laws of right and wrong – the message is moral. In truth, nothing in life is morally neutral. There are things which do not seem to drastically affect our walk with God: filling the car with petrol, mowing the lawn, but that does not mean that some activities fall under a new category of morally neutral. Everything you do in life will either feed the Spirit or feed the flesh. Everything you do that is good, can be done under the control of the Spirit. Everything in the flesh cannot. You will either be serving God or self at any time. So those who fight for music being neutral usually do so to avoid their music being evaluated on a moral basis. Once you create this imaginary neutral box, and put all music there, then you have a handy passport to slip your music into any setting, anywhere. Music carries a moral message. It's true that sometimes that message will not be hostile to God, much classical music is that way, as it obeys the laws of good music and edifies. Like seeing a beautiful painting: it is not related to Scripture necessarily, and it seems morally neutral, but in fact, it is morally edifying. It is healthy for the soul, and does not tear down or destroy. But there are many paintings which are harmful, likewise with many forms of music.

Consider the following example. Some Christian singers place their lyrics to the music of the world and say ‘Music is neutral – it's the lyrics that count!’ Why then doesn't the world ever place its lyrics to godly music and say ‘It's the lyrics, guys, the lyrics! Focus on the lyrics!’ Absurd. They don't because their music has a message which is in line with their morality.

- Some object and say, “Music is from God! Every good gift comes from above – so we mustn't call any music unclean. It's neutral – and

can be used for good or evil” God didn’t create Christian music – He created music!!!

Well its true that music is from God. So is sex. Sex is a good gift from God. But sex comes with restrictions from God as to how it is to be used. It finds its place in a permanent union between two people, male and female, in marriage. Sex is not neutral. It is always either used in a good way in God’s plan, or wickedly in an evil way. Sex is from God, but that doesn’t mean that a good gift can’t be corrupted by man, or Satan. Satan, in fact, is a master at corrupting. Satan is not an innovator or a creator, he merely takes what God has made and distorts, corrupts and twists it. If Satan was indeed the leader of worship in heaven as Ezekiel 28 seems to imply, then you can be sure he understands music and knows what to do with it to accomplish his ends.

You’re right that music can be used for good or evil. But it’s more than that. Music is never neutral: the way it is constructed automatically places it as edifying or destructive to the child of God.

4) Music has Style

Music is infinitely variable. Mixing the various elements in music creates different styles of music. The style of music is influenced by a few things.

One of them is **Culture**. Different cultures have different music. But some people hide behind culture. They say “All this talk about music is just one culture trying to force itself on another. This music is part of my culture! Don’t say this music is wrong or you are insulting my culture!”

Now, we know that culture is part of common grace. But we also know that no culture on earth is above the Word of God. Every culture’s traditions, beliefs, dress, morals, and music is open to the Bible’s scrutiny. Again, culture is not neutral. Every aspect of culture must be evaluated for it’s morality – its rightness or error in the sight of God. Imagine we get two people from different cultures to paint the same sunset. Now a Chinese interpretation of that sunset will differ from a South American one. This is just diversity and it;s great. But if either one of them paint a naked body or lewd material – the art is immoral. It has nothing to do with diversity. The art itself is wrong. Likewise with music. You cannot hide behind culture to defend what you listen to. We must judge culture by the Bible, not the Bible by culture. So if a culture produces or listens to music that the Bible has a problem with, then God’s Word comes first. Consider also, that the longer a culture developed without exposure to the Gospel, the more likely its values and practices will be found to be contrary to Scripture.

Another thing that influences the style of music is **Morality**. The morals of a group will come out in their poetry, their writings,, their art and primarily, their music. Mick Jagger said “Pop music is sex, and you have to hit teenagers in the face with it.” Bach said “The sole purpose of all music is to bring glory to God’ Compare the style of Jagger and Bach.

Style is also affected by **Motivation** . Why are the people producing that music? To sell a cigarette, to sell sex – it will be heard in the style. Music reflects a philosophy. Night clubs play a particular kind of music reflecting a philosophy. If your philosophy is that there are no absolutes, everything is relative, it will be heard in the way you slide up and down the notes, never hitting them absolutely. Why you sing, or play, for who and for what will ultimately affect what the style of your music. Some Christian artists say, “we are doing this for God’s glory”.

But upon closer inspection, you find that they have other motives too ‘We need to reach the youth. We need to have our songs get exposure on secular stations. We need to evangelise people with music they are familiar with.’ Thus their motivation affects the style of the music.

We’ve just begun to examine music. We’ve seen music has style, structure, a message and morality. Starting from next week, we’ll begin to see how these elements must be brought under the Lordship of Jesus to truly be Christian music.