

Grace Evangelical Free Church  
Issues & Answers: Music

Ephesians 5:19: “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord”

There is a saying in ministry that the two most dangerous undertakings of a church prove building programs and choirs. Not meaning to be offensive, the reality is as believers we have challenges enough maintaining a righteous path without those associated with additional resource requirements and what has proven one of the most divisive aspects of modern ministry: music. Does Scripture provide guidance in relation to music evaluation and selection? What are the Biblical parameters to which we should adhere? Is there leeway for various styles and expression? For the Scriptural answer, we examine:

- **Historical Context:** Ephesians 1:1 identifies the author of the Book of Ephesians as the Apostle Paul, very likely written between 60-63 A.D. Paul intended all those that long for Christ-like maturity to receive this writing. Enclosed within the Book of Ephesians is the discipline needed to develop into true sons of God. Furthermore, a study in Ephesians will help to fortify and to establish the believer so he can fulfill the purpose and calling God has given. **The aim of this epistle is to confirm and to equip a maturing church.** It presents a balanced view of the body of Christ and its importance in God's economy. Doctrine occupies the greatest portion of the Book of Ephesians. Half of the teaching in this epistle relates to our standing, and the remainder of it affects our condition. All too often those who teach from this book bypass all the foundational instruction and go directly to the closing chapter. It is this chapter that emphasizes the warfare or the struggle of the saints. However, to benefit fully from the contents of this epistle, one must begin at the beginning of Paul's instruction in this letter. First, the follower of Christ must fully understand who God declares him to be. He must also become grounded in the knowledge of God's accomplishment for all humanity. Next, our present existence and walk must become exercised and strengthened. This must continue until we no longer totter or stagger back and forth with every spirit of teaching and subtlety of men. Paul's writing breaks down into three main segments. (1) Chapters 1-3 introduce principles with respect to God's accomplishment. (2) Chapters 4-5 put forth principles regarding our present existence. (3) Chapter 6 presents principles concerning our daily struggle.
- **Grammatical Usage:** “Speaking” in the Greek is “Laleo” meaning, “to utter in a voice, emit a sound” within the context of declaring and disclosing one's thoughts: “psalms” is “Psalmos” meaning, “striking or twitching of the fingers” in context to musical accompaniment of a sacred song; “hymns” or “Humnos” meaning, “a song of praise” in the context of the sacred – recognition of the character of God; “spiritual” or “Pneumatikos” meaning, “divine” in the context of governed by the Holy Spirit. A critical adjective to the next key which requires definitive definition; “songs” or “Ode” literally meaning, “lyric piece” in the generic (common use); “singing” or “ado” – a verb meaning, “to voice praise”; “melody” or “Psallo” meaning, “singing with accompaniment” in context conveying “to touch or strike the chord, to twang the strings of a musical instrument so that they gently vibrate” according to Vines.
- **Literal Application:** Disclosing from the heart one to another in instrumentation and praise and Holy Spirit directed lyrics of praise, exhortation and prophecies, singing and making music not overpowering but gentle in nature to the Lord (based upon His instruction and character) with your heart (as a reflection of your heart).

- Contextual Interpretation: The linguistic breakdown of this verse is critical to proper interpretation:

1. **psalms**--generally accompanied by an instrument.
2. **hymns**--in direct praise to God (compare Ac 16:25; 1Co 14:26; Jas 5:13).
3. **songs**--the general term for lyric pieces; "spiritual" is added to mark their restriction to sacred subjects, though not merely to direct praises of God, but also containing exhortations, prophecies.
4. **making melody**--*Greek*, "playing and singing with an instrument."
5. **in your heart**--not merely with the tongue; but the serious expression of the heart accompanying the singing of the lips (compare 1Co 14:15; Ps 47:7). The contrast is between the heathen and the Christian practice, "Let your songs be not the drinking songs of heathen feasts, but psalms and hymns; and their accompaniment, *not the music of the lyre, but the melody of the heart*" [CONYBEARE and HOWSON].
6. **to the Lord**-- "To *Christ* as God."

Understanding how divisive music can become, it is no accident that in v. 20 the qualifier for reference is, "...God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" which reflexively directs one to the Word of God. V. 21 deals immediately with submitting one to another: Let no man be so *tenacious of his own will* or his opinion in matters indifferent, as to *disturb the peace of the Church*; in all such matters *give way* to each other, and let *love* rule according to the standards of the Word of God. The phrase, "In the fear of God" is a present tense concept of setting Him always before your eyes, and considering that he has commanded you to *love one another*, and to *bear each other's burdens*; and that what you do in this or any other commanded case, you do as unto the Lord. How do we determine the commands and intent of God (?) - by the Word of God. Therefore we move to the next section of the lesson.

- Scriptural Comparison: We are commanded to guard our hearts and guard our minds (Phillipians 4:7). When listening to music, four questions need be reviewed:

- 1) whether the song or the group performing advocates for or against the convictions of God;
- 2) whether it promotes pro or anti-Christian attitudes leading to right/wrong behavior;
- 3) whether it causes spiritual freedom/bondage;
- 4) whether it is a stumbling block to others.

I often find Ephesians 5:19, "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart," a good contextual summation related to our approach to communication in general and music in particular.

Just because music is labeled as "Christian", does not necessarily mean that it is good. Just because music is labeled as "secular", does not necessarily mean that it is bad. While there are 7 basic elements to music (see supplement), there are two fundamental elements which provide direction:

1) There is the actual music, the arrangement of the notes and final sound that is made. Music elicits many emotions. These emotions bring about certain responses which prompted Andrew Fletcher's famous statement, "Let me write the songs of a generation, I do not care who writes its laws" in relation to personal/cultural control. Whatever music we are inclined to listen to, it must not bring forth emotions prompting ungodly actions or attitudes or those reactions that "do not bring about the righteousness that God desires" (James 1:19-20). Permitting is promoting,

especially in relation to on-lookers which is why we are cautioned not to be a “stumbling block” (1 Corinthians 8:9). The reaction of the individual/group is the best indicator of adhering or in conflict with James & 1 Corinthians.

2. Interestingly, the first clue to a song’s inappropriate nature are the lyrics which are drowned out or camouflaged by the instrumentation. The only way that we can be sure that what is being said/sung is correct is to become students of Scripture as well, being committed to checking out what we hear (Acts 17:11). Second, the overall message, or theme of the song must be in line with things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable. These are our basic themes for thought (Philippians 4:8-9) followed by “...and do not give the devil a foothold” (Ephesians 4:27) should lyrics or the overpowering nature of the instrumentation be contrary to Scripture.

Both components must glorify God (1Corinthians 10:31: “Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. 32 Give none **offence**, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God”). Offense is defined as an injury or wrong done to one (1 Sam. 25:31; Rom. 5:15); a stumbling-block or cause of temptation (Isa. 8:14; Matt. 16:23; 18:7). The Greek term is “skandalon”, properly defined as that at which one stumbles or takes offense.

This command includes doing those things with the right conviction, or mind set with guidance from Colossians: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow or deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and basic principals of this world rather than on Christ.” (Colossians 2:8) Often the church will adopt a worldly practice as a form of accommodation in the name of being seeker sensitive – often beginning with music. This approach is antithetical to the new life as described in Ephesians 4:17-34 as well as the concept of being separate (2 Corinthians 6:17).

Two axioms are critical in the use of music as an evangelistic tool:

- **It is never right to do wrong to do right** (obedience is better than sacrifice – 1 Samuel 13:9-13). If a medium is to be blessed with results of a righteous nature, it must conform to the righteous standards of the Word of God which is a direct reflection of the character of God;
- **The ends do not justify the means.** When someone asks if the ends justify the means, the answer to this question depends on what the ends or goals are and what means are being used to achieve them. If the goals are good and noble, and the means we use to achieve them are also good and noble, then yes, the ends do justify the means. But that’s not what most people mean when they use the expression. Most use it as an excuse to achieve their goals through any means necessary with little or no regard for established Biblical conviction. What the expression usually means is something along the line of “It doesn’t matter how you get the results you want as long as you get them.” From a Biblical standpoint, of course, what is missing from this discussion is the **character of God, God’s law** (commands, convictions and implications) and the **providence of God**. Because we know that God is good, holy, just, merciful and righteous, those who bear His name are to reflect His character (1 Peter 1:15-16). All manner of sinful behaviors are the expression of man’s sin nature, not the nature of God. For the Christian whose nature has been transformed by Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17), there is no justifying behavior adverse to Biblical standards, no matter the motivation for it or the outcome of it. From this holy and perfect God, we get a law that reflects His attributes (Psalm 19:7; Romans 7:12) and instruction as to course of life. God makes no "escape clause" for motivation or

rationalization. Notice that He doesn't say, "Despite the wrong behavior which the music elicits, go ahead if it results in a successful altar call." This is called "situational ethics" and there is no room for it in God's law. So, clearly, from God's perspective there are no ends that justify the means of ignoring, excusing, breaking or failing to consult His Word as to our actions – especially in promoting God to the lost.

- Conclusion: According to Proverbs 6:16 – 19, there are seven things God hates. The seventh is a **man who stirs up dissension among brothers**. Brothers are created by God to live in unity (Psalm 133:1; 1 Thessalonians 4:9). Believers are brothers and sisters since they have one Father God and one Brother, Jesus Christ. The Church is also the Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:25-27). In many situations strife among brothers and even within the church seems unavoidable, but anyone who purposely causes disruption to the peace in the body of Christ will displease God above all, since that person gives room for others to sin and for himself/herself to sin further (1 John 2:9-11; 4:19-21). The remedy is found in Jesus' pronouncement of a great blessing on peacemakers, the privilege to be called "sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). Peace is always achieved in aligning with God and His Word. Issues which arise within the fellowship are to be handled according to Acts 6:4 where the leadership is devoted to prayer and the Word – implementing the corrective action of truth as congregants subject themselves to the authority of the local Church's leadership according to Hebrews 13:17, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account." Hence, gossip in any form (conversation, e-mails, blog postings, text messages, tweets, etc.,) which either sparks or perpetuates disagreement and dissention given a clearly articulated Biblical conviction and decision risks the wrath of God, places those guilty of continued misbehavior in line for discipline while forfeiting the privilege of ministry until restoration is achieved.