

## What is Christian Music? 4 The Sensibilities of Christian Music

We've been examining what is Christian music. We've looked at what music is. We've defined Christian music. We have looked at the Source of Christian music, as well as the Sound of Christian music. Today we wish to close off with the sensibilities of Christian music. That is, the practicalities, the methodology of Christian music. We want to answer some of the common questions that are raised. Should we use Christian music to evangelise? What should we expect in one who sings Christian music?

Some say, "I hear what you're saying about Christian music and the Bible. But, this is how we are going to win people to the Lord! What's wrong with that?" Well, there are two things to remember.

### **1) Music is never used in Scripture as evangelism.**

In Scripture, music is always praise given to God, it is never mentioned as evangelism. Evangelism, according to I Cor 1:21 must always be done through the foolishness of preaching. Interesting to note that when Israel was in captivity in Babylon, in Ps 137:1-4, they refused to sing the Lord's song to the unbelievers. Clearly, they didn't see music as evangelism.

- "You have to take the Gospel to the people. People aren't going to come to church. You've got to meet them where they're at."

Now that, in principle, is fine. But let's define our terms. If I am trying to win people addicted to watching strip-shows to Christ, *going to them* might be going nearby a strip-joint and handing out tracts. It may be taking a person addicted to that stuff out to eat and witnessing to them. But it would *not* be opening up a Christian strip-joint- so they'll come and then we can witness to them there. No, that's really mixed-up thinking. You don't solve a problem by encouraging people to continue in it under the name of Christ. Repentance means a break from the old life. This is the thinking behind 'This is what they listen to! Let's copy it and slip in some Christian words!'

I'm also interested in why an unsaved person will want to listen to a Christian form of his type of secular music, when he is quite happy with his secular music as it is. Why should he buy Christian stuff, with religious words clogging up the lyrics when he already has a fine collection of probably superior worldly stuff? The truth is, he won't. He will listen to something that is totally *different*, but if you make the Gospel into a form that he recognizes, he has no real reason to give it any attention. Quite possibly, and it happens, he will merely mock Christians for their pathetic attempts to seem as cool, trendy and with-it as the world. John MacArthur said "Putting a Christian message in such a musical form [rock style] does not elevate the form but degrades the message to the level already established in the culture by that form."

- 'this is what the youth are listening to'. Now to me, that is like safe-sex teaching. OK, you're going to fornicate, please at least use a condom to avoid death. It's a compromise. You either obey God's laws or you don't. You don't give people a safety net for when they choose to disobey His laws. The wages of sin is death: no man can change that law. And the same attitude is present

when people say, “Well, this is what they are doing, let’s just meet them where they are.” There are many godly young people who do not listen to fleshly, immoral music. Listening to immoral music is not a youth thing. Rebellion is often a youth thing, and it’s the rebellion of the heart that must be addressed. Don’t feed that rebellion with immoral music with Christian lyrics, and hope to win the teens. They will simply thank you for a meal of fleshliness, and then go looking for some stronger stuff in the world.

- “You’ve got to be like them to win them.” I wonder who invented this teaching, because it’s not found in Scripture. Jesus never taught a Gospel of infiltration: be exactly like the world, make them accept you, and then slip the Gospel in when they’re not looking. Frankly, Jesus’ Gospel was never slipped in, nor was it user-friendly or non-offensive. Jesus told us to be salt – and He plainly said when salt has lost its savour, it is useless. How can you make a difference by being no different? It boggles the mind! Evangelism can only be effective when the person witnessed to sees the point of salvation: a radical change of life into the image of Christ! Do we condone the immoral lifestyles of so many of the modern secular musical stars? No! Then why do we wish to tell people that they could continue a life like that and just add Christ? It’s deceptive! In Mk 8:34, Jesus says following Him means self-denial, dying to self. You don’t win people to Christ by changing the terms of the Gospel. The Gospel will offend. Darkness will hate light. Separate from sin, show the world that righteousness is better and then call them to where you are. Don’t stoop down and point them up. To win a Satanist, do you have to imitate the devil? No. Being with people doesn’t mean imitating their lifestyles or practices. Jesus ate with sinners, but He didn’t join them in their sin. Being separate doesn’t mean being haughty or snobbish. It just means being Christlike.

Someone says, “But Paul said to the Jew I became a Jew” so – we become like those we want to win. No, that’s not what Paul was teaching. He says those words in I Cor 9:20-22 while defending his apostleship. Paul is saying that when around Jews he observed Jewish customs to avoid giving offence, and reversed this when with Gentiles. He altered his presentation, but not the message itself. Like a missionary who learns the language of the locals. He is not changing the message, only his presentation of it. Or even when you teach 7 year-olds. You change your presentation of the message, but not the message itself. But a preacher who arrives smoking marijuana and cursing every second word with no shirt on, is not only altering the presentation, he is altering the message itself, because the message of the Gospel insists that one saved will not behave that way. Someone says, well that’s the language of bikers! He’s speaking their language! No, he’s imitating their lifestyle. Someone coming out of that might know how better to relate to them, but to join them in sin would be to change the message.

- “Martin Luther set his songs to secular music.” Poor Martin Luther. Whenever Christians dispute over music, his name gets pulled out the bag. Here are the facts about Luther that are seldom heard :

Luther avoided dance tunes and drinking songs, and spent time de-rhythming the songs he used. Luther borrowed musically from a culture that was controlled by

religion: the arts, sciences, everything was regulated by a moral code of the day. To say he borrowed from secular songs is to admit that at worst he borrowed from a church-based culture. Luther himself wrote that he did not consider music to be neutral. And then consider the numbers: of his 37 songs: 15 were composed by Luther himself, 13 came from Latin hymns, 4 were from German folk songs, 2 were religious pilgrim songs, 2 are of unknown origin, 1 came directly from a secular folk song. Those are the facts around Luther, one who loved and honoured godly music.

2) **God cares about how you do it, not only why you do it.** People say, “Look at the heart. Look at why they’re doing it, not how they’re doing it!” But Scripture shows that God cares about motive and method. Scripture is full of examples of people who had good motives, but bad methods. Consider Saul. Saul was told in I Samuel 15 to go and completely destroy the Amalekites. He partially obeyed. He destroyed a lot, but kept the spoil. He claimed his motive was spiritual. He said to Samuel “I kept them so we could sacrifice them to God”. But God rejected his reasoning. He said “to obey is better than sacrifice”. He stripped Saul of his kingship not long after that. His motive did not make up for his disobedient method. Another example is Uzza the priest in I Chronicles 13. Uzza tried to stop the Ark from crashing to the ground off its ox cart when the ox stumbled. God struck him dead. His motive was good, to protect the Ark, but his method was wrong. No one was supposed to touch the Ark ever, and besides the Ark was to be carried by the priests, not by ox-cart. In Leviticus 10:1-3 we have another example. Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu offered strange fire on the altar and God struck them dead. They didn’t offer sacrifices to Baal, but they thought that a motive – offer to God -- made up for the poor method, which was strange fire. They are like many Christians today who think, if I’m doing it for God, He must accept it. They quote Samuel, “man looks on the outward appearance, but God sees the heart.” Yes, He sees a heart that knows what methods please him and still disobeys, and He is not pleased. God is not obliged to accept anything from you, just because you put it on the altar in His name.

God cares sincerely about methodology. He is a meticulous God as seen in His detailed instructions for building the tabernacle, in the exactness of worship instituted in the Temple. We see how pleased God is when things are done exactly as He commanded in Exodus 40 and 2 Chronicles 7:1-3. His glory descended because the people cared about how it was done, not only why.

Someone says, “What about good results? What about those who have been won to God through questionable Christian music?”

Well, we don’t doubt that God can use anything to accomplish His plans. He spoke through a donkey: He is not limited. Paul said in Colossians 1:15-18 that some were preaching against him personally, but people were still being saved. Paul didn’t condone what they were doing, he just thanked God that people got saved. Jonah preached at Nineveh with an ungodly heart, attitude and spirit. Thousands repented. Does that mean God was happy with what Jonah did? No, it is proof that God is sovereignly able to work in any situation, in spite of us and our rebellion. *That is not an excuse to continue to use rebellious methods.* Did God include Jonah in the Bible to teach us how to do evangelism? No, if

anything, Jonah is an example of how not to do it. God will get the glory from our lives, as vessels of honour or dishonour. The problem is that, like Jonah, you will lose out on rewards and the real blessing of knowing God when you choose methods that God has not sanctioned. Also, there is another danger. People who hear the Gospel via questionable Christian music may get saved, but will probably be at a disadvantage with regard growing in the Lord. They will think the Christian life involves no change, no sanctification, and will struggle to learn how to submit to authority and take up their cross. Even worse, there may be some who never truly repent, but think that they are saved because of a supposed prayer or invitation. Finally, we ask, “Where is the fruit of supposedly massive conversions at Christian music concerts”? Supposedly thousands get saved at these concerts. Where are the changed communities, the changed families, the full churches, the new missionaries?

Lastly, with regards methodology we must add that God cares about the performer and the performance. The **performer**, should be better termed *the messenger*. He is like a preacher: a servant, one representing another. He is not supposed to stand there in his own name, heaping praise to himself. I wonder what would happen if some of today’s famous preachers like John MacArthur or Bruce Wilkinson started fan clubs for themselves. If they produced t-shirts, posters and stickers with their face on it. What would people say? We would say these men have lost all sense of what they are doing, and have become self-worshipping. Well, why doesn’t anyone say anything when so-called Christian artists have fan-clubs, posters, stickers, badges and legions of screaming fans? “Well, it’s different!” Why? How? Christian singers are in many ways messengers, preachers, people honouring the king. They are to be servants, not stars. Servants do not seek fame, adoration or notoriety. They prefer the shadows. They do their job and forget about it. Luke 17:10. There are thankfully, good Christian artists who live this way, but unfortunately the pressures of record companies telling them to ‘juice it up’ affect them. Often the record companies market Christian servants like superstars to juice up their record sales. Greedy record executives manipulate artists into accepting a style of ministry that is no different from a secular performer.

Also, as an ambassador of Christ, they should seek to have the same blamelessness of a preacher. They are also on display, and though they may fall, they are to strive to have the same blamelessness as pastors and preachers. Too often, singers in our churches and elsewhere are leading lives that are morally repugnant. They slump in their chair during preaching, showing that their love for God’s Word is all but non-existent. According to I Chronicles 15-16, 23 and 35, Temple singers were to be well-organised, educated and trained, skillful & efficient performers, punctual and systematic, consecrated to God and models of obedience.

But further than that, the **performance** must also be Christlike. Just like a preacher can preach truth, but do so in a proud, nasty and insulting way, so the singer can perform in a way that distracts from the message. Nothing in the performance should distract from the message. A preacher cannot swear during a sermon, and then say, “That’s what the unsaved relate to!”. He is contradicting the message. The performance must direct people to Christ, whether it be in dress, appearance, body language or even attitude. Those talented with good singing voices must beware of over-the-top performance, using vocal gymnastics to *wow* an audience. Be careful of attracting attention to yourself. A preacher can do many things to ‘wow’ an audience.

But the fruit of the Spirit is meekness: power under control. Not always doing what you can, when wisdom calls for less. God always uses meekness in dealing with us, so must singers. Also, be very careful of imitating the vocal technique of secular singers who sing in such a way as to enter a person's personal space. They sound sensual, sliding up and down notes, a very sensual and seductive sound. It has no place when communicating God to others.

We've seen many things in our study on music. We've looked at what music is. We've answered many objections that are commonly raised. We've examined the Source of Music, being the Holy Spirit, and saw what that means. We've examined the Sound of Christian music and seen what that is. We've looked at the sensibilities of Christian music, and seen the practicalities and the methodology of Christian music.

But maybe someone says, 'I know what you say, but when I listen to this music, it works for me! I feel close to God. How can that be wrong?'. It's a good question. Consider that you don't always know your own heart. Jeremiah 17:9. Always be open to the fact that God knows what's right for you even when you think you do. Your flesh can deceive you into enjoying something that God doesn't. Remember always that what you feel must always be subject to what God says in His Word. If your attitude is, "It works for me!" then your **experience controls the truth**. That is dangerous. The correct thing to do is to say, "The Bible shows me certain things about God. As I meditate on them, I respond in a particular way, and the music reflects that ." Thus the **truth controls your experience**.

May truth control our experience of Christian music. As you ponder these things and weigh them up against Scripture, again ask yourself the 4 questions in evaluating Christian music 1) Is it helpful? 2) Does it bring me under its power 3) Does it cause others to stumble? 4) Does it glorify God?

Ultimately, there is music which glorifies Him, and there is music which doesn't. God help you and me to know the difference, and to obey Him in the area of Christian music.