

Three Musical Principles

Not too long ago, I read a deeply saddening article. It was by a young lady by the name of Meghan O' Gieblyn. In the article, she describes how through her pre-teen and later years, she followed one Christian rock group and pop group after another, through the various fads and fashions of the 90s and early 2000s. She describes how as she grew up in this environment, she saw how the church tried to keep up with the marketing techniques of the world, to make itself supposedly relevant, trendy, cool and attractive. This is how she finishes the article. "... I continued to call myself a Christian into my early twenties. When I finally stopped, it wasn't because being a believer made me uncool or outdated or freakish. It was because being a Christian no longer meant anything. It was a label to slap on my Facebook page, next to my music preferences. The gospel became just another product someone was trying to sell me, and a paltry one at that ... In trying to compete in this market, the church has forfeited the one advantage it had in the game to attract disillusioned youth: authenticity. ..If Christian leaders weren't so ashamed of those unvarnished values, they might have something more attractive than anything on today's bleak moral market. In the meantime, they've lost one more kid to the competition."

O'Gieblyn's article is not primarily about music, it's about the Christian church trying to be trendy, and failing. Nevertheless, if you read the article, you will see that music is central to what she's talking about, because it was in the music she listened to, that she defined her identity as a Christian. The music she was exposed to and encouraged to listen to shaped her whole view of what Christianity was about. In the end, she abandoned the whole thing.

O'Gieblyn is one symptom of a worldwide debate: what kind of music should Christians listen to? What kind of music should Christians worship with?

Perhaps you have heard some, or all of the following statements about worship music.

"The Bible is silent when it comes to our musical choices."

"What matters is that our worship songs have good, doctrinally-sound lyrics. The music is just stylistic wrapping-paper."

"Music is an issue of personal preference, and not something we ought to prescribe."

"Music is a Romans 14 issue, one man likes this, another likes that, as long as they like it unto the Lord, it's fine."

"Music is morally neutral. What matters is the theology we sing to our music."

Perhaps you may have voiced those same remarks. And if so, you certainly wouldn't be in the minority. Probably the large majority of professing Christianity today holds that musical style is morally neutral, a personal preference, and something that only divisive people discuss or make an issue of. Yet, for all that, the debate about music will not go away.

When it comes to the debate about music, there are two errors we can make. On the one extreme, we can decide that because the Bible has not given us in precise words what kind of music we should use in worship or listen to in general, that this means God has absolutely no preference in the matter at all. It is all a matter of personal taste, and God has no more preference in music than he does in food. This view thinks that God is completely silent on the matter, so we ought to be as well.

On the other extreme is the idea that God has spelt it out for us in the Bible, and if we learn a few extra Bible verses, we can easily split music up into the approved list and the banned list. This view thinks that everything that God wants us to know can be learned in three easy steps, so music is the same.

The truth is, that is not the case. If music really were a non-issue, we would not have had debates

about it for hundreds of years. If music were really as simple an issue as the other side makes out, we would not have had debates about it for hundreds of years! The truth is with neither extreme.

The Bible does have something to say about music. We need to know what it says and be obedient. However, the Bible does not say all there is to say about music, any more than it says all there is to say about poetry, architecture, astro-science or botany. If or where it does speak on those things, it speaks truly, and is authoritative. But the Bible is not our exhaustive source of knowledge when it comes to music. Our goal is to discover what the Bible does say about music, and where it expects us to do some further learning on our own - we will do that.

So, what I would like to do is to see three principles from Scripture that relate to music, and then draw a reasonable, logical conclusion. If you belong to either of those two extremes, you are going to be disappointed. If you are looking to hear that all music is acceptable as long as we are sincere in our hearts, then you will be disappointed. If you are looking to leave with a list of songs, or musical genres that are good or bad, you will be disappointed. What I hope you will leave with is a clear understanding of some Scriptural principles, and a desire to do some homework so as to apply them.

I. God commands the use of music in worship.

Ephesians 5:18-19 And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, (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.

Here is a very clear Scripture. Hardly anyone I know of disagrees with the point that God wants music, whether it is simply the human voice, or the accompanied human voice, or pure instruments in New Testament worship. We all agree that some kind of music is to be included in New Testament worship.

This should tell us how important this is. God has told us in His Word that He wants music included in our worship of Him. He did not tell us to use drama. He did not tell us to use paintings. He did not tell us to use sculpture. Had He told us to use those things, people who love God ought to become very interested in painting or sculpture or drama. Why? Because if the one we love has specified that He wants something included in worship, then we should become very interested in that thing.

If a husband loves his wife, and she tells him, "I would like flowers in my home," what is the appropriate response? By picking any flower at random? By getting the flowers he likes? No! Surely the right answer is, find out what flowers his wife likes.

Here we find out that of all the things in creation, God has specifically called for music to be used in worship. That elevates the importance of music. That makes it extremely important. So when we hear people saying that music is a non-issue, we ought to reply, "Perhaps to you, but not to God. God took the time to inspire direct New Testament commands that call for music."

With that first principle in mind, let's consider the second one.

II. Music is a form of communication.

Eph 5:19 – **speaking** to yourselves. Col 3:16 – **teaching**.

Speaking and teaching are forms of communication. Now, if someone is to argue that it is the lyrics

of the music that communicates, and not the music, the answer is, of course it is true that the lyrics communicate. But the real question is, if it is only the lyrics that communicate, why set them to music? Why not just read those lyrics out like a speech? If God wanted psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to speak and to teach, it must be because they communicate in ways which sermons do not. The music of those psalms, hymns and spiritual songs is part of the communication.

Music was designed by God to be a language of sound. By the way it is constructed, it carries forth ideas. It communicates messages. The Bible has several examples of how music has a particular purpose, and communicates. For instance Scripture speaks of songs of the drunkard (Ps 69.12), songs of the harlot (Is 23.15), songs of praise (Nehemiah 12:46), songs of devotion (2 Kings 3.15), songs of celebration (1 Kings 1.18-40; 1 Chr 15.28).

A very graphic illustration of this occurs when Moses and Joshua are returning from Mount Sinai, and the people of Israel have fallen into idolatry down below:

Exodus 32:17-18 And when Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a noise of war in the camp." (18) But he said: "It is not the noise of the shout of victory, Nor the noise of the cry of defeat, But the sound of singing I hear."

Before Moses or Joshua could actually hear the lyrics, they heard a sound. The sound was so clamorous that it sounded to Joshua like a war. It communicated the idea of battle, conflict, the tumult of war. Moses had to tell Joshua that although it sounded like war, it was actually music – it was singing.

Different music communicates different ideas. The message of war is different from the message of seduction. The message of drunken revelling is different from the message of praise (how we need to meditate on that for a while).

Not only can music communicate an idea, but it also communicates emotions. Music is so able to represent an emotion that the Bible sometimes treats that emotion and the sound of the music as the same thing.

My harp also is turned to mourning, and my organ into the voice of them that weep. (Job 30:31)

Most everyone recognises music is an emotional language. We all understood that films use mood music in the background to help us know if we are supposed to be happy, scared, in suspense, tense, excited, thrilled, titillated, saddened. This music is usually without lyrics. The form of the music communicates certain emotional ideas.

By the way, this puts the lie to the notion that we all get something totally different out of music. While we may have differing likes or dislikes, no one listens to scary music and thinks it means humour. No one listens to sad music and bursts our laughing. No one listens to upbeat marching music and cries. Though culture plays a part, there is a universal kind of understanding of music that God has built into people.

So, this is where we are: God has commanded us to use worship. That makes it important. Music communicates ideas and emotions. We come now to a third truth from Scripture.

III. God has commanded and prohibited certain forms of communication and certain kinds of emotions.

Has God said anything about the kinds of communication believers are to have? Has He said anything about the kinds of emotions believers are to have?

Ephesians 4:25 ²⁵ Therefore, putting away lying, "Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor," for we are members of one another.

He does not want any kind of deceitful communication. He has told us through many commands

that all forms of lying and deceit are evil forms of communication.

Ephesians 4:29 ²⁹ *Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.*

Ephesians 5:3-4 ³ *But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints;* ⁴ *neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.*

He does not want any kind of defiling communication. Forms of defiling communication include dirty language, blasphemy, profanity, insults, murmuring, nagging, crude joking, sinful topics.

We could go to many other references to see other kinds of communication God condemns like slander, gossip, innuendo, diminishment. He has *prohibited* these kinds of communication.

Positively, what kind of communication does God want? He wants truthful communication. He wants edifying communication. He wants pure communication.

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.

Has God said anything about emotions that are pleasing to Him and emotions that are not?

Ephesians 4:31-32 ³¹ *Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.* ³² *And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.*

Here you see a sampling. God forbids the emotions of bitterness, anger, clamour, malice. There are other emotions which God has forbidden us to have: outbursts of wrath, jealousy, rage, despair, apathy, discontent, intemperance, revelry, rejoicing in sin, brutal, headstrong, hedonistic.

Likewise, God commands certain other emotions. He commands joy in Philippians 4:4. He commands gratitude in Colossians 3:15. He commands righteous anger in Ephesians 4

Ephesians 4:26-27 ²⁶ *"Be angry, and do not sin": do not let the sun go down on your wrath,* ²⁷ *nor give place to the devil.*

There are other emotions which God has commanded and encouraged His people to have: delight, reverence, awe, sadness, sorrow, , peace, boldness, hope, longing.

Three principles, all from Scripture. God commands music. Music communicates ideas and emotions. Some ideas and emotions are not pleasing to God, but some are. So what can we reasonably conclude?

If music communicates, then it is capable of communicating either in ways that please God, or ways that do not please God. It can communicate ideas and emotions that are true, edifying and pure. It can also communicate the opposite ideas and emotions.

It's reasonable to conclude that some music is inappropriate if it communicates ideas displeasing to God. Simply taking Scripture as it is, and using God-given reason, it is plain to us all that when we use this tool of communication in worship, it ought to communicate in ways that God approves, since we are using it for Him. Since music is capable of expressing all these emotions – it is *reasonable to say that some music is inappropriate because it communicates emotions never appropriate for a believe in Christ.*

If that's true, and I don't see how it could be falsified, then the upshot is that we Christians must use music that communicates ideas and emotions that please God. It is not up to us to decide what

music we will use, purely on a preference basis. That might work for food, but music is not food. Food does not communicate. Food does not enter the mind and soul. Music is far better compared to speech. Do you get to decide what tone of voice you will use with your spouse purely because you like it, or because it will communicate in a God-pleasing way? Do you get to choose the volume or pitch or speed or accompanying facial expressions of your words purely because you like them, or because they are pleasing to God? If music is a tool of communication, then like speech, we first want to know what God is pleased with, we then want to know how music does that.

We know what the ideas and emotions are from Scripture. But how do we know if and how music communicates its ideas or emotions?

The Bible does not tell you how music communicates, any more than it tells you what the three angles of a triangle add up to. The Bible does not tell you how music communicates ideas and emotions, it simply assumes that it does. It gives you clear statements of the kind of communication and kind of emotions God wants.

The Bible, having given you the principle that music must be as godly in communication as your tongue, now expects you to understand, in your day and age, in your culture, what music communicates, and how it does so.

Now, on some level, we all already understand it. We know what the movie maker means by having that music in the background. We know what kind of music revellers want, and we know what kind of music people in a book-store want. We know what kind of music is played at a serious event, and we know what kind of music is played at a jolly, comical event.

Before we see the music video, or hear the lyrics, we can close our eyes, and imagine what scene the music fits. We already feel part of the emotion that the music is evoking.

(In any given bit of hymnody, the text will communicate less than the music. The text is vital: we must sing with understanding. But most often, the power of music will overwhelm and shape the understanding. You might say “I love you” to your spouse, but if you use an angry or provocative or sarcastic tone of voice – it changes the meaning. So, if the music says “Party” or “Revel” or “Play” while the lyrics say “Rejoice in the Lord”, then what comes to happen is that you believe rejoicing in the Lord means partying in the Lord or playing before the Lord. Good music may redeem mediocre lyrics, but good lyrics rarely, or never, redeem bad music.)

And one of the most helpful things you can do as you try to evaluate Christian music is to listen to it, and ask, what kind of scene does this fit? What sort of joy or love or hope is being communicated?

For example, God tells us to rejoice in Him in Philippians 4:4 What kind of joy do you think corresponds to joy in God? Flippant, hilarious, partying, jolly, amused, playful, pleasant, satisfied, exuberant, exultant. Some of those kinds of joy do not correspond to God. Is it possible for music to communicate these different kinds of joy? If the music is communicating a kind of joy that does not correspond to the kind of joy that belongs to God, the music is inappropriate, and a form of deceit.

Even if you have no training in music, you can begin to think seriously about these things. You can ask, what kind of fear does God want me to have for Him? What kind of idea does this music communicate? (If it could be used for a song about puppy-love, it's a good hint that it isn't communicating the ideas that go with knowing God). The point is, we Christians must be giving a lot of thought as to what kinds of joy, or fear, or sorrow, or zeal belongs to knowing and responding to God. Once we know that, we can listen to music to hear if it is evoking and expressing those ordinate responses, or if it is actually confusing us by using orthodox lyrics with inordinate

emotions.

This kind of continual judgement and discernment is part of your Christian life.

1 Thessalonians 5:21 ²¹ *Test all things; hold fast what is good.*

Ephesians 5:10 ¹⁰ *finding out what is acceptable to the Lord.*

Now, if you are serious about knowing how music communicates its ideas and emotions, then you go to those who know best how the elements of music combine to communicate, those who work with and compose and understand music best: composers, musicologists, critics. If I want information on whether it is against the law to take cocaine in South Africa, I will ask a good lawyer. I will not insist that the lawyer be a Christian, or that the lawyer quote a Scripture in his answer. I want outside information to apply Scripture, so I go to a good, reliable source.

So in music. An unbelieving composer cannot tell me what kind of musical communication God wants, but he can tell me what a particular kind of music communicates. He can tell me – this communicates tension; this communicates peace; this communicates wildness; this communicates sensuality. An unbelieving music critic can't tell me what God likes or dislikes but he can tell me how music might achieve those ideas through its melody, harmony, rhythm and tone colour.

The unbelieving critic cannot tell me if God prefers outbursts of wrath, or reverence, or awe in worship, but he can tell me when music evokes outbursts of wrath and when it evokes reverence and awe. If I find a trustworthy composer, and he is an unbeliever, he will not be able to tell me the difference between the kind of joy which glorifies God, and the kind of joy which is about loving myself, but he can tell me how melody, harmony, rhythm & tone colour combine to achieve different emotional textures.

Like we said at the start, the Bible is not silent on music, but the Bible does not say all there is to say on music. Christians do not take anything away from the Bible when we learn about music from unbelieving experts.

Whether or not you undertake that kind of study, you are commanded to worship God with music, and to communicate in God-pleasing ways, and have emotions that are God-pleasing. Music comes into all those areas.

Start by reconsidering just how important music is, for God to have commanded it. Make the habit of listening to music and asking, what does this say? Where could this be used? What might this sell or say or be in the background of? Very importantly, be asking, what kind of joy is joy in the Lord? What kind of love is loving God? What kind of fear is fearing God? What kind of ideas are associated with God? If you are mediating on that, and beginning to connect it to what different forms of music communicate, you will go a long way towards coming to the right answers on this.

Meghan O' Giebllyn left Christianity because ultimately, the music she listened to communicated that God is implausible and irrelevant. Music communicates. God commands it. It's no side-issue. Let's test all things to find out what is acceptable to Him.