

Moral Sympathy And Spiritual Confusion

Music

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When a close friend of mine asked me this week what I was speaking on, I gave him a one-word statement of what it was; and I told him, "Music." His comment back was, "Boy, you're not going to be very popular after that sermon." He was kidding; but it is a shame that sometimes we have that attitude towards sermons on music. But right off the bat I would like to state that God, of course, loves music. He wants us to enjoy music, and He enjoys seeing us enjoy music.

All year long, we try to resist the worldly messages transmitted through music. At this time of year, we are bombarded with Christmas songs that promote religious syncretism and false doctrine with catchy jingles. I am not going to mention any of them, lest they stick in your head for the rest of the sermon.

Music is an influential force that not only reflects moods and feelings, but also can create them. Its ability to play on emotions and to achieve psychological effects has long been employed by moviemakers to draw us into the mood of the moment. A few years ago I saw a special where they showed the effects of music on movies, and it was quite interesting. They just showed a woman walking down stairs. That was it. She was dressed in a normal way, but she was walking down the stairs.

At first they played upbeat music, happy music; and you got the feeling that she was on her way to a party, or to a wedding, or something of that sort. The same exact scene was then played, with her walking down the stairs and nothing had changed; but they played sad music. As she walked down there, you got the feeling that she was going to a funeral, or that she had just lost her love, or something of that sort. Finally—if I remember correctly—same scene, with the same woman walking down the stairs; and they played what we think of as horror music. You were sure that she was going to be murdered by the time she got to the bottom of the steps.

So music does have a profound effect on us, and this world knows very well how to use it to gain whatever their goal is. The spoken word by itself can, of course, stir feelings and passions. But when words are combined with music, the effects can be profound. For decades, radio and TV advertisers sold their products to the melodies of catchy tunes. Everything from detergent to automobiles had an appropriate rhyme that stuck in people's minds, influencing their buying decisions. And, if you will notice, many of the car commercials today are targeting a specific age group. That is, those that they feel are most likely to buy the types of cars they are offering.

Music has also been used as a conveyance for patriotic or political messages. Nations have been incited to war to the words of stirring songs; and the list is endless of the songs that have been produced, especially in this country. In the War of 1812, Francis Scott Key penned what we call our "Star Spangled Banner." It was not until music was added many, many years later that it actually became popular. I think it was about 80 years later that it actually became our national anthem. But once that music was added to the words, and the words and the music together were played—it was able to bring an entire nation to tears, when it was heard. So *the power of music* is almost beyond our comprehension.

Religious hymns and songs often promulgate false doctrines. Just because music is seemingly pleasing and inspiring does not mean the words are necessarily true. Yet people subconsciously 'accept as fact' erroneous concepts about the Bible and Christianity merely because of the music to which the words are attached. Many religions rely more heavily on the emotions that music stirs up than biblical doctrine.

In addition to religious lies, far too many of today's songs advocate obscenities, premarital and illicit sex, sexual perversion, drugs, the occult, and even revolution. Most caring parents would be shocked if they knew what their children are being told to do through popular music. Most of us parents in the church are well aware of how bad it is; but most parents in the world are not.

Music is a powerful medium that works on moods and emotions that can *stir to action* as mere spoken words cannot do. It is well substantiated that many of the messages in today's perverted music—pumped into the heads of children and adults—often lead to horrible crimes, confused morals, and consequent sexually transmitted diseases. God never intended for music to be perverted into its present worldly form. He intended music to be true, inspiring, thankful, joyous, positive, and in a general sense "good" in every way. So, who is responsible for the large amount of degenerate music that we have today?

A well known Turkish proverb says, "As the music is, so are the people of the country." People will listen to the messages that contain attitudes and beliefs they agree with. The music of a society will be consistently reflective and representative of the society that nourishes it, and of the changes in that society.

One record publisher said, "A certain sound is pushed, and people get used to it and accept it—not because they want it, but because it is there." So you can see how easy it is for perverted music to be thrown upon us and accepted. It is a cycle that feeds on itself. A song is released. It appeals to human nature and reflects the distorted way of life many are living. People buy the music, and thus create a demand for more. And more is forthcoming because people in the business love one sound in particular. That is, the jingle of coins and the rustle of bills falling their way. So, for them, it is music to their greedy ears.

What else is behind today's wave of sensual music? There are many chapters in the Bible, especially the Psalms, with songs written to be sung to musical accompaniment. The ultimate source of good music is God Himself. He was the One who designed into His creatures the ability to produce and enjoy music. The first song there is any record of was joyfully sung by millions of angels when God created the earth.

Job 38:4-7 "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements? Surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? To what were its foundations fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?"

Some of those "morning stars," or angelic beings, that sang in this celestial chorus later followed the archangel Helel in rebellion against the government of God. They became evil spirits, and Helel became Satan. Because their nature became so set to do evil, everything they did had become twisted and perverted. They deliberately chose to do and be evil, and to promote evil—and partly through the perverted music that we have today.

Until Jesus Christ comes to replace him, Satan is allowed to rule, and influence, and blind this world.

II Corinthians 4:4 Whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.

Revelation confirms the same thing.

Revelation 12:9 So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

He is called "the prince of the power of the air," because he broadcasts his malicious moods and attitudes into human minds. It is particularly directed at stirring up in people the lusts and desires of the flesh.

Ephesians 2:1-3 And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

So Satan's wicked sway is partly responsible for all that is wrong in the world. And we certainly see that influence in the music that we have today in this society. There can be no doubt that the current deluge of songs emphasizing self-gratification, promiscuous sex, rebellion, and acceptance of evil not only has Satan's approval, but his active backing as well. There is no attempt to hide the satanic themes in some music. Symbols of the occult and Satan worship often occur on album covers and in advertisements. One of the most deceptive attitudes is found in the retort, "But it's just entertainment."

Proverbs 3:21 My son, let them not depart from your eyes—keep sound wisdom and discretion.

An early step towards teaching children to be discerning is convincing them that entertainment is a force to reckon with, and to be careful with, and to apply godly principles to. They will argue, "It's only a sitcom." or "I just like the beat." or "I don't even listen to the words." But not all preachers stand in pulpits, and not all teachers stand in classrooms. The media are **powerful motivators** in their own right.

With the degeneration of entertainment, there has never been a more critical time to teach discernment to our children. Entertainment (and, more specifically, the music industry) is a major driving force in this society—for teaching our children not only how to live morally, but religiously as well. That is what it is doing, but we do not want it to do that.

Def Jam Records founder, Russell Simmons, is proud that a casual reference to one of his artists recently inspired a run on designer sweaters. About the artist, he boasted this: "Jay-Z [the name of the artist] raps about Iceberg. [Iceberg is a designer sweater, something that you put on when you are cold.] So, "Jay-Z raps about Iceberg, and it catches fire. That's a fact! The minute he said it, Saks Fifth Avenue blows out Iceberg sweaters at what? \$600.00 a piece, instantly!"

That is a major impact that music has on this society. But what about Jay-Z's lyrics that glamorize illicit sex, gang violence, and drunk driving? What about their impact? Only a foolish person would believe that music does not eventually motivate the listener to act. Therefore, bad music inspires bad actions.

Only a few showbiz personalities are willing to challenge this age-old double standard that we see in the world that is so prevalent. Wheel of Fortune host, Pat Sajak (which I think is almost a household name), said this: "Television people have put blinders on; and they absolutely refuse—and movie people too—to admit that they can have an influence for ill in our society. You know the argument. 'We only reflect what's going on. We don't perpetrate it.' And yet not a week goes by in this town when there's not an awards ceremony where they are patting each other on the back and saying, 'We raised AIDS awareness.' or 'There'll be no more child abuse, thanks to that fine show you did.' The argument is you can only influence for good. You can't influence for ill. That makes no sense at all."

In his book, "All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes," Kenneth A. Myers writes: "Every generation of Christians faces unique challenges. . . The challenge of living with popular culture may well be as serious for modern Christians as persecution and plagues were for the saints in earlier centuries." It certainly is a challenge. That is for sure.

Unfortunately, parents stumble when they gravitate to one of two unhealthy extremes. Those unhealthy extremes are either *permissiveness* or what we might call *legalism*. (I use that term very carefully.) Permissive parents are generally "hands off" when it comes to entertainment. They tend to choose their battles carefully and have simply decided this is not one worth fighting for. That decision inevitably leads to indecent exposure, as their offspring wander wide-eyed through the culture without the tools to recognize—let alone resist—hollow and deceptive philosophy that is being perpetrated in the music of today.

At the other extreme, many well-meaning protective parents resort to a legalistic approach to media. It is lovingly dictatorial. The lines are drawn, which is good, but with little discussion; and that is where the error comes in. We can demand that our children do what we say, but we are not going far enough on that. We have to also explain why, so that they will be capable of making decisions on their own as they get older. Children learn what is acceptable, and what is not; but without understanding why, it is strictly through a legalistic approach. We do need to tell our children though, "You can't listen to that." or "You can't watch that." But we also need to explain why.

Thankfully, there is solid middle ground. Taking time to *teach discernment* leads to more mature thinking based on clearly defined standards. Let us look at three scriptures that convey the principles that apply here. The first one is very familiar to us.

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 [or contemplate, or think very carefully] on these things.

Righteousness will control the tongue and the ears—avoiding twisted and crooked speech and music. Words and thoughts flow from the heart. Wisdom produces truthful speech and discerning listening. We will see that here in Proverbs 4.

Proverbs 4:23-27 Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life. Put away from you a deceitful mouth, and put perverse lips far from you. Let your eyes look straight ahead, and your eyelids look right before you. Ponder the path of your feet, and let all your ways be established. Do not turn to the right or to the left; remove your foot from evil.

We could add to that, "Let your ears filter out evil." Psalm 101 expresses the principle that we must have a *desire* to act wisely, and a *purpose* to do it. This holds true in our choices of entertainment. If music promotes wickedness, it promotes a perverse mind.

Psalms 101:2-4 I will behave wisely in a perfect way. Oh, when will You come to me? I will walk within my house with a perfect heart. I will set nothing wicked before my eyes [and we could add, "or before my ears."]; I hate the work of those who fall away; it shall not cling to me. A perverse heart shall depart from me; I will not know wickedness.

These principles unite families, rather than dividing them. It gives children *life skills* that they will carry with them well into adulthood. So it is very important that we teach this to them. Proverbs 22:6 is a very familiar scripture, and it says:

Proverbs 22:6 Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.

That is not a request. It is a demand. It is a command—from God—that we do that, if we want our children to be blessed and to be faithful followers of God when they are old. Many parents walk a tightrope every day in the difficult *quest for balance* in their homes. Part of that difficulty stems from not being convicted to God's way of life. We must maintain **a righteous standard** in our homes. If we do not, no one else will; and, of course, we need God's help through the Holy Spirit to maintain that standard in our homes.

The tugging by society on our families is constant and will wear us down if we only *prefer* God's way of life, rather than being *convicted* of it. It is a matter of **preferences** and **convictions**. We may prefer to live a way of life that seems compatible with God; but, if it is not a conviction, any number of pressures will cause us to stop making an effort to live His way of life.

Dictionary definitions generally say that a preference is our first choice in the matter—indicating that there are many other choices that we will consider. But a conviction is a certainty or strong belief about a matter. A conviction we may die for, but a preference we will not (because we have other choices).

No matter what our children may think, we are not opposed to them having a good time. But if there is any chance that our kids' "fun" might put them in danger, it is our job to check it out first. We have to do this with all entertainment, which includes music as well. The same goes for movies, television, and other forms of entertainment, or influences from our society. Pop culture is a wild ride beckoning our children. And virtually any child that can listen can climb on board, at any age. It does not pay any attention to weight, height, or age. Anyone that can turn on a radio can listen to perversions right at their fingertips.

As parents, we have to check it out first—everything that our children get involved in—if we are to establish reasonable, responsible limits in our homes. By doing so, we will teach our children to ask

tough questions and challenge the notion that the pop culture has the answers—which it does not! God has commanded us to do what it says here in Deuteronomy 6. These are very familiar scriptures, but some of the most important in the entire Bible.

Deuteronomy 6:1-2 "Now this is the commandment, and these are the statutes and judgments which the LORD your God has commanded to teach you, that you may observe them in the land which you are crossing over to possess. That you may fear the LORD your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments which I command you, you and your son and your grandson, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged."

Deuteronomy 6:5-9 "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

So there is no doubt in our minds that we have to take the initiative, and very strongly and diligently watch very carefully what enters our minds and the minds of our children.

Is listening **moral sympathy**? Is listening to music on the radio or CDs "moral sympathy" with what is being promoted? The truly powerful thing about music is that the very act of listening accepts an invitation to moral sympathy. In this way, listening to a song is no different from reading a novel or watching a movie. In both cases, the audience—whether listener or reader—is invited to put himself in the position of the person telling the story.

Since every storyteller has his own point of view and personal values, when we put ourselves in his position even briefly we allow ourselves to share his perspective. With time, this viewpoint can rub off on the audience. When the novels or songs in question serve to affirm the values of a truly moral life, that is a good thing. But it is a bad thing too if those morals that are being promoted are horrible. The music or literature in question is in the service of a set of values that are perverse and bad. So we should not be listening to them.

Like lyrics, the characteristic sounds that make up a musical style also tell a story. Take for example punk rock. Even if you could remove all the singing from an album of punk music, a characteristic sound would still remain. And in the case of punk, this characteristic sound is the sound of scorn and resentment. So, in that case, both the words and the music are wrong.

Similarly, with rap music—if you strip away the words from a typical rap album, what is left over is a pattern of rhythms that come very close to the sound of crude physical threat. This often holds true even of rap songs that are supposed to be about love. Still, if you take the music away from a rap song, there is a harshness to it—a threatening aura about it.

In both cases, when you put the lyrics back in, the message does not change. It just becomes more literal and obvious. In other words, when considering the morality of music—that is, the total product: *performance, lyrics, and style*—you must take all three into account to determine whether music is good or bad.

There is a trail of our time, of our affection, of our allegiance, of our devotion, and of our money in what we listen to. That trail leads to a throne, and whatever is on that throne is what we worship. And we are all doing a great job of it, because God has created us to be worshippers. The problem is that a lot of people have very bad gods, and so they are worshipping the most horrible things. Now, I do not mean that they are **worshipping** in the strictest sense of the word "worship," but in the sense of paying homage to or allowing it to influence.

Although virtually all biblical references to music are positive, there is also a theme of music as a symbol of the human heart and mind in disease, or ailing. Amos denounced a culture for whom the music of religious ritual had become a substitute for the exercise of justice and righteousness.

Amos 5:23a Take away from Me the noise of your songs. . . .

Before we go on, the definition of the word **noise** is *sound that is distracting*. Years ago, I remember reading a scientific experiment or data. Scientifically it has been found that any type of music—even classical music—becomes noise after 15 minutes. Now, keep in mind that the definition of noise is anything distracting. So music can become noise if it is distracting.

I do not know if you are like I am, but I get distracted very easily. So if I am sitting reading a book, or reading the Bible, and there is a song or music on—it is very distracting to me; and I cannot concentrate. So, even though it might be the most beautiful music in the world, if it is distracting at the time then it is noise. This is very well known in the field of sound engineering. When you engineer a building for sound intonation, you take into consideration even music—because that is considered **noise** in the strictest sense.

Amos 5:23-24 Take away from Me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Amos also paints a picture of a decadent society whose music is part of an indulgent lifestyle that ignores social oppression.

Amos 6:3-8 Woe to you who put far off the day of doom, who cause the seat of violence to come near; who lie on beds of ivory, stretch out on your couches, eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall; who sing idly to the sound of stringed instruments, and invent for yourselves musical instruments like David; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint yourselves with the best ointments, but are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph. Therefore they shall now go captive as the first of the captives, and those who recline at banquets shall be removed. The Lord God has sworn by Himself, the LORD GOD of hosts says: "I abhor the pride of Jacob, and hate his palaces. Therefore I will deliver up the city and all that is in it."

So those people were singing idly, to possibly beautiful music. Isaiah paints a similar picture of indulgence as a substitute for the fear of the Lord.

Isaiah 5:11-13 Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may follow intoxicating drink; who continue until night, till wine inflames them! The harp and the strings, the tambourine and flute, and wine are in their feasts; but they do not regard the work of the LORD, nor consider the operation of His hands. Therefore My people have gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge.

So apparently here, all of the music that these people were doing and the words that they were putting to the music had no sense to it—had no meaning, had no value. When we grasp that all music amplifies the value of something, we can understand the true force of music as a vehicle of moral meaning. Young people seem to recognize this more readily than their elders.

Whenever young people meet, there comes a point early on when they ask one another about their musical tastes. This question that they ask each other may be direct, or it may be indirect; but it is not an idle question. It is a very important one to them. As anyone who has grown up in America knows, *music preference* is at the same time ***a matter of allegiance***. In this society, what we listen to is always in part a self-conscience declaration of the community with which we identify. It is also an affirmation of support for the values upon which our community is founded.

When one adolescent asks another about his musical tastes, he is thus asking about much more than the contents of the CD or cassette collection that he has. He is asking about the contents of his heart and mind. In a culture in which music has, with the sponsorship of big recording labels, too often come to represent a perverted moral life—this "heart" and "mind" are rarely innocent.

To see this, you only need to spend a half-hour or less watching MTV. Then you will see it very clearly. In what is a powerful cocktail of images, lyrics, and sounds—young people are lured into identification with *values* and *types of behavior* that would kill even the most hardened worldly person in this society. For many who are neglected by their parents and left to their own devices in finding their way in the world, morally bankrupt music is a primary source of moral instruction and education. This is what the young people of this nation are turning to, if their parents are not teaching them God's way.

With a "politically correct" education, such as we see in the public education system, it comes as little surprise that the recent epidemic of school shootings has, for the most part, taken place in affluent suburbs. Can you guess one reason why that may be the case? More people have cable there. I am not saying this is the only reason, but it is definitely an element. An important principle to keep in mind is what is at stake in our musical preferences, and to refuse as far as possible to participate in music that affirms a corrupt morality.

Many musicians now promote their spiritual beliefs in songs. So not only are we being bombarded with immorality but also with false doctrine. Pollsters tell us that almost two-thirds of American teenagers do not attend any church regularly. The resulting moral vacuum allows *spiritual counterfeits* to prosper. We are seeing more and more of this in the music field all of the time.

According to a committee of the American Medical Association, "As adolescents gain independence, they turn to music as an information source about sexuality and alternate lifestyles—subjects that are largely taboo." So the American Medical Association, as liberal as it is, recognizes that. Some teens are also turning to music to learn about God and to look for life's deeper meaning.

Once musicians today capture a listener's attention, this new generation of musicians apparently cannot stand just to promote their immoral lifestyle; but they have to add their theological "two-cents-worth" as well. So our children are getting bombarded both ways—not only with immorality, but also with false doctrine.

Discussing her song "Father Lucifer" in Spin magazine, folk/rock balladeer, Tori Amos said, "I wanted to marry Lucifer, even though I had a crush on Jesus. [Is that not distorted?] On some of my darkest days, Lucifer is the one that comes and gives me an ice cream." That is perversion.

Even among Christian teens, nearly 50% listen to music that wars against religious beliefs. Church pollster George Barna discovered that a large percentage of mainstream Christian teenagers—42%—had watched MTV in a one-week period. That is more than non-Christian teens, where 33% watched it. So there must be **an enticement** there that draws children where there is an attempt for God to be taught to them.

Alan Weed, president of the Christian music organization, Interline, said: "According to our research, Christian kids listen to four hours of music a day—most of it non-Christian. That means a serious kid, who goes to two church services a week, has a personal quiet time and invests time with a mentor still spends more time getting messages from a secular world than he does with spiritual things." Of course, that is from a worldly Christian quote; but still the message is there, and it gets the point across. And we have to ask ourselves how many children really get that much positive church influence, even at that?

Some musicians, while not blatantly "anti-Christian" in their lyrics, flaunt all forms of perversity and antisocial themes while proudly calling themselves "believers" or "church goers." Ricardo "Krupt" Brown wrote in the liner notes of Dogg Food, the number one album debut from rap musicians The Dogg Pound, "I wanna first give thanks to God, who made all this [four-letter word] possible." (I just shake my head at that.) His music partner, Delmar "Daz" Arnaud, adds: "I'd like to thank the Lord Jesus Christ, king of my life." Their lyrics (which I saw some of) are absolutely way too filthy to even give you a sample.

I do not know what it is with these rap songs names, but here is another one. Snoop Doggy Dogg's publicity department recently told Focus on the Family's Plugged-In newsletter that the gangsta-rap superstar has completed a gospel album. (So you can see who are getting into the religious business now.)

The apostle Paul warned about the heresies that continually crept into the church. Many times we forget that the words of most popular secular and religious music are heresy and perversion. This same good advice from Paul applies for any type of lie, from any source, "From such, withdraw yourself!"

I Timothy 6:3-5 If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself.

That advice also applies to music. Many popular musicians misuse God's name to justify offensive messages today. From album liner notes to award shows, it has become increasingly "trendy" in the music industry for the artist to pay lip service to God while ignoring His commands and His morality. Do not think for a minute that our children are safe if they listen to "religious music." Look at the source. Whether it is a religious song promoting heresy or a secular music group promoting their form of morality, the end result is that it is anti-God and anti-Christ.

Let us notice how well the apostle Paul's warning applies to the *perverted influence* of today's music industry.

II Timothy 3:1-5 But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come. For men shall be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!

That is such a good summary of today's music, because as the nation goes so goes the music. What you have there is a direct description of these "artists."

What is good music? Right from the creation of the earth, God intended for man to have good music. The repeated terms, and patterns, and refrains of the opening chapter of Genesis suggests, at least, a poetic (and probably a musical) dimension in the whole story of creation. That is from Genesis 1:1 all the way to Genesis 2:4; and that was recorded for man's education. So it may very well be that God intended that story of creation to be set to music and sung among His people on a regular basis.

God is the Source of the skills that produce good music and songs, so that good music has the quality of a gift and inspiration. David describes himself as a God-anointed singer of Israel's songs. In Psalms 40:3, David said that it was God who put a new song in his mouth. King Solomon was also given the gift of songwriting.

I Kings 4: 29, 32 And God gave Solomon wisdom and exceedingly great understanding, and largeness of heart like the sand of the seashore. . . He spoke three thousand proverbs, and his songs were one thousand and five.

God did a lot of inspiring there, with Solomon; and thankfully we have many of the things that Solomon wrote (in the book of Proverbs). Alongside the image of God as Lawgiver, there is the image of God as Musical Composer. He told Moses to write down a song that He had composed as a witness against the Israelites because He knew they would provoke Him—by breaking His covenant, and by turning to other gods.

Deuteronomy 31:19-20 "Now therefore, write down this song for yourselves, and teach it to the children of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for Me against the children of Israel. When I have brought them to the land flowing with milk and honey, of which I swore to their fathers, and they have eaten and filled themselves and grown fat, then they will turn to other gods and serve them; and they will provoke Me and break My covenant.

In one sense, this is a prophecy as well. God could see their hearts, and knew what they would do.

Deuteronomy 31:21-22 Then it shall be, when many evils and troubles have come upon them, that this song will testify against them as a witness. For it will not be forgotten in the mouths of their descendants, for I know the inclination of their behavior today, even before I have brought them to the land of which I swore to give them." Therefore Moses wrote this song the same day, and taught it to the children of Israel.

God told Moses to teach this song to the Israelites and to have them sing it. This implies that sufficient repetition was needed to fix it in their minds before they sang it. So they learned the song,

and then they sang it—so that it was deeply embedded in their hearts and minds. Only then would they be able to sing it, and only then would it be a witness to God's admonition—not only to those of that generation, but also to their descendants who will not have forgotten it as it was passed down from generation to generation.

God knew that the repetition of music would permanently fix the song in their minds, for their own good. And, in contrast (but with a similar effect), songs advocating obscenity, immorality, drugs, and murder—heard over and over again—will permanently fix evil in the mind of the listener, for their own destruction. The same principle applies.

Music played a central part in ancient Israel's life. It was very important in all that they did. Every facet of its life and every stage of its history were marked by music. Music was present when the people greeted each other and when they said farewell, when they married and when they were buried, when they went off to war and when they came back—ancient Israel had songs that they sang at those times. From the least to the greatest, Israelites sang and played instruments. At every level we find romantic songs, working songs, and entertainment songs.

The Israelites in exile and the remnant in Palestine looked on Ezekiel's ministry in mockery. They would gossip that they should go hear God's Word. It was similar to listening to the hymns in our services, when we do not necessarily listen to the words. The Israelites in exile and the remnant in Palestine were not really listening to Ezekiel's message. They were merely listening to it in mockery.

They would gossip that they should go hear God's Word; but when they came to Ezekiel or heard his message, they would "listen," but they would not act according to his warnings. They verbally expressed devotion, but their hearts were greedy for material gain. They were playing games with God, in a manner of speaking. To them, Ezekiel was no more than a good entertainer. He was amusing to listen to and to watch—with all of his symbolic acts and prophecies—but just as an entertainer. And just as an entertainer does not demand a response, so they did not sense a need to respond to Ezekiel's messages.

Ezekiel 33:30-32 "As for you, son of man, the children of your people are talking about you beside the walls and in the doors of the houses; and they speak to one another, everyone saying to his brother, 'Please come and hear what the word is that comes from the LORD.' So they come to you as people do, they sit before you as My people, and they hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain. Indeed you are to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not do them.

As Ezekiel's prophecies became a reality, then Israel realized that a true prophet had been among them; but by then it was too late. They had been listening to Ezekiel's prophecies, but only as many people listen to songs today—only halfheartedly.

When we sing the hymns as part of God's formal Sabbath service, we obviously should not just mouth the words; but we should think about them as we sing. The hymns are an important way in which we worship God with spiritual sacrifices on His Sabbath. Not being ready when the song service starts, or leaving to go to the restroom during the hymn before the closing prayer, sends a message to God that you do not take worshipping Him seriously enough.

Picture this: How many brides run off during their wedding, as they are walking down the aisle, to go to the restroom? How would the groom feel, if he is standing there waiting and the bride just heads off to the restroom? Surely she could have waited. (It is not a direct comparison, but it is a similar comparison.)

Major events in the lives of the people of Israel—such as the exodus from Egypt, conquering the Canaanites, recapturing the ark, dedicating the temple, crowning the king, and returning from exile—were celebrated in music and song. It was all music that **glorified God**. The hymns that we sing in services are also hymns that glorify God. So that good music and that positive music that Israel had primarily glorified God.

The Israelites excelled in music—perhaps more than any other contemporaries or other nations around them—and nowhere more so than in their congregational worship. From the beginning, music and song were at the heart of the temple worship—a tradition that continued when the second temple was built. *Thanking God* was a top priority!

Nehemiah 12:27-31 Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings and singing, with cymbals and stringed instruments and harps. And the sons of the singers gathered together from the countryside around Jerusalem, from the villages of the Netophathites, from the house of Gilgal, and from the fields of Geba and Azmaveth; for the singers had built themselves villages all around Jerusalem. [So there were a lot of singers, obviously.] Then the priests and Levites purified themselves, and purified the people, the gates, and the wall. So I brought the leaders of Judah up on the wall, and appointed two large thanksgiving choirs. One went to the right hand on the wall toward the Refuse Gate.

Nehemiah 12:40-43 So the two thanksgiving choirs stood in the house of God, likewise I and the half of the rulers with me; and the priests, Eliakim, Maaseiah, Minjamin, Michaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets [So apparently there were a lot of trumpets there as well.]; also Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam, and Ezer. The singers sang loudly with Jezrahiah the director. Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off.

The main reason that it was heard "afar off" is because of all the music and all of the singing that was going on. When Israel had its focus right, it glorified God and honored Him with great enthusiasm—as we see there in the book of Nehemiah. The scale on which this took place was very impressive.

II Chronicles 5:12 And the Levites who were the singers, all those of Asaph and Heman and Jeduthun, with their sons and their brethren, stood at the east end of the altar, clothed in white linen, having cymbals, stringed instruments and harps, and with them one hundred and twenty priests sounding with trumpets.

I cannot imagine the sound of 120 trumpets blowing at the same time. That must have just stirred the body, all the way to the heart.

II Chronicles 5:13 Indeed it came to pass, when the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the LORD, and when they lifted up their voice with the

trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and praised the LORD, saying: "For He is good, for His mercy endures forever," that the house, the house of the LORD, was filled with a cloud.

There were stringed, wind, and percussion instruments. The number of people required by this extravaganza—and the overwhelming atmosphere of joy and festivity—are described in several passages. One example is in the whole chapter of Psalms 149, which you may want to read later.

It follows, from this, that the range of emotion expressed by ancient Israelitish music was anything but limited. The music that could be used to interpret or accompany the psalms with any degree of fitness must have been capable of expressing a great variety of moods and feelings. Not only the broadly marked contrast of joy and sorrow, of hope and fear, of faith and doubt—but every shade and quality of sentiment are found there, in the words and the proverbs.

It is hard to believe that the ancient Israelites could be pictured in the way that many historians picture them. That is, as not having any talent; and that it was just a drumbeat and drone of singing these psalms. They were *so capable* of producing wonderful and beautiful music! And, of course, God inspired them as well, as we saw in the case of Solomon. So the ancient Israelites music must have been absolutely breathtaking when combined with the psalms. It must have been so stirring and moving. It is sad in the sense that we do not have that to listen to today.

It is hard to believe that the people who originated all that wealth of emotions in speech and writing would have been without a corresponding ability to invent diversified melodies. Or that they would have been content with the bald and colorless vocal style usually attributed to them in historical writings. The Psalms are a natural and a fitting response to what God had done for His people—whether congregationally or individually. Either way, the Psalms are inspiring.

Just as a way of example, turn with me to Psalms 150. In many passages, the individual is encouraged to praise God in song. In these references, music is preeminently a form of praise *associated with joy*. In fact, over 100 references in the Psalms command the use of music for praising God. And 91 out of 107 references to music in the Psalms specify *God as the audience* to the music.

Psalms 150:1-6 Praise the LORD! Praise God in His sanctuary; praise Him in His mighty firmament! Praise Him for His mighty acts; praise Him according to His excellent greatness! Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet; praise Him with the lute and harp! Praise Him with the timbrel and dance; praise Him with stringed instruments and flutes! Praise Him with loud cymbals; praise Him with clashing cymbals! Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD!

Psalms 150 brings the Psalter to a solemn and joyful conclusion at the end of all the psalms. This psalm begins and ends with the command "**Praise the LORD!**" It is directed at all that exists. Everything must praise God in song. It is so inspiring to realize how important music is, in combination with praise.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul reminds us of what we once were. He summarizes it in one word: **darkness**. But now—as members of God's church and children of light—we must walk, talk, and sing as *a light*. We praise and honor God by how we live our lives.

Ephesians 5:8-14 For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light; (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather

expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret. But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light. Therefore He says: "Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light."

Not only had we lived in darkness before our conversion began, *we were darkness*. But now we have been rescued from the dominion of darkness, and inherit the kingdom of light. We not only live in the light, **we are the light!** This is possible only in union with Jesus Christ, who Himself is Light. Light is known by its effects. When the light of Christ shines in the lives of the elect, it produces *benevolence, fairness, and integrity*. These three qualities counteract the dark influence of malice, injustice, and falsehood.

The three characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit mentioned in verse 9—*goodness, righteousness, and truth*—coincide with those three qualities that I just mentioned. That is, benevolence, fairness, and integrity. They are characteristics necessary in music that is listened to or produced by a true Christian.

Even though each of these characteristics is a gift from God, we have a personal responsibility to help produce them. *Goodness*, mentioned there in verse 9, is achieved with moral excellence combined with a generous spirit. *Righteousness* is achieved by conforming to the demands and obligations of the will of God. The third characteristic there in verse 9—*truth*—is achieved by genuineness and honesty. Truth is not only something to be *said*, but something to be *done* as well.

The light is found not only in all these qualities or characteristics held in balance in the rounded Christian, but in every aspect of each quality which those who have received the light of Christ want to increase. That is something we desire and very deeply want. Those who live as "children of light," as mentioned in verse 8, will be continually endeavoring to determine what is the will of God in every situation—so that all they do will please Him.

Another exhortation is added in verse 11. We are not to have any share in "the unfruitful works of darkness." We are not to be involved in them at all! In verse 12, Paul insists that we are not to even breathe a hint of a word of immorality or anything else that the wicked do under the cover of secrecy. They are unspeakably abominable. If it is a shame to do something, then it is a shame to speak about it. It is a shame to talk or sing about it.

In verse 13, Paul appealed to the effect of light in the natural world. It penetrates wherever it shines, so that everything is lit up by it. In the same way, whenever the light of Christ appears, it shows up sin for what it is. Evil can no longer masquerade as anything else. So—as members of God's church and as children of light—that light should very clearly expose the ills and the wrongs that we see in worldly music.

Whatever hidden wickedness is revealed by the light of Christ can no longer be obscured by darkness but is shown up in real nature. In verse 14, the lines form what is called a metrical triplet in a rhythm. Basically what that is saying is that they have an obvious pattern to them. It seems to be a baptismal hymn, based on Isaiah 60:1. It may have been recited to those about to be baptized.

The exhortations "awake" and "arise from the dead" place the hymn in the context of *resurrection*. Baptism and resurrection are closely connected, of course. The rhythm ends with "Christ will give you light." Since Christ is already risen, He sheds His light on all who are raised to newness of life in Him.

Ephesians 5:15-21 See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God.

Because of the illumination that Christ provides, we should pay the most conscientious attention to our own personal behavior—and not be looking at how others act and live their lives. In verse 15, *walking circumspectly* underlies the need for the utmost concentration on leading an irreproachable life. We can no longer act as simpletons do (as the world does), since God's own wisdom is always available to us.

In verse 16, Paul tells us to make the best possible use of all circumstances, like careful stewards—and to grasp good opportunities and to reject bad opportunities—lest our time be wasted. The days are evil in a moral sense, not necessarily by reason of hardship and distress. And that evil is constantly bombarding us through music.

In verse 17, to "understand" implies that an effort has to be made. So it has a sense of "trying to grasp"—where you are trying to grab hold of something. We have to work hard to try to grasp God's will. Paul recognized **God's will** as the regulative principle of Christian life. It should be what guides us. The will of God the Father and Jesus Christ are the same. *Human will* must be **replaced** by *God's will*.

Romans 12:2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

That takes a lot of work, and we are trying to grasp that. It is as if we are in a world that is sinking, and we are trying to grab hold of something that will save us. In Ephesians 5:19-20, the outcome of being filled with the Spirit is described in a series of *four essential responsibilities* that we have—speaking, singing, making melody, and giving thanks. Notice that each of these expressions of the Spirit's fullness has to do with **praise**. The verb "to speak," in verse 19, is from the Greek word *laleo*. It not only refers to normal conversation but also covers utterance of any kind. So it is perfectly applicable to the medium of psalms, hymns, and songs.

Turn with me to Colossians 3, as we wrap this up. From a good heart the mouth speaks good things. And so also from a good, righteous, and truthful heart comes acceptable praises to God. The Holy Spirit, through a faithful heart, produces the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In a sense, this list is the ideal *checklist* for what we should be aiming for in the way of developing our tastes in music. The perpetual accompaniment of all these fruits of the Spirit in our lives is **thanksgiving**. Such gratitude to God covers every circumstance in life.

Colossians 3:15-17 And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. 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. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.