

Understanding God's Purpose in Music

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Down through history music has always been a powerful expression of emotional, social, and spiritual messages. Also, since music can bypass a person's conscious mind and therefore communicate more deeply than just spoken words, it we need to be careful what messages are being smuggled into our minds without our conscious consent.

These wrong messages can be damaging enough in an adult's life, but the most dangerous impact of some music is upon children and adolescents. The heightened impact of music upon youth is due to the fact that the younger the child, the more impressionable the child. Thus, it is vital that during the time young people often want to listen to the music of their peers, parents must help their children select music that will encourage godliness instead of worldliness.

Since music has always been a powerful medium for sending and receiving information, we must understand what music is, how it affects us, and how God desires us to utilize it. If we do not understand God's design for music, then we will not only miss the blessings He has for us in godly music, but may be allowing evil influences to corrupt our lives.

Music is tonal and lyrical auditory vibrations that our ears receive and our brains interpret. Both instrumental music and verbal lyrical components of music have unique impacts on all people. Due to human design, music can make an "end run" around our conscious minds and, for better or for worse, alter our perceptions of God, ourselves, and the world. Music is so powerful that even animals and plants are affected by it.

Specifically, the two components of music illustrate how this effect occurs. The lyrics of music can be easily read, but not so often easily heard. One of many myths that people hold about music is that if the words are not easily understood, then they are not having an effect. Numerous research studies have shown this belief to be false. More significantly, and also contrary to some views, even instrumental music is not neutral or amoral. This is true for two primary reasons: (1) Different types of instrumental music, such as hard rock and classical music, have been consistently shown to have different effects upon the body, mind, and emotions; and (2) Different types of music have different connotations to the listener because of associations made with previously heard music.

The clearest example of how music affects us can be seen in the match between a person and the types of music one listens to. To paraphrase Aristotle, you will become like the music that you like. Or, put another way, "You are what you listen to." For good or for evil, this is why everyone listens to music. Our individual choice of music is like our personal soundtrack for the movie our life-- anthems by which to live. For example, sometimes secrets or insights about a person's self-image can be discerned by knowing the types of music with which they are programming themselves.

Some rock 'n roll music is illustrative of all that can be destructive in music. The emphasis on sex, drugs, alcohol, rebellion, and the occult provides a clear picture of how man can pervert music, from what God intended for His glory and our benefit, into an evil medium. Rock music often accomplishes this effect with loud volume, fast tempo, irregular beat, and ungodly lyrics which together create an emotional, physical, psychological, and social tension that influences thoughts and deeds.

The greatest concern here is the deteriorating nature of some modern music. Unlike most popular music before the 1950s, popular music has rapidly grown increasingly explicit in its ungodliness. Some cite music as partially responsible for the decline of American culture. In reality, our

deteriorating moral and social culture and deteriorating music have a chicken and egg relationship--that is, both cause and effect the other and are inseparable.

While mankind has twisted God's plan for music, God has given us clear principles to help us richly enjoy the blessings He has for us in a broad spectrum of godly and edifying music. It is very important that we do not repeat a primary error of Christian faith in history--diluting God's truth with the world's deception. When this happens Christians are easily tricked into thinking that they are doing what God wants them to do.

Christian music is currently engaging with this debate. In the Bible, God never prescribes music as an evangelistic tool. Thus, the rationale for utilizing popular music with "Christian" lyrics to reach out to non-Christians may not be patently unbiblical but it is clearly not prescribed in the Bible. The logic cited in support for this position is that some people have become Christians because of Christian music. While this might occur, it is not a sufficient Scriptural and logical foundation upon which to build a principle. One's experience does not determine God's truth. In addition, listening to some types of Christian music solely because it is personally appealing may in fact be a solid reason to not listen, rather than an argument to listen. The soulish appeal might be to an old worldly lifestyle that has not yet been completely sanctified out of a person.

From these complex ideas, it is readily apparent that this issue of music requires godly discernment and understanding. Each individual must study God's Word to receive guidance from God about how to use music in his or her life. All of us must be careful to separate our own opinions from what the Word of God actually says, because music is a personal topic to all of us. Nevertheless, God's Word does give us principles to guide our decisions in this area of grace, freedom, and responsibility.

The Bible reveals that God's intended purpose for music was to give us a method of praising Him, exhorting fellow Christians, and being personally blessed in the process. Thousands of verses, a few of which follow, give us principles guidelines as to how God desires us to utilize music. While we might want the Bible to be black and white on this (and many other issues!), music falls in with the majority of life decisions that require wise consideration that can only occur when we are submitted to the Lordship of Jesus. As well as revealing any existing wrong thinking and practices, study on this topic can also show the most powerful positive uses of music.

First, singing praises to God for who He is and what He does is the most important. Second, singing to and with fellow believers is a great source of personal and corporate encouragement. The verses that follow explain that godly singing flows from the person who is filled by the Holy Spirit, an ongoing command to believers.

As we individually commit ourselves to following God's plan for music, we will enjoy some of His richest blessing. Music is truly one of God's most exciting inventions. Many Christians' deep fear is that if we start letting God shows us what music He wants in our life, He will only allow "boring old hymns!" Actually, if we are willing to submit this area to God, then we can not only be shown what God does not want us to hear, but we will be surprised by the wide range of music that can be edifying.

Verses

"Like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, or like vinegar on soda, is he who sings songs to a troubled heart." *Proverbs 25:20*

"It is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man than for one to listen to the song of fools."

Ecclesiastes 7:5

"Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps." *Amos 5:23*

"And after singing a hymn they [Jesus and the disciples] went out to the Mount of Olives." *Matthew 26:30*

"And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison... But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them." *Acts 16:23a, 25*

"All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify." *1 Corinthians 10:23*

"And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord;" *Ephesians 5:18-19*

"Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is excellence and anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things." *Philippians 4:8*

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

"Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone among you cheerful? Let him sing praises." *James 5:13*