Regarding the Morality of Music

A Response to
"An Important Question for Our Times – Is Music Moral?"
by Kurt Woetzel

by

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Abstract: A response to Kurt Woetzel's article about the morality of music, this is a careful look at that view as presented in his article. This looks at the topic from Biblical, linguistic, communicative, and anthropological points of view, offering an alternative solution to the dilemma using a communication model and suggesting guidelines for dealing with the situation.

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by Kurt Woetzel

The ability to worship God with music is one of the greatest gifts that He has bestowed on us. When we think about it, there is only one physical being created that can make music – man.[1] The problem is that many of us differ on what is worshipful and what is not. Some tend to take a more free approach, saying that any sort of music can be used for worshipping God. Others, on the other hand, say that music in and of itself is moral and so only certain styles can be used to truly worship God. But in all of it, both sides try to focus on one thing: wanting to worship God in purity and to the best of their abilities.

Not having had too much exposure to the latter idea, I was surprised when some of my friends and acquaintances made mention of this subject in passing. As our choir director and some people I highly respect espouse the music-is-moral view, I figured it would be worth checking it out, simply to form an opinion on the subject. And so I came across Kurt Woetzel's article "An Important Question for Our Times – Is Music Moral?" on Majesty Music's web site. I read it with curiosity at first, but then with a twisted feeling in my stomach. Both my emotional and intellectual responses to this were so intense that I felt compelled to sit down and write a critique of the article. Here I would strongly recommend that you first read Mr. Woetzel's article before continuing on with this evaluation of it, because you need to make your own assessment before you look at mine.

In this response I want to first take a look at my presuppositions going into this brief treatise. Then I will look at the underlying presuppositions that Mr. Woetzel evidences in his article. After that I want to look at the Scriptural background he presents and consider some of the implications of those, as well as of the secular sources that are cited regarding this issue. Following that we'll take a quick look at some of the unmentioned history regarding the music debate and then discuss the music is a language analogy. I would like to close the discussion with a communication-based model of the morality of music and a quick look at the all-important human element in the making of music.

I. My Presuppositions

Stating your presuppositions clearly is of key importance when writing on such an explosive subject as the morality of music. Many times we just cruise into the writing without formulating our own presuppositions that we wish to pass on. In order to make sure that we are all on the same page regarding the logic that I use, I would like to state my presuppositions right at the beginning.

A. The Bible is the final authority.

When it comes to spirituality there is no higher place that we can go than the Bible itself. Being the inspired word of God from cover to cover in all of the words chosen, it is the final standard when it comes to living our lives in a way pleasing to God. If something is clearly Biblical, it must be applied to life and practiced. If it is clearly un-Biblical it must be set aside and not done.

B. There are "gray" areas in the Bible.

While the Bible is the final authority, God chose to not insult our intelligence (or lack thereof) by prescribing everything down to the most minute nuance. He primarily gave us principles, not prescriptions. There are some topics that the Bible is silent about and when confronted with these, it is our responsibility to form a carefully thought-through opinion or conviction based on clear Biblical principles. Convictions and opinions such as these will differ from Christian to Christian and some of the applications will differ as well, but that is the beauty of the diversity of Body life.

C. Opinions are *just that* and should not be forced on others.

It took me a very long time to realize that this presupposition is key to living in harmony with Godly people who think differently than I do. My younger brother is one such person. Being a highly opinionated person myself I would tend to try to force what I thought on him, only to find myself fighting with him about

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[1] Pastor Paul Overdorf, Jr. in his sermon "The Expressions of Worship." Delivered 08/03/2003 in Canterbury, CT.

inconsequential minutiae that had only the effect of making us angry at each other and disturbing an otherwise fine relationship where we thought very similarly in the big picture.

While this is merely a small example of what I'm trying to get at, we need to remember that as Christians our first duty is to *love* one another (John 15:12), not to convince one another of our pet doctrines, the way some of us tend to want to do.

For that reason what I am stating here is mostly opinion, but I want you to see the logic behind my opinion and the Biblical basis for it. What you do with it at the end is your responsibility, not mine.

D. Every person is individually responsible for their words, actions, thoughts, tastes, etc.

While there are certain things that we are corporately responsible for, it is my conviction from Scripture that God deals with us on an individual basis. I. Corinthians 3:10-15 suggests an *individual* judgment of each believer before the throne of Christ.

It is our responsibility to warn a brother who is sinning and, if possible, to draw them back from it, but what if they don't do that? Whose responsibility is that? If we've done our job with teaching, exhorting, and praying for that brother, we have fulfilled our responsibility towards him and so the responsibility now rests squarely on his shoulders, not ours.

E. Music is an intensely personal subject.

Every person I have met has certain types of music that resonate with them and certain types that don't. The instant you tell them you don't like their music they will try to defend it. This suggests to me that music is something that is deeply rooted within a human being, perhaps even as deeply rooted as their sexuality. For this reason we need to highly respect each other's taste in music, even if we can't agree with it.

F. Music is not moral in and of itself, but *becomes* moral depending on certain variables.

This will most certainly turn off some people who believe music is moral, but I hope that you will finish reading this paper and try to understand where I'm coming from. I believe that the whole debate is a lot more complicated than it is made out to be and that there are certain variables, including the listener, the musician, and the songwriter, that must be factored in to the equation before we can come to a conclusion. I will explain how I came to hold this opinion as we go on.

II. The Presuppositions Mr. Woetzel Evidences in His Article

Now, having placed my presuppositions squarely on the table, it is time to take a look at the presuppositions Mr. Woetzel has in writing his article. (Once more, I would encourage you to read his article carefully before continuing on here.) He does not come out at the beginning or really state any of them, but these are gleaned from a careful reading of his paper. I do not want to make any value judgments about them, but merely collect and summarize them, so we know where he is coming from. Beneath each supposition I will either present a direct quote or a summary from the article.

I do believe that Mr. Woetzel and I would agree on the presupposition that God's Word is paramount, though our application of that principle will differ a bit.

A. Worship is primarily a vertical relationship with God and our music will reflect upon how we worship.

The believer's music is to be an in-house, vertical activity. … Sacred music is for the saints and unto the Lord.

B. Music in and of itself is moral, regardless of what the musician does with it.

Whenever music is played or performed, something is being taught.

Quoting Deryck Cook from *The Language of Music*, "Of course, rhythm and form play a large part in moral expression."

"Can an amoral medium have moral impact?"

There are many more quotes that could be used to examples for this presupposition, but to list them here would make me have to basically reproduce the entire article.

C. Everything can be categorized in black-and-white categories.

The aforementioned presupposition dictates that this presupposition exists. In many Christian circles, especially those who tend to be a bit more legalistic, this unspoken presupposition arises, as everything is carefully ordered according to what the leaders believe to be moral or immoral.

D. There can only be two possible, polar opposite answers to this problem

We can't have it both ways! Music is either neutral and has no bearing on values or it is moral and, as do other moral agents, impacts character and values. Therefore, it is inconsistent and illogical to say music is amoral, and yet has influence upon values.

E. If the source is negative, it will contaminate the result beyond redemption.

How did that which was art-oriented, contemplative, uplifting, wholesome, and orderly get replaced with the pop sound from the lounge, dance floor, honky-tonk, and other places where the world congregates to feed the flesh?

F. Change is bad.

This is again one that I cannot supply a direct quote for, but when reading the article it becomes clear that Mr. Woetzel likes things the way they were before Don Wyrtzen argued that we should try to reach people using contemporary music.

These are the presuppositions that I have found within the text. Knowing these helps understand where Mr. Woetzel is coming from and helps us to understand how to approach what he is saying to us.

III. *Scriptural Background*

The biggest problem that I had with the article was what was done with the Bible. The impression I gained from the introduction of the article told me that I was going to be reading something that was firmly rooted in Biblical truth. However, I was shocked to find only a few verses scattered here and there and the section entitled "A Biblical Perspective on the Question – Is Music Amoral?" was the *last* one and it was also the *shortest*! If this is something that is supposed to have such a great impact on Christianity, why is the Bible not quoted more?

I would like to take a careful look at each passage that Mr. Woetzel quotes, first in the context that he puts it in, and then in the context of Scripture. I will directly quote him and highlight the passages he quotes so that we can see the Biblical words themselves.

In each case I would like to argue for a consistent hermeneutic using the following four points.

1. It is important to remember what the full context of the quote is before applying it. Prooftexting is a highly dangerous practice as it gives the impression that the exegete is misusing God's Word for his own ends and doesn't know what he is doing.

2. We must look at who the recipients were and what *they* would have understood when they heard the text. This means taking into account cultural backgrounds and ideas.

3. We must look at where the passage fits into the overall Biblical picture before using it.

4. We must make a point not to stretch the meaning of the passage beyond what it is *within the text*, something that all exegetes and theologians, including this one, are guilty from at time to time.

A. I. Corinthians 15:33

The inherent contradiction evident in the *Christianity Today* article reflects the dilemma of those in the Christian community who stoutly maintain that music is neutral, yet having to admit to its power and notable influence on character and values. **1 Cor. 15:33** gives further insight and an unmistakable warning-**"Be not deceived, evil communications corrupt good manners."** Music is a powerful instrument of communication. Manners are the fleshing out of values and character. That which is neutral, obviously, cannot impact character. However, when we ascribe or attribute morality to an entity, it must, by its very nature, have the capacity to affect and influence character. If music is moral, then it will, by necessity, prevail upon behavior-the evidence of character. We can't have it both ways! Music is either neutral and has no bearing on values

or it is moral and, as do other moral agents, impacts character and values. Therefore, it is inconsistent and illogical to say music is amoral, and yet has influence upon values.

The book of First Corinthians was written to the Corinthian church, which was a predominantly Gentile and highly unruly fellowship of believers who loved sensationalism and anything that was new and unusual. The passage quoted is embedded deeply within Paul's discussion of the resurrection and the bearing that it has on our life. When we look at the immediate context of this quote, we find that there are people who have been teaching that there will be no resurrection and that the Corinthians are believing them. Following the quote is specific teaching on the resurrection.

This is a quote of a *secular* proverb from Corinth, something the Corinthians would be familiar with.

If we take the understanding of the passage itself, Paul is saying that "evil communications" (KJV) or "bad company" (NASB), i.e. the false teachers, "corrupt good manners," i.e. the understanding concerning the resurrection. The word "manners" can also be translated "customs" or "habits", which is the *root* meaning of the word ἦθος (*ēthos*). The idea here deals with false teachings that are dangerous to our personal salvation. We *could* apply it to the idea of music, but the question hinges on whether to translate the word ὁμιλία (*humilia*) "communication" or "company" and all translations of the original Scriptures are not only fallible, they also contain errors. That is why we need to compare various translations before coming to a conclusion, unless we can read the Koinë Greek.

B. Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16, and Hebrews 2:12

The Scriptural model for sacred music is quite clear. **Ephesians 5:19** suggests, **"Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord."** The sister passage, **Colossians 3:16**, reminds us that we are to be **"teaching one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." Hebrews 2:12** echoes these two passages with **". . . I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee."** The believer's music is to be an in-house, vertical activity. Speaking to *yourselves*, teaching *one another*, and declaring the Lord's name *in the midst of the church*, does not even hint at evangelism. Sacred music is for the saints and unto the Lord. Over and over the admonition of music references in God's Word includes the same sentiment, "unto Him, unto the Lord, unto the Most High, unto Thee, unto Thy Name." When a society abandons its mores, restraints, and conscience, as it did in the 1960's, it is not the duty of the church, nor is it appropriate for individual believers, to cast off the Scriptural model of music and follow a decadent-bent community in locked-step for the opportunity "to get a hearing in the contemporary culture."

1. Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16

Ephesians is a letter sent to the saints in south-western Asia-Minor, modern-day Turkey. Colossians was sent to the church at Colossae. It is conceivable that both were meant to be read together, as they cover much of the same ground.

Both of these passages appear towards the end of each book, in Ephesians after a lengthy treatise talking about what God has done for us and how He gave the mystery of the church, and in Colossians after calling the recipients to not be deceived by false teachers, but to live in a manner worthy of Christ. In the immediate context in both cases Paul is dealing with what the transformed life of the Christian is to be like, imitating Christ. It is only natural that in this context he would talk about this.

This context seems to suggest a primarily *horizontal* use of the songs, and secondarily a vertical use, in which being *thankful* to God is the primary focus. Would that mean that these passages strongly suggest a teaching use of music in the church? It is interesting that it does not prescribe any sort of set forms of what the songs are to be *like*. In each case the "psalms" (probably Old Testament ones), "hymns" and "spiritual songs" seem to suggest the content of the *lyrics* not necessarily the type of music used. We must also remember that there probably were unsaved people in the congregation, just as there are today. Thus the music would take on an evangelistic character as well.

2. Hebrews 2:12 and Psalm 22:22

The letter to the Hebrews was written, as mentioned, primarily to the Hebrews living in Asia Minor. From the context it is clear that the recipients were in danger of leaving Christianity for the comfort of the old Jewish religion. For that reason the writer of Hebrews focuses primarily on how Jesus is far better than anything that has gone before.

If we look at the immediate context of this verse, we find first of all that what it is talking about is that Jesus is better than the angels and that Jesus is human. The one who is singing here is not the Christian it is Jesus! This passage emphasizes that He is human by this action and that *we* are His brothers! We need to look at the whole swath of the writing before we grab it out of context to support our point. If anything this says that Jesus proclaims God's name to his brothers and sings God's praises in the congregation.

Granted, that's what the context of Hebrews suggests, but what about the place that this is quoted from? Psalm 22 is the psalm of the suffering king. And here the king again sings in God's presence to exalt and extol Him before his brothers. This is not applicable in the way that Mr. Woetzel is using it.

C. I. Corinthians 14:7-11 and Deuteronomy 31:19-22

Can we support music's linguistic character and attributes Scripturally? **1Corinthians 14: 7-11** includes an unmistakable example where music is used as an analogy for language. **"For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound . . . how shall it be known what is spoken?" Deuteronomy 31:19-22** was the last face-to-face meeting between the Lord and Moses. This was obviously a momentous occasion during which we could expect the Lord to give Moses some very important instruction. What does the Lord tell Moses? What would replace God's presence and direction which the Israelites had known and enjoyed? How would His comfort and care, experienced for forty years, continue? God instructs Moses to **". . . write ye this song for you, and teach it the children of Israel: put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for me against the children of Israel."**

1. I Corinthians 14:7-11

As we have already discussed the background of I. Corinthians above, I'll focus mainly on the context here. If we look at Chapters 12-14, we find this passage quoted is in the section dealing with spiritual gifts. It is in the chapter immediately following the discussion on love. In the immediate context Paul is arguing for the superiority of prophecy over speaking in other tongues. The point of his argument is to draw an analogy about language from the realm of music, which is valid, as music is a language of sorts. The application of this passage, however, deals with the fact that worship of God must be understandable to the human, as prophecy is, not unintelligible, as speaking in tongues is. Just so, certain music may be unintelligible to some people, but deeply moving to others.

2. Deuteronomy 31:19-22

The book of Deuteronomy contains the farewell words of Moses to the children of Israel. It is all about remembering what God has done for His people, warning them of the dangers that lie ahead of them. This portion falls in the fifth and final section of the book which records Moses' final words to the new generation of Israelites who are ready to conquer the Promised Land. If we look at the context all is now prepared for the commissioning of Joshua. In the following context we have a copy of this "national anthem" that Moses wrote for the children of Israel.

We can only assume that the words given Moses were God's Words. It is interesting that God would command a song to be given, but then again, as Deuteronomy is a book about remembering God and what He has done, we would logically find that God would use just about any method to get His people to remember what He wants them to know. Thus the song would more be considered a device to aid in memorization rather than necessarily a measure of whether music is moral or not. Besides, what *kind* of music would they be using there? It would probably not fit within the narrow definitions of what we perceive to be moral or immoral music, as it arises from a culture vastly different from either our Christian sub-culture or post-Christian nation.

D. Philippians 4:8 and Proverbs 23:7

His comments should really not come as a great surprise. It was mentioned earlier that the term music itself is derived from *muse* or *musa* which means to think, to meditate or to contemplate. Could something which causes us to think a certain way be amoral? If so, then we would need to conclude that thinking-is just thinking. Fortunately our common sense tells us otherwise. Furthermore, the Word of God provides candid instruction for the believer on this matter. **Philippians 4:8, "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."** Why is the Lord concerned about how we think? Why should believers give attention to the thoughts which flow through our minds? The answer is found in **Proverbs 23:7, "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he:"** Dr. Charles R. Phelps, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church, Concord, New Hampshire, has well said, "If music impacts thought and our thoughts are to be righteously regulated, then we must righteously regulate the music to which we listen."

1. Philippians 4:8
The key idea of the letter to the Philippians is Paul's joy in thinking of this, his favorite church. It is a letter that overflows with encouragement. This verse is found towards the end of the letter and it is immediately preceded by the admonition to be joyful in Christ and letting Him fill us. The result of thinking as this verse tells us to is that God will be with us.

    This can definitely be applied to music, but it must also be applied to the way we think of our brothers and sisters who think differently from us. When our minds are focused on what is *good*, God's peace will guard our minds and hearts, regardless of what's going on around us.

2. Proverbs 23:7
The book of Proverbs is a collection of wisdom sayings, mainly from Solomon. This proverb is found in the second part of the book "The Proverbs of Solomon" and is in the middle of a section on relationships. As a matter of fact it is torn right out of the center of the proverb relating to the relationship of a person to a miser or selfish person. The whole context is dealing with how to face the hospitality of a selfish person. As a matter of fact the word שָׁעַר (šāʿar) which the King James translates "thinketh" should more correctly be translated "calculates" or "reckons" and the context tells us that the man is really calculating what you're eating and is angry that he has to put it in front of you.

    This is a gross misuse of this passage and it probably stems from two things: first, not carefully looking at the whole context, and, second, not carefully looking at the meaning of the words, either by consulting other translations, or by doing a Hebrew word study, which anyone can do, thanks to Strong's concordance.

E. I. Chronicles 25:1-3
> Why is music moral? Why is it critically important for the believer to grasp this concept? Because Scripture declares music moral-*without* the help of secular wisdom. The evidence from the "world" only reinforces, clarifies, embellishes and perhaps contemporizes what the Bible already declares. For those perhaps still uncertain let us consider a final passage in the Old Testament. In **1 Chronicles 25:1-3**, we find a particularly valuable and interesting phrase which unmistakably indicates that music, without words, is moral. In verse one we read, **". . . of the sons of Asaph, and of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who should prophesy with harps, with psalteries, and with cymbals: . . ."** In verse three the same thought is repeated, **". . . under the hands of their father Jeduthun, who prophesied with a harp, to give thanks and to praise the Lord."** The words "prophesy" and "prophesied" literally suggest that preaching took place. A prophet addresses social, political, and spiritual issues. In this instance the "preaching" was done with instruments-with sound-music! Could such prophesying be considered amoral or neutral? No. Thus, for the Christian to take a music-is neutral position is not only to dismiss the enormous amount of data which exists from secular experts, but more seriously, to deny and deliberately oppose the clear teaching of the Word of God.

Chronicles was written after the exile, primarily to explain the temple rites and give the priestly perspective on the history of the southern, God-pleasing kingdom of Judah and the house of David. This passage falls at the end of David's life when he was ordering the worship in the temple. In that vein he appointed the sons of Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun to "prophesy" with various musical instruments.

    If we take the time to study the Hebrew term נבא (naḇʾa), which is translated "prophesy", we find that the form it is most often used in is the *passive* form ("he was caused to prophesy"), suggesting, as Scripture says[2], that prophecy is something brought upon a person by the Spirit of God or some other external force. The rest of the time it is used in a reflexive form ("he caused himself to prophesy"), which scholars generally consider to imply wild frenzy.[3]

    The word is used a grand total of 110 times in Scripture, the bulk of which are found in Jeremiah (37 times) and Ezekiel (37 times). The earliest uses in Numbers, Samuel, and Kings (as well as a parallel passage in Chronicles) are almost all in the reflexive form. The usage of the passive form in these books is clearly a direct parallel to the reflexive, carrying the same idea of maddened ecstasy, which included dancing, shouting, playing

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[2] see here II. Peter 1:20-21
[3] P.A. Verhoef,. "Prophecy:Theology." *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* CD-ROM. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001.)

music for hours on end, entering trances, and in some cases even stripping down and self-mutilation. As a matter of fact, in some instances some translations translate the term as "rave".

In the later books (late Divided Kingdom, Exile, and Post-exilic periods), the passive form dominates, but the strange behavior accompanying prophecy has not vanished, especially when viewing some of the things the great prophets, like Isaiah, Hosea, and Ezekiel did.

When we look at who this term "prophesy" is used for, we find that from Kings on it is primarily used for false prophets in their worship and their false predictions of the future. It is also mostly the godless men who use the term to describe what is going on. Amos is accused of prophesying by the godless high priest of Bethel, and the prophet then uses the term "prophesy" polemically in response to his opponents charge.

In Jeremiah only 10 out of 37 uses of the word are used either by God or by godly people to describe the actions or words of a prophet of God. It is not until Ezekiel that it is primarily used for the prophet of God, when God tells Ezekiel to prophesy. Interestingly Ezekiel is one of the strangest prophets in Scripture, as he uses unusual actions, word pictures and utterances to make his points. Again the idea of frenzy is not far away.

The term is used in the postexilic prophets only by Zecariah and he again uses it to describe godless predictions of false prophets which result in their death, as prophecy is unnecessary when Messiah rules from Jerusalem.

Joel uses the term only once in the famous passage about the Spirit of God being poured out upon the people. Interestingly the term "prophesy" is used in parallel with dreams and visions, something that we fundamentalist Evangelicals don't like either, which once more suggests unusual actions and words.

In general the term "prophesy", when not signifying frenzied ecstasy, applies to proclamations of the word of God, which some people might call "preaching." Many times these were unpopular or strange words that the hearers did not fully understand or *want to* understand. In Ezekiel's case it might have involved a trancelike state (see here Ezekiel 8:1). Only Jeremiah seems to not exhibit too much strange behavior during his ministry.

The most recent usage of "prophesy" is the one used by Ezra in the I. Chronicles passage (the II. Chronicles passage is almost a word-for-word copy of the I. Kings passage) mentioning the musical ministry of Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun, and their "sons" (or students as the term "sons" can designate the student of a master, who is called "father" by his pupils). The term used here is in the passive form, not the reflexive. The idea of proclamation through music is clear, but, as even in late uses of נבא involve strange behavior, we can assume that this was by no means a quiet, meditative kind of ministry. There is no reason to think that it would be different in this case. It would more probably be very loud and perhaps in places very ecstatic, perhaps even more wild than many of the most modern and loud worship concerts that happen today.

It definitely pays to take a *careful* look at the cultural background before you make statements. The prophet may address social, political and spiritual issues, but when he is doing that he is not necessarily "prophesying" in the Old Testament. He is speaking a word from God. When he is prophesying he's more often in a nearly insane frenzy of worship where his entire focus is on God and the proclamations come as a sub-set. If we take this into account, the only real application we can get from this passage is that our God does not enjoy disorder in His worship. Even the most frenzied times are given an ordered frame to operate in.

The focus of the prophecy of these men and their "sons" is not on the music they used – which we westerners would find exceedingly strange and perhaps even "immoral" – but on the words that accompanied the music. If we look at their "prophecies" we find many of them in Psalms, all of them focusing on God and what He has done.

F. II. Kings 3:15

Music has a powerful influence in individual lives, families, and churches. My prayer, aim, and purpose for this discussion is that the music in the life of the reader would cause him to experience the reality of the words in **2 Kings 3:15. "But bring me now a minstrel. And it came to pass, when the minstrel played, that the hand of the Lord came upon him."**

II. Kings is a historical book written by a prophet to show God's dealings with Israel and Judah. When we look at this passage it is in the middle of a narrative concerning the evil King Jehoram of Israel and the good King Jehoshaphat of Judah coming to Elisha to get a word from God concerning their war against Moab. Elisha is so incensed at the coming of King Jehoram that he cannot calm himself to be able to hear God's voice. The harpist's music calms him enough that he can hear God's voice and he predicts how Jehoram and Jehoshaphat will see the defeat of Moab.

When we look at this passage two things immediately come to mind. First, it is a narrative, and it is notoriously difficult to get principles out of narratives. Secondly, we're not looking at the full cultural background here. Remember, Elisha is a prophet in a time when prophets were considered to be slightly crazy. The music used here was to calm him and it may have been a mystical sort of calming effect. Thus this passage *could* be used to teach that using music to call down a word from God is an acceptable way to do it. However, this is the *only* time in Scripture that this happens. Basing a principle on one passage only is also dangerous, as strange heresies have come from those.

In summary we must note that Mr. Wotzel tends to use prooftexting to make his point, a very dangerous practice. He often does not consider the full hermeneutical background, including the cultural and historical backgrounds of each passage, and he even quotes a few of them out of context, filling them with an entirely different meaning that the context gives them. That is misuse of Scripture and it is highly dangerous, because it brings us to do things that may be un-Biblical and in some cases even *anti*-Biblical.

IV. The Question of Secular Sources
The next difficulty that I had with Mr. Woetzel's article was the fact that he almost exclusively quoted secular sources regarding the morality or immorality of music. Also, these sources were not well documented, so it was not possible to find them and form an unbiased view of their writings.

There are several thoughts here, the first of all is that consulting secular sources has in the long run almost always had an adverse effect on the Church. Let me mention only a few, such as the effect that Aristotelian and Platonic philosophies have had on the Roman Catholic church and by extension on the Protestant as well, obscuring many of the truths in Scripture behind a system that tried to explain everything. Think here of the modern movement towards theistic evolution where people are trying to synthesize the evolutionistic world view of science with the Truth that God created everything. Another example is the modern deliverance ministry that casts demons out of Christians and has its followers constantly living in fear of the great powers of Satan comes from getting too much information about the spirit world from non-Biblical sources. I could list more, such as the corporate model of running churches, but that is beyond the scope of this writing. Suffice it to say, we must be extremely careful before letting *any* secular philosophy into the church, even if it is seemingly to her benefit.

When looking at these quotes my first question was, what were the motives of the authors of these various books? Each author has an axe to grind, ideas that they want to disseminate, and many of them are strongly tainted *away* from the truth. Especially critics are ones that we need to be wary of, because they have their own personal tastes that will color what is written. And often they aren't authorities on what they're writing about. An example here is what film critics have said about the recent Lord of the Rings movies. First they say that they haven't read the book and then they complain that they can't understand the movie. They condemn lack of intelligence, etc., but then praise its silliest parts. Critics need to be taken with a barrel of salt in *every* venue, including that about music, because they're paid to be critical.

We as Christians need to hold to the Bible first and foremost and to its principles. The principles of the world will *always* be anti-Biblical, because the Bible is the antithesis of this world system and this world's realm will do everything to corrupt the message of the Truth from *both* sides.

V. Historical Gaps
When reading Mr. Woetzel's writings, he contends that, "Music-is-neutral thinking evolved in Christian circles in the late 1960's and in the early 1970's." Perhaps that certain formulation of this idea did, but the use of secular music to praise God goes back much farther than that.

Let's take, for instance, General William Booth of the Salvation Army who lived in the late 1800s. A man who staunchly defended singing only music written specifically for spiritual use, he came to the point where he not only realized the usefulness of using secular tunes to reach the unchurched, but even endorsed them with his immortal quote, "Why should the devil have all the best tunes?"[4] And so "Champagne Charlie Is My Name" became "Bless His Name He Sets Me Free," and we ended up with the old favorite "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah" from an old Confederate battle song.

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[4] "Origins of Salvation Army Music." *The Salvation Army.* The Salvation Army Website. 2003. [http://www1.salvationarmy.org/heritage.nsf/36c107e27b0ba7a98025692e0032abaa/a32f0fed65165da48025697e00514406? OpenDocument]. Accessed 08-04-2003.

But we didn't stop there. We took such melodies as "O Sole Mio" and the theme from Beethoven's 9th Symphony and what became the German national anthem ("Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit") and what became the British national anthem ("God save the King") and gave them Christian lyrics. And we call it "sacred" music. There's nothing sacred about that music! It's only the lyrics that make it sacred. If it were the melodies, then we'd have to stop singing "The Star-Spangled Banner" in church because the melody was originally from the bar song "Anacreon in Heaven," which undoubtedly was a lot more offensive than any of the tunes named above!

If we look at the modern worship music, there *are no* secular tunes among them! They are written for the express purpose of worshipping God, albeit in a mode that is uncomfortable for some Christians. If the *origin* of the music is any indication, we'd have to toss two thirds of our extant church music.

Another link in the historical gap problem is the definition of the word "music." Mr. Woetzel states "the term music itself is derived from *muse* or *musa* which means to think, to meditate or to contemplate." If we take a look at the etymology of music, we find that the Merriam-Webster dictionary states the following.

> Etymology: Middle English *musik,* from Old French *musique,* from Latin *musica,* from Greek *mousikE* any art presided over by the Muses, especially music, from feminine of *mousikos* of the Muses, from *Mousa* Muse[5]

Now, if we were to take a look at *who* the Muses were, we would find that they are "Greek goddesses who presided over the arts and sciences."[6] There wasn't really one in charge of music, per se, but it was spread around among them. Most of them dealt with poetry anyway and not so much with the ordering of sounds in a rhythmic or harmonic fashion. The one that would probably interest us most is Polyhymnia ("many songs"), who is not only in charge of the sacred hymn (or song), but also of eloquence and dance![7]

The origin of our word "music" is definitely pagan and has little to do with contemplation. We need to do our research correctly before we make any sweeping statements about the origin of the word music, and *especially* applying them to a *spiritual* facet of life.

VI. The "Music is a Language" Analogy

This is the one place where Mr. Woetzel strikes a chord with me, because in one way he is right, but he is also incomplete in his analogy. He writes that music "is also referred to as the universal language." When we look at music around the world, we find that this is inaccurate. Music is *not* a universal language. We find ourselves faced with Middle-Eastern music, which we can identify as music, but which doesn't sit well with us westerners because of the unusual combination of tones, rhythms, and instruments.

Music is identifiable as music, just as speech is identifiable as speech, but just as each people and culture have their own language, so they have their own music which speaks to their heart. And some of these use the precise rhythms and harmonies considered "immoral" by some people. If music were a universal language, then there would be no need for the study of ethnomusicology, which precisely studies the differences in music around the world, tries to understand and document it, much like linguistics does with the languages of the world.

When we look at the music is a language analogy, though, a lot of things fall in to place. However, Mr. Woetzel doesn't use full linguistic principles in building his analogy. Language is made up of certain sounds ordered in a certain way to produce a certain meaning. We call these sounds syllables, which become words, and from there sentences. The sentences follow certain structural rules, called grammar. The combination of sounds and grammar differs from language to language. Take for example the word "peach" in English. This might be a perfectly acceptable term to use for a sweet, if slightly hairy fruit that ripens in late summer. However, if you use the same word in Turkish, you would be referring to the canine origins of a person's mother thus insulting them. What determines the meaning of the words? It is the culture surrounding the words, not the sounds themselves.

Music is very much like a language in that certain sounds are ordered in a certain way to produce a certain result or meaning. If we take the analogy to its bottom-line conclusion, then the rules for certain types of music

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[5] "Music." *Merriam Webster Online*. Merriam Webster, Incorporated. 2003. [http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary]. Accessed 08-04-2003.

[6] "Muses." *Encyclopedia Mythica: Greek Mythology.* Pantheon.org. 1995. [http://www.pantheon.org/areas/mythology/ europe/greek/articles.html]. Accessed 08-04-2003.

[7] "Polyhymnia." *Encyclopedia Mythica: Greek Mythology.* Pantheon.org. 1995. [http://www.pantheon.org/areas/mythology/ europe/greek/articles.html]. Accessed 08-04-2003.

are similar to the rules for certain types of grammar. What may be acceptable in one type of music will not be in another, simply because the laws surrounding that genre make up the meaning.

Mr. Woetzel claims that "Just as language cannot be neutral, neither can music." The problem is that from a linguistic point of view, language *is* neutral. If we begin to claim that language is moral or immoral based upon what sounds and grammar it uses – which would be the logical comparison to claiming that certain types of music are moral or immoral – then we would be hard pressed to find *which* languages were moral. If we were to take the Biblical languages as an example, then we'd be in quandary as well. Hebrew is formed on a Verb-Subject-Object grammatical structure, as is Aramaic, making it the preferred model for a moral language. However, Greek is formed on a Subject-Verb-Object grammatical structure and *both* are used for Scripture! Which one is moral, which one is immoral? Shall we extend the analogy to words as well? Should we all stop using the word "peach" in America simply because it is a cuss word in Turkey? Who is to say that the Turks are "immoral" for imbuing such a negative meaning in such a positive sound in our language? What about basic grammatical rules? Does a language that is verb-based, like Hebrew or Arabic, have a moral superiority over a language that is noun-based, such as English or Latin? What about talking about prefixes and suffixes? Which is moral and which isn't? What about infixes?

Let's apply the concept of only certain moral languages to Bible translations. If only the Biblical languages were to be considered moral, then we'd have to burn all our English Bibles and Wycliffe would have to get into the business of teaching Hebrew and Greek rather than translating the Scriptures into the heart-language of the people they are trying to reach.

If we come down to the bottom line, a thinking that language in and of itself is moral will result in a linguistic superiority similar to that of the Muslims in claiming that Arabic is God's only language and hence we must pray to Him in that language.

But what *about* the heart-language of people? Have you ever seen a foreigner in America light up when they hear their native tongue? There is just something about speaking your own language that touches you deeply. What about when you visit a country where few people speak English? How would you feel if you suddenly heard someone speaking your language? Clearly there are languages that God has placed on our hearts. Each language has its own way of expression that cannot be fully translated into another which suggests that God is the creator of *all* languages.

If we take a language is moral attitude we end up espousing a cultural superiority similar to that of Great Britain in the colonial age. We will look down on the people, because of their poor, immoral languages and believe that God has given us a mandate to force-feed them our language, our cultural values, and our religion, because we are moral and they aren't. This attitude has harmed missions more than anyone can think.

When it comes down to it, viewing language as moral in and of itself will actually *kill* missions, because it will make us hesitant to learn another language, due to the fact that we consider it immoral to speak it. We will never be able to communicate the depth of God's love to the people of that culture, because we cannot reach them in their heart-language and we will alienate them both from ourselves and from the Truth of the Gospel.

The results of such a view are staggering and it brings us to the question what makes language moral or immoral. The answer is simple: it is the person speaking the language. The words he or she chooses, the meanings that he or she places within those words affect the morality or immorality of the language. It also depends on the person listening to the language. If a Turk who cannot speak English has an American say to him in English, "Would you like a peach?" he will naturally be offended, even though neither the meaning, nor the words of the American were in the least immoral. The morality is determined first in the speaker and secondly in the listener. Language thus *becomes* moral or immoral, depending on the sender, the receiver and the circumstances of the communication.

If we apply this to the language of music, then we can run aground on the same errors. As every person has a heart-language, so each person has a heart-music. This is probably formed by exposure to music as a child, perhaps by changing tastes in the teenage years, but by the time a person reaches adulthood, they have certain musical styles that speak deeply to them. Music that strikes you deeply might leave me completely cold and vice versa.

Taking the music-is-language analogy to its logical conclusion, we would have to say that if music is a language, then the morality of the music lies not within the sounds strung together, the rhythm used, or even the lyrics set to it, but within the song-writer, the musician, and the listener. Thus the music *becomes* moral depending upon the above variables.

VII. A Communication Model

I would like to illustrate this idea using a graphic based on one created by David Hesselgrave for his book *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*[8] that describes how communication works.
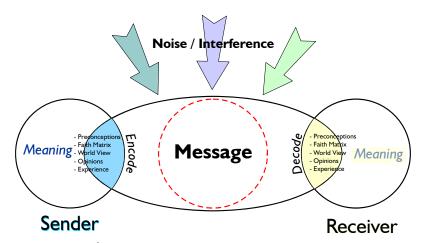

Figure 1 – The Communication Model[9].

In this communication model you have the Sender who wants to pass a certain meaning on to the Receiver. The Sender encodes this meaning into a message using his personal preconceptions, world view, opinions, experience and faith matrix[10]. This message is then passed on to the Receiver, who decodes the message using *her* personal preconceptions, world view, opinions, experience and faith matrix.

The result will be a meaning that is shaded by the understanding of the Receiver. Added to this is the noise or interference worked by the culture, the milieu, and body language of each person. Sometimes the message can be totally lost to the interference or in the decoding process. The morality of the message is then determined first by the Sender, then by the Receiver and, depending on the filter of each, that can be very different for each person.

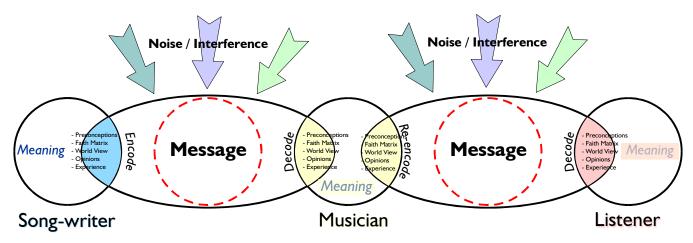If we take this graphic and apply it to music it might look as follows:

Figure 2 – The Communication Model Applied to Music

The process becomes much more complicated here, because we often have another link involved, namely the Musician. We'll assume for a moment that no lyrics are involved. The Song-writer writes the song using a certain

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[8] David Hesselgrave. *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally.* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press, 1980).

[9] Based upon David Hesselgrave's graphic on p. 28 of *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Press, 1980)

[10] The "faith matrix" is the central set of prepositional mores that a person espouses and that drive their actions, their words, and their religion.

melody, harmony, and rhythm. The Musician then takes this piece of music and interprets it, shading the meaning to her liking and plays the piece, which the Listener hears, who then filters the meaning and adds his own spin to the meaning. Then the meaning is affected in each transfer by the noise around the message transmission.

We must remember that the meaning of music is most often emotional. If a song resonates deeply with someone, it will cause an emotional response, whether positive or negative. If it doesn't they'll brush it off.

The morality of the music is then determined once more in the Song-writer, the Musician, or the Listener. And so the music *becomes* moral. When we add the lyrics to the song, we add a fourth dimension, because they, too, convey meaning and the song not only carries emotional meaning, but an intellectual one as well.

Let's take for example, a worship song that is written by a God-fearing musician using a style that would be considered "moral" by everyone. A well-meaning Christian singer takes the song and sings it in front of an audience using a style that he thinks to be worshipful of God. However, one of the listeners finds that the style that the singer is using reminds them very much of breathy, sensual songs they hear on the radio and so are turned off from the worship aspect of the music. Is that music still moral or has it become immoral to the listener?

As you can see, if we follow this system of thought, things get more complicated and more responsibility is placed upon each link of the chain. The danger of the music-is-moral view, is that it *takes away responsibility* from each of the links in the chain, by simply naming certain styles as good and certain styles as bad.

VIII. Considering the Human Element

With this loss of responsibility comes also a tacit denial of the depravity of each of the links in the chain of communication. Now, most of the people who espouse this idea will immediately protest that their view precisely factors that in, but it is really the opposite. If you state that certain music styles are immoral in and of themselves, you begin to think for people and you take away the responsibility of the musician playing the music, because the music is immoral, not necessarily the musician making it. I will grant that we won't go that far in our logic, but we rarely do follow all our thoughts to their logical conclusions.

It is in the end effect the human that determines the morality or immorality of the music, not the music itself, because, like a language, the music *becomes* moral or immoral depending on the use it is put to. Thus a melody that was once used to extol the virtues of drinking alcohol can become a worship song. Thus a music style used by Satan to promote rebellion can be snatched back and used to promote righteousness.

If we take our individual responsibility concerning music seriously, we'll find that music that is perfectly moral for the song-writer could be considered immoral for the listener if it has an adverse effect on the listener mentally, physically, or emotionally.

What also affects the music is the milieu in which it is performed. Thus jazz music played in certain skuzzy bars would often be considered more sensual and profane than music with a similar rhythm and harmony played in a concert hall, or even in a church service. If we look at the milieu in which most modern, pop-style worship music is performed in, we find that the people there are mostly moral, upstanding people, who desire to worship God and are there not merely for an emotional high, but as an expression of their deep faith in God. Is that music then immoral?

As mentioned above, claiming certain music is moral and certain is immoral takes the responsibility away from each link in the chain and oversimplifies the process of making music. It also denies the idea of a heart-language of each human in music and is highly culturally insensitive (not to our post-Christian culture, but to cultures around the world).

Are we remembering that each link in the chain, including ourselves, is utterly depraved, utterly selfish, and extremely opinionated to the point that we think that we are the only ones who are right? Are we remembering that we are more often *wrong* than right? Each of us must judge for ourselves using the Bible as our guide.

IX. Conclusion

In the end the responsibility regarding the morality or immorality of music will lie with each of the three links in the communication chain, and thus with us as we take our place in it. The idea that music is moral is basically a human idea that doesn't really find support in Scripture and so must be viewed as what it is – an opinion, something that can be presented but that must not be forced upon another human.

As music is a language, it must be treated the same way a language is and we must realize, that just as language becomes moral or immoral based on the speaker and the listener, so music becomes moral, dependant upon the song-writer, the musician, and the listener's conceptions and mental, emotional, and physical responses.

In the end it is each person's responsibility to decide how the look at the issue of music being moral or immoral. What I then request is that you *act* upon that conviction in your own personal life and not bicker with one another about it, because all that causes is division within the Body. None of us are completely right. We're human.

In closing I'd like to leave you with five guidelines that have helped me to determine the morality or immorality of music.

1. **What are the lyrics?** – These often determine whether or not I'll listen to a song.
2. **What does the music make you want to do?** – If it wants to make you do something negative, it's probably not good to listen to, but if it drives you towards the positive, embrace it.
3. **What is the life of the musician like?** – This will strongly determine the two mentioned above. A bad life will often spawn negative lyrics and destructive music.
4. **Where is this music played?**
5. **What happens there?** – The milieu will strongly affect the tenor of the music, but sometimes when it is taken out of the milieu it will lose that negative sound.

May God give us all wisdom in dealing with this issue and may we in the end live lives that are pleasing to Him, regardless of what kind of music we like.

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