

[1st](#) | [2nd](#)

[Original eMail Received]

From: _____
To: millsd@yaho.com
Subject: Fwd: What make music secular or sacred?
Date: Tuesday, March 06, 2001 7:39 PM

Dave:

Thought this might help you in your search for truth. Another point of view. I agree with him when he said, I don't have to like there Christian music, but if it's in true worship to our Lord, and it's saving souls I wouldn't condemn it. I have gone to concerts and come home saying "that group was not singing to our Lord it was entertaining the people with sacred music." You can tell the difference. It not the music, but how the music is used, that important. If you want to talk let me know.

From: Mark Lowry <marklowry@marklowry.com>
Reply-To: Mark Lowry <marklowry@marklowry.com>
To: ReRemarks by Mark Lowry <remarks-list@lists.netcentral.net>
Subject: What make music secular or sacred?
Date: Sun, 4 Mar 2001 15:26:15 -0800

Hey reMarkables!

Yesterday was Gloria Gaither's birthday. If you'd like to send her a happy birthday email, send it to: _____@gaithermusic.com

We were in Cedar Rapids this past Friday night and Minneapolis Saturday night. I got home around 3 in the morning. I checked my email before going to bed and had a new article from Reverend J. He answers the question, "What makes music secular or sacred?" It's very thought provoking. I thought I would forward it to you, since I've been asked that question so many times.

Here it is:

PROFANE MUSIC?

What makes music sacred or secular?

Dear Reverend J:

There is a big controversy in my church over what kind of music is acceptable to use in our services. Some are objecting to certain kinds of Contemporary Christian Music as sounding too "secular" for church. How do you determine the difference between "secular" and "sacred"

music? Where do you draw the line between what is profane and holy? Does the Bible give any specific guidance on this subject?

Music Minister

Dear Music Minister:

The Bible simply says, "Let everything that has breath, praise the Lord." The Psalms are full of encouragement to use all kinds of brass, woodwinds, strings, and percussion instruments to offer praise. The fact that these instruments were used rhythmically to get the body to move and feel the joy of being alive is obvious: "Praise him with tambourine and dancing." (Psalm 150: 4)

The Hebrews were normally quite phobic about adopting the customs of their "pagan" neighbors. The Mosaic laws had 613 rules, many of which spelled out in exact detail how NOT to behave like the nations surrounding them. Rules about diet and dress codes and all kinds of things. But when it came to music, absolutely nothing is forbidden. They used the same musical instruments and styles as anyone else. The only difference is that they used their music to worship the one true God and to celebrate life.

Music is the language of the heart. The language itself is neither holy or unholy. If the heart is profane, then what comes out of the heart is profane. If the heart is pure, then what comes out of the heart is pure. (Matthew 15: 18,19) It's not the sound of words that makes them holy. It's the intention and motive behind the communication. We now have historical evidence that the Hebrew language grew out of Canaanite dialects. So did their music. They borrowed from their contemporary culture and made it their own.

Though we have no record of music being a source of controversy in the Old Testament (or the New Testament for that matter), the history of the Christian church has been full of controversy over this issue. At one point only unison chant was considered "sacred". Harmony was considered too sensual. Worship was perceived at that time as being only contemplative and sober and the music of the church reflected that.

This controversy runs like a sticky thread through the entire history of the institutional church. It has no basis in Scripture whatsoever but in tradition and culture. Calvin condemned the pipe organ as being profane. Luther loved it. Today we all consider Handel's "Messiah" as being one of the greatest works of sacred music of all time. But when he composed this masterpiece he was roundly condemned in conservative pulpits all over London. How dare he profane the Word of God by using the same musical motifs employed in Italian operettas? And to make matters worse, he premiered this work NOT in the church but in the theater--a house of secular entertainment. To many Christians this was shocking and offensive.

Luther's music was just as scandalous. His most famous lyric "A Mighty Fortress" was set to a beer-drinking tune straight out of the pub. Today it's considered traditional "sacred" music of the finest order. Charles Wesley had the same mindset that Luther had. Make church music singable, hummable, simple and melodic--but with profound theological lyrics.

Move forward to the last century and we see the emergence of gospel song writers who hijacked popular music and did the same thing. Songs like "In The Garden" were considered too romantic and sentimental to be sacred for some. John Peterson's gospel songs like "It Took A Miracle" even landed on the hit parade in the fifties. Stuart Hamblen combined Country Western and pop musical motifs during that period to write such standards as "Until Then". His best known song, "This Ol' House", became a chart-busting hit.

During the sixties, Ralph Carmichael scandalized the evangelical church by using the same sensuous orchestrations with gospel songs that he used when arranging for Nat King Cole, Peggy Lee, Roger Williams, and other pop artists. He had his feet in both worlds and the church didn't like that much either. How dare he use the rich sensorial harmonies of jazz and pop music to interpret sacred themes? And he didn't stop there. While scoring the Billy Graham movie, "The Restless Ones", he was pretty much the first Christian musician to push the envelope further into using rock motifs. "He's Everything To Me" comes from that movie. Today that song is a standard and most of Carmichael's music from that period would be considered classic and traditional now.

Everyone knows Bill Gaither's enormous legacy in gospel music. His premier song, "He Touched Me" was roundly criticized in the late sixties as being too sentimental, too pop, too country, too simple. Today you can't buy a hymnal without it being full of Bill and Gloria Gaither's rich repertoire of gospel music. They have changed the way the church sings. And it just doesn't get much better than "Because He Lives." If you can't feel the gospel thrill you right down to your bones with that anthem then you might as well fold your cards and go home.

The seventies witnessed another shift as Contemporary Christian Music created a genre all it's own that paralleled all the styles and sounds of the popular culture. Lots of controversy once again. But as Larry Norman put it: "Why should the devil have all the good music?" At last the pseudo-boundaries of sacred vs. secular music came tumbling down as artist after artist claimed their own unique voice. That genie will never go back into the bottle. It's taken us this long to get back to what the Hebrews knew millenniums ago. "Whatever has breath, praise the Lord!"

I have an observation about all this. Christian music today employs all the sounds and rhythms of virtually every cultural expression. Personally, I think that's a triumph for the gospel. No other religion can claim that. How many Grammy categories do you see for Moslem music? Buddhist music? Hindu music? It just isn't there. It is the gospel

that has universal appeal. It is the gospel that speaks to young people and old people. Conservative people. Progressive people. Red and yellow, black or white. All are precious in his sight. There isn't a single style of music today that isn't giving praise to God. That's something to celebrate, not condemn.

To those who still hold on to the presupposition that there is a difference in the sound of sacred vs. secular music, I would ask this question: Is there a different vocabulary you use to describe your everyday life from your faith? Are some words holier than others? Words are neither secular or sacred. The New Testament was not written in classical Greek, but street language Greek. There are no sacred words in the Bible that weren't also used by pagans throughout the Mediterranean world. It's not the words themselves that are sacred. It's the message that is sacred. It's all about the intent behind the words.

Christians have always seemed to have an uneasy time with percussion and rhythm. But rhythm is nothing more than mathematics. With today's musical technology you can program virtually any beat or rhythm into a computer simply by entering numbers. It's nothing more than numbers. Are some numbers more holy than other numbers? How ridiculous is that? The body was constructed by God to enjoy the feeling of rhythm. The heart beats in rhythm. The universe pulsates and moves in rhythm. The seven day cycle of activity and rest is all about rhythm. The more rhythm you feel in your body the more alive you are. To not feel rhythm is to be dead.

You can also graph and edit virtually any sound or combinations of sounds on a computer. All the audible colors of musical harmony and expression are nothing more than vibrations. Sound waves. Is a vibration of sound either secular or sacred? Of course not. Sound is all about physics. Physics can't be subdivided into sacred vs. profane categories.

Even in the somber monotone of a sacred chant there are harmonic vibrations that the ear can't hear. If those monks from the Medieval period could have heard them they would have freaked out. But they're there. They're just not audible. The universe is filled with the vibrations of sound that reflect the mind and diversity of its original Creator. No wonder the Bible says "Let everything....praise the Lord." It all points back to him.

What makes music profane or holy is not the subdivision of numbers between the beats. It's not in the sound waves. It's all in the intent behind the communication--the spirit of the music. All music is sacred if it glorifies God and celebrates his creation. A good love song is sacred if it honors the kind of devotional and sacrificial love that harmonizes with the character of God. The Song of Songs in the Old Testament even celebrates human sexuality as a sacred gift from God. The Hebrews were not afraid of the body the way Christians are.

In today's musical culture we are bombarded with musical expression that is indeed profane. It's profane because the message degrades human dignity. It's profane because it ignores God entirely and celebrates self-indulgence. The images and lyrics regularly portrayed on MTV are truly disturbing. The message of popular rap artists like Eminem are beyond deplorable. They incite misogyny and bigotry. The only good that can be squeezed out of this kind of material is the wake-up call it signals to the rest of society. It's really a scream for help.

The mission of "sacred" music should always be concerned with addressing the human condition with hope. The ministry of grace. The ministry of reconciliation. The ministry of healing and mutual respect. Lyrically you can accomplish that with good theology that lifts the spirit and inspires faith. Sonically you can accomplish that with instrumental beauty that resonates with the soul. Music is God's gift to reconstruct the human spirit, not tear it apart. That's the best way I know how to evaluate what is holy or unholy. But this criteria is subjective and personal. What might edify and inspire me might not inspire you.

A music minister has the thankless task of pleasing a whole range of musical tastes in a diverse community. Many churches have solved this problem by splitting the services into traditional and contemporary services. The goal should be to service the cultural diversity within the congregation. And if there isn't any cultural diversity I don't think that church is doing its job very well. The gospel unites all cultures together by its message of inclusion, not exclusion. The Kingdom of Heaven is made of up "every nation, tribe, tongue, and people." The church should reflect that. The music should reflect that. The key word here is "tongue". It's talking about communication. And music is a form of communication.

God is the Creator of variety and diversity. There's nothing boring or monolithic about his creation. It's full of surprises. He brings order out of chaos. That is what the artistic impulse is. And good music is full of surprises. Like good humor it employs that "ah-ha" moment when the lightbulb goes on and you "get it." A great musical artist knows how to achieve that goal. The worst thing that happens in a lot of "sacred" music is that it is predictable and boring. God is neither. Sacred music should expand the soul and fill it with grace and insight and the delight of discovery. Nothing crosses boundaries and melts walls quite as powerfully as music. It's our most powerful tool of communication, rightly used.

The gospel embraces humanity with all of it's emotional colors. The Word becomes flesh. The gospel is incarnational. If music is truly "sacred" it will be fully incarnational as well. It should speak to every human emotion and yearning. If it doesn't do that then it isn't very Christian. It should be both vertical and horizontal in its scope. Why? Because the gospel is. The gospel isn't afraid to dig it's fingers into the soil. It unites heaven with earth. And when music does that it is truly sacred.

The word "holy" literally means "other". It doesn't mean stiff, pious, and aloof. When the angels sing "Holy, Holy, Holy" they are marveling at the character of God--whose heart is fully focused on the "other" and not on himself. That's what separates him from false gods. God is not narcissistic. Jesus came to serve. (Luke 22: 27) That is what holiness looks like. That is what charity looks like. That is what a Christian is supposed to look like.

So let us not be "unholy" by demanding that all sacred music must serve our own tastes. I don't like every kind of music in the world. I've traveled around the world and I've heard some things that make my ears bleed. But I am fascinated by what the human emotion is behind the artistic expression. It enlarges my world to make the effort to understand. I think that's all that God requires of us. Be respectful of others and try to understand what they hear. You don't have to like it. But by enlarging your understanding of others you tap into a "holy" impulse that makes you more fully human in the image of God.

There won't be any music police in heaven. So why develop that skill on earth? Aren't there more important issues to invest our time in? Like maybe calming the storm in other people's lives, rather than creating new ones. So much time and energy has been wasted over debating issues like these. So many unnecessary bruises inflicted. Just think of how much good could be done in the world if Christians had their priorities focused on what really matters most.

"To every thing there is a season," the Bible says. "A time to mourn and a time to dance." Why is that Christians are more comfortable with mourning than dancing? Odd, isn't it? We have so much to celebrate and communicate. I think the real question regarding music is: what is the appropriate "season" for this or that kind of music. And that is primarily a question of taste and good judgment...and a sensitivity to the needs of the community being ministered to. There's no "one size fits all" rule of thumb. The Scriptures haven't given us any.

Let everything that can breathe... praise the Lord! That's as specific as the Bible gets. It's very broad and inclusive. The gospel challenges us to have hearts that are generous and inclusive. I think if we're truly filled with the Spirit our appreciation of all kinds of cultural and artistic expression will naturally be expansive. Not restrictive. Of all people on earth, Christians should be the most eager to expand and grow. In doing so we harmonize with the expansive, innovative Spirit of God.

Did Jesus ever experience a "secular" moment? He was God in the flesh, wasn't he? How can God have a "secular" moment? It's an oxymoron. The Incarnation demolishes all boundaries of secular and sacred. The "Word made flesh" confirms that all of life is sacred. To be fully human, as Jesus was, is to live for the "other" and to discover our true self in the presence of others. Anything short of that is profane.

A true artist gives his soul away to others. That is his or her gift to the world. It is a sacred impulse. A holy impulse. That impulse should not be contained and restricted but encouraged to flower and flourish. Christians, of all people, should be the first to facilitate that artistic impulse. During the Renaissance period the church got it right.

That period produced the greatest art the world has ever seen. What happened? We've lost a lot of ground since then. It's time to face the music and claim it back!

-Reverend J

See ya,
Mark

[Editors 1st Response] eMail was sent to originator as well as Mark Lowry

Thank you for forwarding this along. I appreciate your encouragement and thoughtfulness. I trust my response will be taken as loving as it is intended.

To define "True Worship" we need first to define what it is not. One thing that it is not, is a man that is expecting "feelings" through music that is intended for God. The word "sing" is mentioned in the King James Bible some 119 times. Practically every time, the focus of the singing is unto God.

Mr. "J" stated that "Music is God's gift to reconstruct the human spirit". He also stated the "music should expand the soul". From my study thus far, it seems to me that music was given to us to bring God Joy, not the "human" spirit directly. In fact, we should be yielding over more to our new creation and less to our fleshly, sinful humanity. Our Joy should come from God, not from the music.

Mr J, also made a comment about his fascination with "Human emotion". How many times do we see the results of human emotion. For example, take a look at Amnon in 2 Samuel Chapter 13. The love that he thought he had for Tamar, God called sexual affection in v.1 and he called it "Love" in v.4. God turned out to be right (as always), for v.2 says that Amnon was vexed. This feeling, or emotion that Amnon had turned to hatred in v.15. Human emotion is the cause for many a man being deceived from true salvation in

these last days. He also stated the "Rhythm is nothing more than mathematics?" However true that may be, it has been studied and proven that music creates emotion. J speaks of "getting the body to move", WOW! Human emotion is spiritually deadly if focused on the flesh.

"The gospel has Universal Appeal?", says "J". Has "J" forgotten that "They hated me without a cause", John 15:25. Has he not read that "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you", John 15:18. Is he looking for acceptance from the secular music industry? He may want to take a look at John 15:19, where we read, "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you."

Let's see what else the Bible says about things of the world or things the gain acceptance of the world:

Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. - Col 2:8


Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith. Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand. As many as desire to make a fair shew in the flesh, they constrain you to be circumcised; only lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ. - Gal 6:7-12

For yourselves, brethren, know our entrance in unto you, that it was not in vain: But even after that we had suffered before, and were shamefully entreated, as ye know, at Philippi, we were bold in our God to speak unto you the gospel of God with much contention. For our exhortation was not of deceit, nor of uncleanness, nor in guile: But as we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts. For neither at any time used we flattering words, as ye know, nor a cloke of covetousness; God is witness: Nor of men sought we glory, neither of you, nor yet of others, when we might have been burdensome, as the apostles of Christ. -1 Thess 2:1-6

And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them. And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man. And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost. - Acts 12:21-23

Gymics? Are we looking for gymics to motivate and save? We know that salvation is only

through true repentance and believing on the only begotten son. The question that begs asking, is can we use gymnastics to accomplish God's work. According to Jesus in John 2:23-25, "Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast day, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did. But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man.", it simply won't work. So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. - Romans 10:17

J's statement about Luther was dishonest. I have attached a PDF file that I copied (with permission) a chapter out of a book I just finished reading which addresses this nicely. 

Mr J. made the statement that "It's all about the intent behind the words?". Wow! With this statement and others he has made in this article, I am of the understanding that "J" believes that the "ENDS justify the MEANS". Scary. I think of Moses and the price he paid for disobedience. Of course, we read in Numbers 20:11 that the "water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their beasts also." Did the ends justify the means? Abundantly, the congregation drank, and their beasts also. No, it did not justify means. God said to speak to the rock (v.8). Moses' disobedience cost him a price. "Because ye believed me not, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them." Numbers 20:12

We should not be seeking out our own expression. Our focus should be 100% on Christ with all awareness not to satisfy to flesh. He will provide the Joy.

It is not surprising that "J" feels the way he does. Contemporary Christian Music is infiltrating "Conservative" and Fundamental churches worldwide. A direct result of the ever growing Charismatic Movement. "J" speaks of tolerance. This is another general theme among many new evangelicals and liberals today. Tolerance, not obedience. I see the point the "J" is trying to make. However, he seems to be taking a fleshly, feel good stand.

True Worship? I will praise the LORD according to his righteousness: and will sing praise to the name of the LORD most high.

Thanks again.

Respectfully
In Christ,
Dave

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So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.
- Romans 10:17

It takes only a single generation to make a word archaic...

and a single generation of Bible readers can bring it back into use.
- David W. Daniels