

Can God Use Rock Music?

by Keith Green

The potential of reaching people for Jesus through the media, including rock music, is monumental, but it depends on the motives and attitudes of those using it.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 16:7, Proverbs 4:23, Matthew 15:18, Romans 14:16, 1 Corinthians 8:9, 1 Corinthians 9:22, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Galatians 5:13, Colossians 3:17, 1 Thessalonians 5:21

Topics: "Christian Music", "Worship Standards"

Description

Keith Green addresses the controversial topic of using rock music in Christian ministry, sharing his personal struggles and insights on the matter. He discusses the differing opinions within the Christian community regarding the use of rock music for evangelism and worship, emphasizing the importance of examining one's motives and heart condition. Green highlights the need for Christians to surpass worldly standards and focus on glorifying God with pure intentions, rather than seeking self-exaltation. He challenges the notion of labeling music as inherently 'evil,' stressing that it is the heart behind the music that determines its impact.

Transcript

Introduction

This is a hard article for me to write, mainly because I'm afraid people will think that my opinions would have to be prejudiced by the fact that I am involved in (what has come to be known as) "contemporary Christian music." As you might guess, the title of this article is no new question to me. Since I myself have been somewhat "guilty" of using the medium of rock, I have heard just about every opinion about it - and have received no limit of warning, exhortation, and outright rebuke from many a well-meaning soul. Since I take my negative mail very seriously - always reading each negative and corrective letter as a possible word or warning from God - I have had to listen closely to each argument - praying and thinking the whole thing through with eternal values in mind.

Although I have always wanted to address this subject publicly, I have only just answered the questions privately, seeking to avoid controversy. But now I believe the time has come for me to openly tackle this question, mainly because the Lord has been teaching me so much lately about motives and how they are the bottom line in just about everything!

Please realize that these are just my opinions, I am certainly no authority on scriptural truth - or music (except maybe my own). These are just some of the answers I have come up with after many years of studying this question with fear and trembling before the Lord. But like everything else, you should seek the Lord on your own for answers to difficult questions. I only hope to give you some things to think about.

The Prevailing Opinions

There seem to be two different and widely opposite schools of thought concerning whether or not God can use something as questionable as rock and roll as a tool for evangelism, or even (forgive me!) in worship.

One line of reasoning believes that rock and roll, whether secular or "so-called gospel," should not ever be listened to, or used as a medium by Christians. The reason given is simply that it is "of the devil." There are many statistics and "proofs" used by adherents to this position to prove that rock music itself is the direct cause of everything from drug abuse to teen-age pregnancy. And most people who hold this view are sincerely convinced that anyone who indulges in the use of rock music in any form cannot truly be used or blessed by God.

The other school of thought is the one that believes that God can redeem and use anything - and just because rock music is so prevalent in the world doesn't mean that God's people can't use the same medium to reach those still lost in that world. After all (the people who defend this position say), "Christians are supposed to be "in the world, and not of it!"¹ and didn't Paul say that he "became all things to all men that he might save some?"²

The View From Here

Of course, I have always leaned toward the second school of thought, but I think that sometimes this group has taken things a little too far, doing a lot in the name of "freedom" that I believe is grievous to the Lord, because it tends to stumble a lot of little ones. We should not forget that Paul also said, "Do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh."³

It is because of these abuses of freedom that I have chosen to remain silent on this issue. I have not taken up my pen to defend the "Christian rockers" because frankly, I have been just as much offended by most of what I've heard and seen as any sweet ole Christian grandma who accidentally stumbles into a blaring-loud gospel concert.

It isn't the beat that offends me, nor the volume - It's the spirit. It's the "Look at me!" attitude I have seen in concert after concert, and the "Can't you see we're as good as the world?" syndrome I have heard on record after record. Jesus doesn't want us to be as good as the world, He wants us to be better! And that doesn't mean excelling them in sound, style, or talent - it means surpassing them in value - in our motives for being up there on stage, in our reasons for singing our songs, and especially in who we're singing for! If there's anything wrong or worldly at all about so-called "Christian rock," it's the self-exalting spirit and attitude that comes across so loud and clear in many of the records and concerts today.

(Please don't get me wrong. I do not want to appear self-righteous, or to be saying - "All those musicians and artists should have such exemplary attitudes and motives as I do!" Believe me, I have struggled over these same things myself for many years, and these are things that the Lord has taught me for my own life and public ministry.)

But What About All Those "Jungle-Rhythm" Stories?

You've probably heard one of those stories about the missionary family that was stationed near a tribe of cannibalistic, voodoo warriors? Well, as the story goes, the missionary had a couple of teen-agers who just loved to listen to "Christian rock." And one day, as they were playing one of their albums up real loud, a witch doctor came running out of the jungle and said, "Why are you trying to call up devils with that music? Don't you realize that those are the same rhythms we use to contact demons in our rituals?" I've heard this story many times, and in many different forms, but it always seems to prove that, "There you have it! Rock and roll is a product of hell - even if it is called "gospel rock!"

Now, I've always joked to myself that this story must have been started by some craggy old missionary who'd been out on the field for 20 years - and when he arrived back in the states, he just about died when he heard the latest gospel music. (Either that, or the witch doctor who came out of the jungle was a recent graduate from a conservative seminary!)

But seriously, I highly doubt that this story is true - and even if it is, it doesn't mean that all "music with a beat" will make your family need an exorcist. What we need to look into now is this question: Is there such a thing as "evil music"? To that question, I would have to answer a definite, "Yes!" but my reasons for calling some music "evil" may surprise you.

What Is Evil Music?

"I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything is unclean, to him it is unclean."⁴

I do not believe that any kind of music is "evil" in itself. I mean, that there are no such things as rhythms or chord structures or melody lines that were born in hell. The idea that the devil has invented certain styles of music so that he could capture the innocent young souls of today's youth is not only without foundation, but is the same kind of ridiculous tale that was told to young people by the church as recently as a generation ago - that "masturbation could cause blindness." Why try to scare the poor little guys into doing what's right? Why not deal with the real problem - selfishness!

The suggestion that there is such a thing as intrinsically⁵ "good music or evil music" seems preposterous to me. I have been involved with almost every aspect of music my whole life, and I have witnessed the various effects it has had on me and other people - and I have to say that I have never once seen a case where music was the direct cause of sin or wickedness in a person's life.

On the other hand, I have seen music be used as a tool for selfishness and egotism in people's lives (as well as my own). I have also seen it be used to create sensual moods by people with lust and manipulation on their minds. I have seen rock groups that were admittedly worshippers of Satan, and were open practioners of black witchcraft, who employed music as a tool to mesmerize their audiences. Yes, I must admit that it would appear to the casual observer that anyone involved with rock music could at least be charged with "guilt by association."

But all the examples I mentioned above have to do with the motives of the heart, not the music itself! That is why I believe that music, in itself, is a neutral force. Let me give you a better example.

Take a knife for instance. With it, you can cut bread, carve a roast, loose someone who's been bound by ropes, or you can do harm and even kill somebody. In other words, you can be creative and productive, or you can be destructive and murderous. The knife itself, when put in an atmosphere of hoodlums, becomes

a weapon. But put it in a kitchen, and it becomes a tool that's useful, even necessary, for the preparation of nourishment for your family.

As another example, let's look at "David's dancing." The Bible says that King David was "dancing before the Lord with all his might!"⁶ But today, people dance in bars and discos, and then afterwards, many indulge in alcohol, drugs, and illicit sex. Does that mean that dancing produces a desire for drugs, sex, and alcohol? You and I both know that yes, movement of the body can excite someone. But someone has to have wicked desires to start with to have any outer stimulation increase those desires. I have seen Christians "dancing in the Spirit." I have also seen Christians dancing in the flesh. It wasn't the dancing that was evil, or the music they danced to, but the attitude and motive of their heart.

Should Mexicans Learn English?

Now, we don't make the people of Mexico learn English before we preach the Gospel to them, do we? The only reason that I have ever used contemporary music at all in my ministry is because I believe it is the "language" of the young people. After I have received piles of letters saying things like, "I never would have listened to what you had to say, unless I had first been attracted to the music!" - I am convinced that the only way to reach those who love music is in their own language!

Have you ever heard the stories of how John and Charles Wesley took many of the popular "drinking songs" of their day and put Christian lyrics to them? And it didn't matter how much success they had in reaching sinners using these tunes - most of the people in the church absolutely deplored their methods!

And then the Salvation Army came along, and had the nerve to put hymns to marching music - and then proceeded to play and sing these "lewd songs" (as the traditional church of their day called them) out in the streets on Sundays! They even followed in the Wesley brothers' footsteps, taking tunes from the drunk-filled taverns, and "converting" them into worshipful choruses, or ringing appeals for people to surrender their lives to Christ! And never have there been so many "common people" converted in England than through the unorthodox efforts of those early "Salvation Soldiers."

Oh, how harmless those melodies would sound now to our grandparents' ears. But their grandparents thought that the devil himself was on the loose with music-demons!

There are those today who still believe that we should use only nice, "wholesome" music to reach young people. Otherwise, (they say) we are only appealing to their sinful rebellion, and we will later find that any conversions resulting from the use of rock music were not really authentic after all. One well-known evangelist recently went so far as to say that, "No one has ever gotten a blessing from contemporary Christian music!"

This kind of reasoning is as narrow as that of the early missionaries to China. They thought that the best way to "Christianize" the people would be to teach them their European standards of dress and living, and thus "civilize" the heathen - as well as convert them. But a young and zealous missionary by the name of Hudson Taylor changed all that - he knew that the only way to reach people was with the truth of the Gospel. And he knew that it was wrong to add any cultural or "outward" conformity to the precepts of truth he so earnestly believed. And so he discarded his European clothing, and began to identify with the people he was trying to reach by dressing like them and adopting their customs. Although he was initially ridiculed and shunned by his fellow missionaries, his ultimate success proved that God was indeed leading him.⁷

Placing People Under the "Law"

It seems that Paul had these same "cultural" problems in the early Church, with those Jewish believers who wanted new converts to first embrace the Jewish law and customs before they could be considered Christians.⁸ I believe that trying to change people's musical tastes, before we allow them to hear the truth, is just as wrong as it was for the Jews to try to push circumcision on the Gentiles as a necessary prerequisite for eternal life. The Bible is clear that we should put no stumbling blocks in the way of people receiving God's precious gift of salvation!

Conclusion: It's All In the Motives!

I am convinced that the potential of reaching people for Jesus through the media - whether it be records, radio, movies, or television - is monumental, simply because these are the things that have, and continue to hold, people's attention. I truly believe that Christians who are completely sold out to God, using these tools, can bring people to their knees in repentance and lead them into the waiting arms of the Savior. But if their lives are not sold out - if their motives are mixed, and their hearts divided - then I only see ridicule and shame brought to the Gospel. And since this is the case so much of the time, it makes it hard and shines a bad light - even on those whose hearts are clean, and whose motives are pure.

I also want to say in closing that yes, I do believe that the Holy Spirit is grieved by a lot of what is being passed today as "music ministry" and "gospel music" - not so much by the beat or content, but by the lack of commitment and anointing. But just because people with darkened hearts still use rock music as a medium for rebellion and self-exaltation, doesn't mean that the same style of music can't be used by people submitted to God to capture the attention of sinners; and lead them away from self - and to the throne of Christ!

After all, don't many cults use the same Bible that we cherish as God's Holy Word, and yet distort and twist the meaning "to their own destruction"?⁹ And didn't the devil himself quote Scripture to Jesus? As you can see, a wicked heart can pervert even the most holy and beautiful of things. And in the same way, God can take even the filthiest of vessels and use it for His glory.¹⁰ (Just look at you and me!) Believe me, if your heart is right, then your music will be right too. But if your heart is full of selfishness and pride, then even if you sing the sweetest hymn, your song will work death and not life. For...

"A good man, out of the good treasure of his heart, brings forth what is good, and an evil man, out of the evil treasure, brings forth what is evil, for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart."¹¹

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