

## BIBLICAL GUIDELINES TO EVALUATE MUSIC

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*The late Peter Marshall, an eloquent speaker and for several years the chaplain of the United States Senate, used to love to tell the story of "The Keeper of the Spring," a quiet forest dweller who lived high above an Austrian village along the eastern slopes of the Alps.*

*The old gentleman had been hired many years earlier by a young town council to clear away the debris from the pools of water up in the mountain crevices that fed the lovely spring flowing through their town. With faithful, silent regularity, he patrolled the hills, removed the leaves and branches, and cleaned out the silt that would otherwise choke and contaminate the fresh flow of spring water. By and by, the village became a popular attraction for vacationers. Graceful swans floated along the crystal clear spring. The mill wheels of various businesses located near the water turned night and day. Farmlands were naturally irrigated. The view from the town's restaurants was picturesque beyond description.*

*Years passed. One evening the town council met for its semi-annual meeting. As they viewed the budget, one man's eye caught the salary figure being paid the obscure keeper of the spring. Said the keeper of the purse, "Who is the old man? Why do we keep him on year after year? No one ever sees him. For all we know the strange ranger of the hills is doing us no good. He isn't necessary any longer!" By a unanimous vote, they dispensed with the old man's services.*

*For several weeks nothing changed. By early autumn the trees began to shed their leaves. Small branches snapped off and fell into the pools, hindering the rushing flow of sparkling water. One afternoon someone noticed a slight yellowish-brown tint in the spring. A couple of days later the water was much darker. Within another week, a slimy film covered sections of the water along the banks and a foul odor was soon detected. The mill wheels moved slower and some finally ground to a halt. Swans left, as did the tourists. Clammy fingers of disease and sickness reached deeply into the village.*

*Quickly, the embarrassed council called a special meeting. Realizing their gross error in judgment, they hired back the old keeper of the spring. Within a few weeks the veritable river of life began to clear up. The wheels started to turn, and new life returned to the hamlet in the Alps once again.*

*Fanciful though it may be, the story is more than an idle tale. We need to keep the spring of our lives clean so that we will have the life giving water to give to the world. Pastors and worship leaders must evaluate the music being sung and played in their churches. Are the songs biblically accurate and glorifying to the Lord? Are the messages of the songs being lost because the medium of the tunes is too worldly? What biblical guidelines should be followed to evaluate Christian music that is played and sung in our churches?*

### CHRISTIAN MUSIC SHOULD NOT BE WORLDLY MUSIC

First John 2:15-17 says, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever."

One of the dirtiest words in our religious vocabulary is compromiser. It evokes images of sinful people who have denied the faith, compromised their principles, and fallen under the spell of the evil one. For many it is almost like succumbing to the plague or hearing the death-knell to have the word compromiser attached to them.

A compromiser is someone who says that he loves God, but he really loves the world. He loves the things of the world, including the ungodly music of the world. He is controlled by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. John says that those who compromise by loving the world really do not love God.

Many believers seem to be struggling with a proper understanding and relationship to this world, frequently equating change in preferences, tastes, traditions and cultures as worldly and compromise. There are essentially four options of understanding and relationship to the world, with only the last one being the more biblical perspective.

These options are discussed in Joe Aldrich's book *Lifestyle Evangelism*.

### **Rejection of the World**

Rejection is seen in withdrawal and isolation from the world. These believers are often so afraid of contamination that they have no social contact with the unsaved. They develop a "closed corporation" mentality. They struggle with and usually reject cultural and traditional changes in music that have nothing to do with biblical principles or theology.

### **Immersion in the World**

Immersion in the world is the exact opposite of rejection. These believers are essentially indistinguishable from the world, with no radical difference. They have succumbed to the world's pressures, being pushed into its mold, even going along with that in music which is dishonoring to the Lord.

### **Split Adaptation**

Believers who advocate split adaptation are compromisers. They go with the flow of the crowd. If they are in a worldly crowd, they enjoy worldly music. When they go to church, they enjoy singing praise choruses. They want to be a citizen of two worlds (time and eternity) and attempt to be at home in each. They struggle with spiritual schizophrenia. They incorporate into their lives music that both honors and dishonors the Lord.

### **Critical Participation in the World**

The biblically balanced believer is spiritually distinct from the world but not segregated from it. This believer lives in the world without the world living in him or her. This believer thinks and acts biblically without elevating his or her preferences, tastes, traditions, and culture relative to music to the level of theology. This balance allows for change where theology is not involved.

Jesus left heaven's glories (with its preferences, tastes, traditions, and culture) and came into the culture of the world as a servant in human form to do the will of the Father in a "cross-cultural" experience (Phil 2:5-9). It's interesting to note that this Christological statement in Philippians is viewed by many scholars as a possible first century hymn.

In John 4:1-26, Jesus demonstrated critical participation to his disciples. He refused to allow His preferences, tastes, traditions, or culture to stand in his way. Yet He was not guilty of compromise. He stepped from one culture (Jewish) into another culture (Samaritan) and ministered to an immoral woman without compromising.

Jesus, the ultimate standard of righteousness, modeled and taught how to live in the world and be free from compromise. How did Jesus, the only perfect person in history, manage to attract the notoriously imperfect? Have you ever noticed that He often "hung out" with the wrong people—tax collectors and prostitutes? Jesus' association with disreputable people was well known. Some called him a "glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Matt 11:19; Luke 15:1-2). Yet Jesus himself never sinned. He came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10).

The apostle Paul was committed to becoming all things to all men that he might by all means save some (1 Cor 9:19-22). Paul did not compromise his doctrinal convictions. He did change his approach when he was with different groups. He became as a Jew to win the Jews. To the Gentiles (those without the law), Paul became "as without law, though not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ that I might win those who are without law." (1 Cor 9:21). Paul was willing to adapt in order to reach different cultures and people groups. He did not impose his preferences, tastes, traditions, and culture on others. He was not legalistic, and he was not a libertarian. He recognized the difference between what could not be compromised (the gospel) and what could be changed (his methods of reaching people for Christ).

Those who live in fear of being labeled compromisers often become much more stringent than the Scriptures. Legalistic standards are often elevated to the level of theology and made a test of fellowship, hoping then that no peer would have cause to accuse them of being a compromiser.

Another major problem that complicates the lessening of the adversarial spirit among believers and churches and the development of the unity of the faith and spirit is the matter of evil reports about others with whom someone disagrees. An evil report is an unauthorized, incomplete, distorted, or false report which influences others to form an inaccurate conclusion or an evil opinion about another person or circumstance. The sharing of an evil report and/or the listening to and taking up offenses of those engaged in evil reports is sin, an activity that brings confusion and division into the church. Rather than spreading evil reports about Christians with whom we disagree, it is essential that we work at keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3). That usually means we must speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15) and confront those who are being divisive (Rom 16:17).

### **CHRISTIAN MUSIC SHOULD BE DOCTRINALLY ACCURATE**

Paul admonished Timothy, “Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed unto thee keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us. This thou knowest, that all they which are in Asia turned away from me; of whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes” (2 Tim 1:13-15).

The precious and excellent sound doctrine, the very form or pattern of the Word of God, is committed to or deposited with the believer to keep or guard as a stewardship. This means that, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, we are to defend sound doctrine against every attack and never allow change or modification in the slightest degree. We are to do this in faith, love, and graciousness. In Paul’s personal experience with these principles, fellowship and association with believers in Asia had been broken, not for personal but for doctrinal reasons.

There are other biblical texts articulating principles that give us guidance as to practice and attitudes relative to no affiliations with the apostasy (Acts 20:27-32; 2 Cor 6:14-7:1; Gal 1:6-9; 1 Tim 6:3-5; 1 John 4:1-3; and 2 John 1:7-11). Apostasy in the Scriptures speaks of a defection, falling away, or departure (Acts 21:21; 2 Thess 2:3). The word *apostasy* is used in a formal religious sense to designate the body of people or movement where there is a disbelief in the inerrant Scriptures; departure from the doctrines of God; self righteousness; and a lack of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. It is essential for pastors and worship leaders to evaluate music to make sure that the words are biblically and doctrinally correct. Songs with biblically inaccurate words should not be sung.

The biblical position and practice is to hold the historic truths of Christianity with a balanced application to conduct and ministry which results in possible fellowship with all those who are separate from the apostasy. The liberal or modernistic position and practice is to redefine the historic truths of Christianity within the bounds of human reason which allows for the ecumenicity of the one world church with no regard for belief systems.

In the early part of this century, the church leaders were defining the essential areas of doctrine that would be necessary as a test of fellowship: that is, for all believers to understand, espouse, and guard by confronting error. These essential beliefs became known as the “fundamentals.” Generally these fundamental teachings included at least the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures; the virgin birth and deity of Christ Jesus; the substitutionary atonement of Christ on the cross for sin and sinners; the literal, bodily resurrection of Christ from the grave; and the personal, bodily second coming of Christ.

A compromise position and practice in holding this treasure of truths entrusted to us is demonstrated in those Christians who wish to hold to the historic truths of Christianity without identifying any doctrinal deviations which result in the downgrade movement, including direct association with the apostasy. As demonstrated in history, ultimately these churches and agencies become apostate in a successive generation.

Perhaps these thoughts can be pictured with the account of a young man from the city who went to work on a farm after the school year. The housewife assigned him the first task of sorting the apples left from the winter. She provided three barrels, one for the good apples, one for the rotten apples, and one in the middle for the part rotten and part good (the rottenness would need to be cut out). A rotten apple will spoil the whole barrel. This principle in nature is likewise seen in the spiritual realm. That is why it is important for pastors and worship leaders to be spiritually and morally clean.

### **CHRISTIAN MUSIC SHOULD NOT BE OFFENSIVE**

Many churches debate which Christian music to play and sing. Some churches want to sing only hymns. Other churches want to sing only praise choruses. Some churches want an individual song leader to lead their congregation in singing, while other churches prefer a worship team and a worship band. Different churches have different philosophies of worship.

Some churches assume that only music that pleases their particular preferences, tastes, tradition, and culture is biblically acceptable. This is a position that is comfortable, secure, and safe by being “politically correct” among their peers. There is a strong compulsion on the part of the people in this category to never be accused of compromise. Legalistic churches are often more restrictive than the Lord would be. These churches struggle with losing touch in communication with today’s culture because of being much more restrictive than God is and dealing with a culture that is moving farther away from God. Pastors and worship leaders must “stretch” these churches to move beyond their comfort zones in order to reach the next generation with biblically accurate and yet culturally relevant worship music.

Some churches are broader in their selection of worship music. The music selected is still within the principles and parameters of the Scriptures. They would advocate the singing of some contemporary praise and worship music. There is some great God-honoring music being written today with acceptable contemporary arrangements and style. These churches are careful, though, to make sure that the style of music is not worldly. They avoid offending weaker Christians who are too restrictive or too loose in their practice. Singing hymns and praise choruses, these churches strive for a balanced worship service. Some are led by a single worship leader; others are led by a worship team. Some of these churches have a pianist and organist; others are led by a praise and worship band.

Other churches are very loose in their selection of worship music. Some of the words of their music would be biblically inaccurate. The musical style of worship in these churches is often offensive to many believers, and the music drowns out the words of the songs or has too great an appeal to the physical. Pastors and worship leaders of these churches hope that this music will reach unbelievers for Christ.

It is possible that, though the early church could have used musical instruments without violating biblical principles, they probably chose at that time not to do so and sang a cappella. It is the feeling of some that the use of musical instruments in those days involved great numbers of believers who did not want to be associated with the substantial misuse of the instruments used in the world. This being the case, it is possible that some believers did not use musical instruments in deference to not offending the weaker believers in honor of the principle in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 and 10.

In public ministry, we should be sensitive to not be an offense to many other Christians. Paul ate “meat” with some Christians, while forbearing with others. Therefore, it is not a compromise to consider the musical preferences, tastes, traditions, and cultures in deciding which spiritual songs would best minister to a particular church. To be flexible and comprehensive with biblically acceptable music styles will most likely allow for public ministry to the greatest number.

## CONCLUSION

The Bible is the standard for our faith and practice. The Bible gives us guidelines for evaluating the music that we sing and play in our churches. Christian music should not be worldly. It should be distinctive. It should honor Christ and bring glory to God. Christian music should be doctrinally accurate. The words of the songs and hymns should teach the truths of the faith. Christian music should not be offensive. It should not cause great numbers of brothers and sisters to stumble. Legalists may be offended by certain styles of music, but they should not dictate to their churches what music should and should not be sung and played. Some libertarians would seek to impose certain styles of music that would offend older, mature believers. A biblically balanced worship service will include the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in a style that is culturally relevant and mutually edifying to all.