

Is Music Neutral?

One of the main tenets of Contemporary Christian Music is that music is neutral. It is neither good nor bad, right or wrong. As long as one chooses appropriate “Christian” words, proponents of CCM believe that any kind of music can be acceptable. The words and message may be conveyed by any kind of music, whether it be rock music or rap music or “Christian” metal or anything else. If any kind of music is blended with the right words, then the music becomes acceptable because it’s the message that counts and the music that is used does not matter. Music, they say, has no power to enhance worship and it has no power to detract from worship. It is just neutral. In the church any music can be used, as long as good words are added to it.

This way of thinking has been made into a creedal confession known as the “Christian Rocker’s Creed.” It goes like this: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all music was created equal—that no instrument or style of music is in itself evil—that the diversity of musical expression which flows forth from man is but one evidence of the boundless creativity of our Heavenly Father” [*Contemporary Christian Music*, November 1988, p. 12]. Mega Church Pastor Rick Warren shares a similar perspective:

I reject the idea that music styles can be judged as either “good” or “bad” music. Who decides this? The kind of music you like is determined by your background and culture. Music is nothing more than an arrangement of notes and rhythms; it’s the words that make a song spiritual. There is no such thing as “Christian music”, only Christian lyrics. If I were to play a tune for you without any words, you wouldn’t know if it was a Christian song or not. [Rick Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, p. 281]

Years ago there was a very effective Christian film entitled, *So Many Voices*. The film began with a very scary graveyard scene. A man in a cloke and hood was walking through the grave stones. The scene was dark and shadowy. The background music created the mood of suspense and fear and tension. The music kept building to a climax and the viewers felt that at any moment something terrible would happen that would make everyone scream! The scene ended quite innocuously as the “villain” removed his hood, uttered the word “boo” and broke into a big smile!

Immediately following this, the exact same graveyard scene was replayed. The video presentation of the hooded man walking through the dark cemetery was repeated. But for this second replay, the music was changed. This time carnival music was played, like something children would hear while riding a merry-go-round. The music changed the mood completely. The viewers saw the same man walking through the tombstones but this time the video was not scary at all. It was actually comical, because the music did not fit the scene. The music was not frightening or suspenseful at all and the audience was greatly amused. Even though the video was spooky, the message of the audio was more powerful than the video, and every element of fear was removed. The only thing that changed was the music.

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Music by itself is very powerful. Even without words it conveys a message, appeals to emotions and creates a mood. As a young man I enjoyed listening to the William Tell Overture and I was amazed that the music itself was able to make me visualize a violent thunderstorm and then the calm that followed the storm. All this was accomplished without words; just with the music. Play a John Philip Sousa march and people will envision a patriotic parade and their feet may even start marching to the beat! Music is so powerful that David was able to soothe the madness of King Saul and bring calmness to his soul (1 Samuel 16).

How can anyone believe that music is neutral? Even the unsaved know that this is not true. The children of this age, in their generation, are wiser than the children of light (Luke 16:8). The children of this age know the power of music. They know the effect that music can have on people.

A good dentist office will play background music that is soothing and relaxing and calming. The staff wants to create the right mood for their patients, to prepare them for what might be an uncomfortable experience.

Those who own fine restaurants are very careful about the kind of music they play to create the right kind of atmosphere and the right kind of mood for their customers. They know that music, even without words, has a strong effect on people.

Owners of shopping centers know that music is powerful and they carefully choose the right kind of music that will help people feel comfortable shopping, resulting in the most revenue.

Sporting events use music (often very loud music) to get fans excited about the game and to create a frenzied and competitive atmosphere. At a basketball game, for example, one does not normally hear slow, waltz music or lazy lullabies! Those in charge know the mood they are trying to create.

At a funeral home, there is music that is appropriate to play in the background and there is music that the funeral home director would never allow to be played. The music carries a message and creates a mood. I've never heard rock music played at a funeral home, but if it's neutral, what would be the harm?

When a mother is trying to get her little baby to fall asleep, there is the right kind of music to use and the wrong kind of music to use for this purpose. Calm, soothing, lullaby music works wonders. Mom would never think of using loud stimulating music. That kind of music might be used later when it is "wake up" time!

The song *Sweet Hour of Prayer* conveys a mood that is contemplative, restful and gentle even if the words are not sung. If you put these same words to the music of a Sousa march or a fast Beatles tune then the piece would create a totally different mood. The mood is in the music, and a good composer will seek to find the music with the right mood so as to fit the message of the words. Thus, *Onward Christian Soldiers* has the mood of a march as if soldiers are going off to war. This fits the message of the song. Try singing the following words to the tune of *Sweet Hour of Prayer*:

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“We’re marching off to war today....etc.” The mood of the music just does not fit the message of the lyrics. Music by itself creates a mood and conveys a message and is not neutral.

Advertisers understand that music is not neutral. They know that just the right kind of music can get a person’s attention and can help in making a sale. They know that certain kinds of music produce certain kinds of responses in the hearers, which can either aid the sale of their product or hinder it.

If music is neutral, then why don’t taverns or night clubs sometimes play traditional hymns as background music? They know that there are styles of music that are greatly preferred because they create the right kind of sensual atmosphere in order to promote the fleshly activities of that establishment.

Secular rock musicians know that their music is not neutral. Jimi Hendrix knew of the hypnotizing power of rock music: “You can hypnotize people...and when you get them at their weakest point you can preach into the subconscious what you want to say” (*Life*, Oct. 3, 1969, p. 74). Rock star Frank Zappa of the Mothers of Invention said, “Rock music is sex. The big beat matches the body’s rhythms” (*Life*, June 28, 1968). Gene Simmons of the rock group KISS said, “That’s what rock is all about—sex with a 100 megaton bomb, the beat!” (*Entertainment Tonight*, ABC, Dec. 10, 1987).

Debbie Harry of the rock band Blondie says “Rock ‘n’ roll is all sex. One hundred percent sex” (cited by Steve Peters, *The Truth about Rock*, p. 30). Allan Bloom wrote, “...rock music has one appeal only, a barbaric appeal to sexual desire—not love, not eros, but sexual desire undeveloped and untutored” (*The Closing of the American Mind*, p. 73). These quotations are old, but they illustrate that in the early days of rock music, the musicians understood what rock music was all about.

If music is neutral, then it would be a simple thing for a lover of rock music to give it up. Jeff Godwin made this observation: “Any ‘Christian’ rock star/fan who thinks music is neutral should face up to one simple fact: nobody gets hooked on neutral music. Why don’t you do a little experiment? Spend the next 30 days without listening to or playing ANY rock music. Try it, Christian Rock fans. You’ll quickly find yourself going through withdrawal. Rock music is a drug! Don’t believe it? [See if you can] go 30 days without it” (*What’s Wrong with Christian Rock?* p. 38).

Those who produce movies know that music is not neutral. They know that background music is a powerful tool to influence a person’s mood. They can use music that will put you on the edge of your seat in fear or in suspense. They can nearly bring the audience to tears with the music. If they are depicting a great military victory, they know what kind of music to use. If there is a tragedy or a death in the film, they know what kind of music to use. If children are happily playing outside, they know what kind of music to use. Tension and danger calls for tense music. Romance calls for romantic music. The musical score must precisely match the script. They can create any kind of mood with music. They know that music is not neutral. They know that there is the right kind of music to use, for whatever purpose they are after, and they know that there is the wrong kind of music—music that would be inappropriate for the mood that they are trying to create. They know that music appeals to the emotions in various ways.

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It is also interesting to observe that in the most highly acclaimed films, rock music is rarely used as background music. Rock music, with its repetitive and driving beat creates tension and is unsettling, and it does not create the kind of emotional response that movie producers are usually looking for.

Rock music, since its very beginnings, has been associated with immorality, sex outside of marriage, glorification of drugs and rebellion against authority. “Decades of rock music in our culture have permanently stamped that music style with the dimension of immorality. Changing the lyrics and substituting Christian musicians cannot remove that stigma” [Dan Lucarini, *Why I Left the Contemporary Christian Music Movement*, p. 91].

In the worship of the living God, the Holy One, there is music that works and there is music that does not work. There is music that sets the right mood and the right atmosphere and there is music that does not. There is music that is reverent, that lifts hearts to God and fits the dignity of the occasion. Majestic music is fitting in worshiping the God of all majesty. We are to worship God in the beauty of holiness; some music is suitable for this purpose and some music is not.

Regardless of the words that are attached to it, what is wrong with rock music? Here are but two of its many problems:

1) The rhythm of rock music dominates the music, appealing to man’s sensual nature.

All music has rhythm, and rhythm is a necessary element of music. *Onward Christian Soldiers* has a definite rhythm pattern (four beats to every measure). The rhythm used in this hymn serves to complement the words and the music of the song. In rock music the beat dominates. Frank Garlock says that the sound that comes from the typical rock group is 70% rhythm. Did you ever drive up next to a car which is playing loud rock music? Sometimes all you can hear is the driving beat and you wonder how the person in the car can survive hearing such rhythm at such a high volume.

2) The rhythm of rock music is unnatural.

Consider the song *Jesus Loves Me This I Know*. There is rhythm in this song, and the main emphasis is on the first beat of each measure. This means the emphasis is on the following syllables or words “Je” “this” “for” “tells.” There is also a secondary emphasis on the third beat of each measure (“loves” “know” “Bib” “so”). This kind of rhythm is natural. The rhythm of rock music comes on the off beat, so that there is a strong drum beat on the second and fourth beat of every measure. This unnatural rhythm appeals to man’s lower, sensual nature and tends to inflame passions. Play rock music in a nightclub and bodies begin to gyrate to the music.

On the other hand, Christian music should create the right mood and convey the right message. David Cloud wrote the following about what the impact of godly music should be:

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Christian music should not speak confusion but peace (1 Cor. 14:33).
Christian music should not speak discord but harmony (1 Cor. 14:40).
Christian music should not speak harshness but gentleness (2 Tim. 2:24).
Christian music should not speak worldliness but holiness (1 Pet. 1:15).
Christian music should not speak rebellion but submission to authority (James 4:7).
Christian music should not speak pride but humility (1 Pet. 5:5).
Christian music should not speak sensuality but spirituality (1 Pet. 2:5).
Christian music should not ask questions but provide answers (1 John 5:20).
Christian music should not speak entertainment but edification (1 Cor. 14:26).

The Church is to represent the living God who is righteous and holy in all His ways. It is not the purpose of the Church to represent a rock concert. The Church is not to reflect jungle music, with its driving drum beat. No, we are to represent the Lord and reflect His Person in a dignified and reverent and worshipful way. “Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Timothy 1:17).

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