

Why We Have to Be Careful in Our Musical Choices

Some people claim that music is a non-issue. They claim that it doesn't really matter what we listen to. It's only music; it's just entertainment. Music is a personal thing; it's all in the ears of the listener. It's not all that important.

Music, of course, is not a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith. It's not an issue of eternal salvation or life and death. We don't find much about music in the New Testament. Jesus didn't say anything about it, and Paul mentions music just a couple of times. Christians have widely differing opinions on the issue. It is, to some degree, a matter of preference and personal judgment.

However, our understanding and use of music is important. It's less important than other things, but it still is an issue we should think about and understand.

Music is important in church; we usually use quite a bit of music in our worship services. And music is often important at home and in our personal lives. Many of us have a good bit of recorded music, and we listen to music quite often. We hear music almost everywhere we go. The music we listen to has an impact on us; it has an influence, either good or bad.

The Bible is not a music textbook, but it *does say a lot about music*. One whole book of the Bible—the psalms—is a hymnal. Christians ought to be concerned about applying whatever principles the Bible contains that apply to music.

My message today is titled, “Why We Have to be Careful About Our Musical Choices.” Obviously, there is not a particular, single passage in the Bible that addresses that issue. But biblical principles certainly apply; biblical principles tell us that we need to be careful about our musical choices.

And we have a lot of musical choices today. From the convenience of your own cell phone, you can listen to virtually any kind of music ever produced. Our musical choices are almost endless. So we have to be careful about those musical choices.

Why do we need to be careful about our musical choices? I think there are several reasons.

I. Music is an important form of worship.

Throughout the Bible, we find that music is a part of worshipping God.

A. David and Solomon organized a large group of Levites to compose and produce music for worship (cf. 1 Chron 22, 25).

1 Chronicles 25:1, 7 *David ... set apart for the service the sons of Asaph, and of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who prophesied with lyres, with harps, and with cymbals. ... The number of them along with their brothers, who were trained in singing to the LORD, all who were skillful, was 288.*

1. All those singers and instrumentalists employed at the temple were there to aid in the worship of God. The music was designed to bring praise and glory to God. Music serves to lift up and exalt God; to bring glory to his name.

Ps 66:4 All the earth shall worship thee, and shall sing unto thee; they shall sing to thy name.

2. Note that the musicians were “trained” and “skillful.” Music ought to be well-prepared and of well-performed. Church music should be intentional, organized, and done as well as possible.
3. We don’t have professional musicians, but we try our best. We should strive to honor God in the way we produce music.

B. Music is an important part of worship for the New Testament Church.

Ephesians 5:19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,

Colossians 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

The terms used here signify both vocal and instrumental music. “Singing” (ᾄδοντες), of course, refers to vocal music making, and “making melody” (ψάλλοντες) probably refers to music played on a stringed instrument in accompaniment.

1. The NT tells us that we make melody and sing “unto the Lord.” God is the most important audience for church music. Church music should, first of all, be approved by God. It’s for God, so our first concern is that God would approve of it.
2. And we also speak to “one another” as we sing. So the music ought to encourage and build up others; music should unify and strengthen those who hear.

App: Since we sing to the Lord and to one another, we ought to *participate* in the music and not just stand there and listen to others sing. We are to lift up our voices as a united congregation in worship to our Lord. “Make a joyful noise unto the Lord.”

So both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, music (both vocal and instrumental) is directly connected and even commanded for corporate worship.

We have to be careful with the kind of music we use at church because music, as a form of worship, should fit the purpose for which it is used. The music we use to worship God must be fitting with the character of the God we are worshipping. Church music should aid in worship, not detract from it.

It would be inconsistent and contradictory to use a form of music that is irreverent or dishonorable to God. We are trying to please God, not man, in our worship music. To the best of our ability, we should choose music that seems to be reverent and honorable.

The Bible tells us to worship the Lord “in the beauty of holiness” (Ps 29:2). That means that whatever we use in the worship of God, it should be both beautiful and holy. Something holy or sacred is set apart for God. Music used for the worship of God should be sacred in character; it should be holy, beautiful, and biblically true. It should reflect the character and purpose of God. It should be quite obvious that it is sacred music designed to worship God, not secular music designed to entertain unsaved people.

Unfortunately, much of what passes for worship music today is anything but holy and beautiful. It’s much more secular in nature than it is sacred. If it sounds like top-40s pop music, it’s probably not appropriate for worship.

Trans: So we should be careful and thoughtful when we are choosing music that we use in worship.

II. Music is a form of communication.

Just as we are careful regarding other forms of communication that we access, so we should be careful about musical forms of communication that we listen to.

A. Why do composers write music? It’s because they want to communicate something to someone.

1. Most composers make music for others to hear and enjoy. If the composer publishes his music, his obvious intent is to communicate his musical ideas to others. He wants others to hear his music and perhaps play his music.
 2. If you are a performer, you obviously want to communicate through music. What would be the point of performing music if you didn't want anyone to hear you? If you want someone to hear you, you obviously are trying to say something through your music.
- B. Music is like a language. Music often uses language to communicate.
1. Some people have the highest, most noble purposes for their music. They want to communicate something about God or about creation or about any number of very good things.
E.g., JS Bach's *Soli Deo Gloria*—a very high, noble purpose
 2. Some people want to communicate very evil, wicked, and perverse things through their music. Their intent is evil; they are saying evil things through their music; they are intentional about composing evil, corrupt music. The composers want their listeners to adopt their perverse, ungodly ideas and behaviors.

Most of us are probably aware of some of the evil things that wicked people communicate their music. I suppose that has always been true, but especially since the advent of rock music, popular music has been the vehicle to communicate some very despicable and depraved ideas. It's so bad that publishers put warning labels on music today.
- C. God has told us what he expects from human communication.
1. We are not to communicate falsehood; we should not lie.
 2. We are not to allow any corrupt communication to proceed out of our mouths. E.g., foul language, gutter language, immoral talk
 3. We should not speak casually about perverse and wicked topics. We should not use or listen to dirty jokes.
 4. The Bible tells us to bridle our tongues and not allow evil words to escape.

5. We should use our words to build up, to speak grace and compassion. We should use our words for good, uplifting purposes.
- D. All of that should also be true of any communication we use, including music. Because music communicates ideas, we should be careful about the kind of ideas the music we listen to communicates to ourselves and to others.
- E. Just like we can judge the moral value of any other form of communication, so we can judge the moral value of music. We have the capacity to judge the ideas being communicated in music.
- F. I would argue that there are some forms/styles of music that are incompatible with Christianity because of what they communicate. These forms of music, in and of themselves, are antithetical and contradictory to the claims and character of the Christian faith.

Rock n' roll, as a style of music, I believe, is anti-Christian music. Much of the lyrics in rock music are anti-Christian and the music itself can hardly be described as good, beautiful, and true. That musical expression does not fit with or correspond to the Christian message or lifestyle.

Rock music is, generally speaking, an expression of self-gratification and the pursuit of unrestricted pleasure. It's the music of "do your own thing." It often expresses rebellion against authority and encourages indulging in our basest instincts. To put it as delicately as possible, rock music is an expression of immoral self-indulgence. Those who produce it openly affirm that, and their lifestyles communicate those anti-Christian ideas very clearly.

A Christian who is careful in his musical choices will stay away from music that is anti-Christian in its purpose and mood. You should be able to discern the intent and the spiritual quality of music and stay away from those forms of music that are clearly anti-Christian in their purpose.

III. Music both speaks to and expresses emotion.

- A. Music has long been known as "the language of the emotions." If you are like me, you find some forms of music deeply moving.

As I get older, I find that music has more of an emotional impact on me. Some music almost brings me to tears. Why is that? It's because music both expresses and affects human emotions.

B. Have you ever heard of “mood” music? Music can set a mood or an atmosphere; it can alter your attitude. Music expresses a feeling or produces a feeling.

1. If you are playing in a marching band in a parade, you play a certain style of music that is conducive to marching.
2. If you are at a funeral, you hear music that is soft and solemn. In fact, a “dirge” is a form of music used for lamentation for the dead. It's mournful, solemn music. It produces an emotion fitting for a funeral.
3. If you are at a sporting event, you hear music that is exciting and thrilling. You don't play a dirge at a football game.
4. If you are at a ballet or a square dance, you obviously hear music that is suitable for dancing.
5. Music affects our emotions, it affects our feelings and thoughts. It produces feelings and can influence actions.

C. God has certain expectation for our emotions.

Pr 23:7 For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he: ...

Mt 12:34 ... out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.

1. Music affects our heart, our emotions.
2. Christians have for centuries recognized a difference between the higher and the lower emotions. The Bible warns us against “lusts of the heart” and “vile affections.” There is a constant battle between the spirit and the flesh.
3. So we cannot simply follow our hearts. Our hearts are prone to inordinate affections and lust. We can't just follow whatever we are emotionally attracted to. Cf. Jer 17:9; Prov 28:26.
4. Instead, we have to allow the Word of God to influence our affections and emotion. We must love what God loves and hate what God hates.

5. We must recognize and affirm the Lordship of Christ over every part of our existence, including our emotions. We must bring our thoughts and feelings into line with godly expectations. Cf. 2 Cor 10:5
6. Music has the capacity to move us emotionally in good or bad ways. Music can draw us closer to God or drive us far from God. So we have to use the kind of music that moves us emotionally in good and godly ways.
7. If music stirs us emotionally, it ought to stir us toward love and good works (cf. Heb 10:24—“provoke unto love and to good works”).
8. Any music we listen to should move us emotionally, not toward fulfilling our lower appetites, but toward godly love.

Trans: So we have to be careful about music because it has the ability to move us emotionally. And our emotions must be submitted to God.

IV. Music reflects your moral commitments.

Isaiah 5:11–12 Woe to those who rise early in the morning, That they may follow intoxicating drink; Who continue until night, till wine inflames them! 12 The harp and the strings, The tambourine and flute, And wine are in their feasts; But they do not regard the work of the LORD, Nor consider the operation of His hands.

- A. What kind of music was Isaiah referring to—music that accompanies drunkenness? What kind of music plays at a night club? What kind at a tavern? What kind at a casino? The moral setting of a place usually determines the kind of music that is played there.

You don't expect to hear great hymns of the Christian faith at a tavern or a casino or a night club. The proprietors of those establishments don't want you thinking Christian thoughts in those places. They are places that promote immoral behavior. Christian music would be out of place there.

- B. Christians should have a set of moral commitments that reflect God's expectations. God has given us commandments to live by, and it's our responsibility to live upstanding, moral lives.

- C. Applying that principle to music, we should use/enjoy the kind of music that is in keeping with our moral commitments. Our music should uphold and support godly Christian living. It should encourage us to follow God and keep his commandments.
- D. Of course, Christian music does exactly that. Or I should say, that's what Christian music *should* do. Some so-called Christian music is just worldly, pop music with less offensive lyrics. Much modern Christian music is what I call "God is my boyfriend" music. It's much more romantic and sentimental than it is sacred and biblical.
- E. Traditional Christian music is much more in keeping with Christian standards of morality. The goal of good Christian music is to help us believe right, think right, live right, and even have the right emotions. Good Christian music helps us to think right and feel right about God.
- F. A good expression of Christian moral standards that we can apply to music is found in Philippians 4:8 —

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.

Moral music would reflect these virtues—truth, nobility, justice, purity, and beauty. Good music is worthy of praise. We know music is good when it reflects these virtues. We know music is bad when it fails to reflect these virtues. Bad music is often opposite of these virtues.

We live in a very corrupt, depraved world. We don't have much control over some of the wicked things that we hear and see; but when we do have control, we should make sure that we are thinking about good things. When we get to control the music, we should make sure it's good, morally acceptable music.

- G. How do we judge whether music has these virtues?
 - 1. Obviously, we can consider the *lyrics*. If the words of the music are not true, noble, just, pure, lovely, good, virtuous, and praiseworthy, then it probably is not the kind of music to listen to.
If the music has a warning label on it, it's probably not good.

Some music emphasizes immoral lyrics. If the lyrics are mostly about getting drunk or high, promiscuity, divorce or abuse, or other illegal or immoral activities. it's not good music. That kind of music is not suitable for Christians to listen to.

2. We can also judge the musical *style* of the work. That's a little more difficult, but it is possible. Music itself, even without lyrics, has emotional content and communicates a message. Some forms of music are much more in keeping with Christian ideals than others. Mature Christians ought to be able to make that judgment. At least you can try to make that judgment.
- H. The point is that we should be trying to judge whether the music we listen to is in keeping with Christian morality or not. If the content and character of the music is contrary to Christian morality, then it's not appropriate for us to listen to. If you are sensitive to such things, you should be able to make such judgments.
- I. We need to be careful about our musical choices because music *reflects* and *affects* our moral standards. If we want to uphold and maintain high standards of Christian morality, then we have to be discerning regarding the music we listen to.

As you can see, there are several good reasons why we need to be careful and thoughtful about our musical choices.

- ✓ Music can be used for worship, so we have to be careful that we use the right kinds of music for this purpose. Worship music should be sacred, beautiful, and biblically true. We should be seeking God's approval in our worship music.
- ✓ Music is a form of communication. As we listen to music, someone is telling us something; the composer is speaking to us. We want to listen to good messages, not evil/corrupt ones. So we have to be careful.
- ✓ Music speaks to our emotions; music is the language of emotions. Good music is going to appeal to our higher emotions, not our lower appetites. Good music will help us think the right thoughts and even feel the right emotions.
- ✓ Music reflects our moral commitments. We don't want to flood ourselves with immoral content. We should be careful to allow only what is good, true, beautiful, and virtuous into our minds.

So be careful about your musical choices. Music will have an impact, whether good or bad. We need to be careful about music so that it has a positive, godly influence on us. The music we participate in and voluntarily listen to should be good, beautiful, true, and consistent with biblical principles.

Let's be careful about our musical choices.