



TRUTH MATTERS

A Newsletter Discussing Matters Related To Truth Because Truth Matters

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Musings on Music

By Bob Bixby¹

Is there a difference between *morally neutral* and amoral? I think so. The battle for Christian music has sometimes unnecessarily polarized. One group says that music is amoral. The other insists that it is either moral or immoral and you can't have it any other way. There is possibly another way to look at it that I'd like to propose.

I'd like to suggest that it is wrong to assume that one can simply ascribe morality or immorality to every *morceau*² simply by evaluating its lyrics and music, but that any musical piece might be morally dynamic. In other words, the same piece of music could be morally positive or negative depending on a host of variables. (Admittedly, there are *morceaux* that are conspicuously sinful, but that is not what provokes the controversy. It is the music that some believe in all sincerity to be godly, and others with equal sincerity believe to be ungodly that stirs up the emotions.)

There are so many variables in music: the performer, the composer, the lyrics, the music, the context, the culture, and the listener to name a few. The same *morceau* may be spiritually uplifting to me (morally positive) one day, a spiritual weight (morally negative) the next day, and spiritually uplifting the following day. Variables that don't affect me make some music spiritually refreshing for me in one context, but ungodly for me in another context. For example, I love Mozart's *Laudate Dominum* (KV 339). It has to be one of the most beautiful pieces ever written. But there are so many variables. It is true that the words are directly from Scripture (Ps 117) and when I play it full volume in the privacy of my study my soul is enraptured. The fact that it was composed by a pervert for the feast day of a saint worshipped as a confessor, sung by perverts, and recorded by perverts has little bearing on my soul's enjoyment and benefit. However, I think it would be immoral of me to use that same work in a local church consisting of converted Roman Catholics who knew the source and purpose of the original composition. The same *morceau* is either moral or immoral depending on the context. (And context is just one variable that the wise person will ponder over).

As already mentioned, a *morceau* can be both moral and immoral, positive and negative, at the same time depending upon the effect of the combined variables on an individual or congregation. God may be pleased with the effect that a good song is having on my soul as it is performed by the soloist in church, but the same song may be odious to God from the perspective of the soloist who is singing out of vanity.

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² Definition: A short literary or musical piece.

For whatever reason, I am not easily offended by various types of music. I'm easily blessed. I can listen to a recording of Sandi Patti singing "Amazing Grace" and be moved to tears. Yet I am fairly sure that I could not be able to benefit from a live concert because of the combined effect of all the variables. I happen to believe that is not hypocritical of me. It is living circumspectly, appropriating godly discrimination to each and every situation.

Face it, we never discriminate consistently. Nor should we. We should discriminate spiritually. "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" doesn't disturb us at camp. During the Sunday morning worship it would be immoral. The fact is that most music falls into that category. **Therefore, it is simply wrong to say that every single piece of music that falls under the CCM category is sinful, but it is equally foolish to indiscriminately delight in certain music anywhere just because we find it appropriate and helpful somewhere.**

Being a Baptist, I actually believe in the priesthood of the believer which suggests, among other things, that the believer has the potential to properly discern the rightness and the wrongness of any given piece in any given situation. As a pastor, I carefully consider all the variables that affect our congregation and seek to guide accordingly. The fact that I will not tell individuals what they should listen to or determine the morality or immorality of all their choices may put me at odds with some Fundamentalists, but it makes me pretty consistent as a Baptist. I think that there seems to be a lack of respect going both ways. The "conservative" musician does not believe the sincerity of someone who claims that she is spiritually blessed by a contemporary song or that it is even possible. Nor does the contemporary musician respect the fact that some of us find some of their music to be unacceptable. It is not right to condescendingly assume that we are uninformed, brainwashed, and narrow-minded. We may be making wise decisions based upon the combined effect of the variables on our spirits. We may be the ones walking circumspectly and with maturity.

It makes sense to me that a local church consider as many variables as possible and then prayerfully select its music. Those variables must include more than just tastes. Certain music may appeal to every congregants taste, causing no irritation in that sense, but remain sinful. If I had a totally hip-hop congregation, I would still exercise strong leadership toward the old hymns of the faith because one necessary consideration in congregational music is that it edify (Col. 3:16). However, another congregation may make different choices, but still stay within the framework of Biblical mandate. We would be foolish to ignore the possibility that the variables in their context are different enough to warrant the godly selection of different music than what we would use.

So, is contemporary Christian music sinful or godly? Absolutely. Depending on the piece. Depending on the lyrics. Depending on the performer. Depending on the context. Depending on the listener. Depending..... Depending on all of these combined. May I suggest something radical when it comes to your music choices? Individually or corporately, the solution is plain: "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh".