

# Theology of Music

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[ 0 : 00 ]     So, I have loved music for as long as I can remember. But more than that, I've always been fascinated by music.

Music is this extraordinary blend of science and art, structure and creativity, logic and emotion.

It's governed by mathematical principles, yet it's this very expressive form of art. On the scientific side, music is rooted in physics and mathematics.

Every note we hear is simply a vibration moving through the air at a very specific frequency. The entire musical scale is built on mathematical ratios, octaves, harmonics, chord structures that follow patterns and can all be measured and predicted.

I mean, even our brains process music in ways that neuroscientists can map, showing how different frequencies stimulate various parts of the mind.

[ 1 : 10 ]     Yet, despite all of this structure, music is also pure art in the way that it expresses joy and sorrow and longing and triumph in ways that sometimes words can't even accomplish.

Some melodies evoke nostalgia. A shift from a major key to a minor key can change the entire mood.

In fact, two pieces of music, strangely enough, can have the exact same mathematical structure, yet one moves us very deeply and the other feels lifeless to us.

So there's a mystery to it all, and it truly fascinates me. But even if you're not particularly interested in music in the same way, just think about how much of our daily lives include music.

Some of us have alarms that play music when we wake up in the morning. We might listen in the car on our way to work. When we walk into a store, we usually hear music.

[ 2 : 17 ]     When we turn on the TV, we watch a movie, there's usually music in the background that sets the emotional tone. It's all around us, right? Now I didn't intend to spend quite this much time talking about various forms of entertainment, but I did want to come back to this subject of music.

It's not something we probably think too deeply about, not too often anyway, but music is everywhere, and it's worth considering what the Bible has to say about it.

Just think about how powerful music can be. It has the ability to shape your mood. For me, anyway, music can transport me to another time and place more effectively than almost any thing else, a sight, a smell, a taste.

So what is the biblical worldview of music? How are we as Christians to think about music? Well, let's start at the beginning, because music is woven into creation itself.

So even before human beings invented instruments and incorporated music into our culture, if you will, the universe was already filled with rhythms and harmonies and vibrations.

[ 3 : 40 ] You know what I'm talking about? The wind whistles through the trees, the waves crash in this rhythmic pulse against the shore, the birds sing intricate melodies with each species having its own song.

The crickets, the cicadas, they chirp in these synchronized patterns. Even the human heartbeat beats at a steady rhythm.

So we know that sound exists because of vibrations, and those vibrations follow very specific patterns called harmonics.

And these patterns, they're not random. They're very orderly, very mathematical. And they're not something that human beings invented, right?

We discovered them. We utilized them. But God himself built these vibrations into his creation. It makes me think of Psalm 19.

[ 4 : 45 ] The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. But not only can we see his handiwork, but we can hear his handiwork.

Scientists have even discovered that stars supposedly emit sound waves. I don't know how they know this. It goes above my head, but they call this the music of the cosmos, which is interesting because long before anyone figured this out, the Lord told Job in Job 38.7, the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.

Then, of course, God gave us vocal cords that allow us to sing. Our brains are uniquely wired to recognize and remember melodies.

We instinctively tap our foot or nod our heads when we hear a beat. Music is very much a part of God's good design.

It existed before the first instrument. And according to the book of Revelation and other parts of the Bible, it will exist for all eternity. Music has always been there, and it will always be here.

[ 6 : 07 ] With that, the Bible does indicate when human beings figured out how to harness music, if you will. In Genesis chapter 4, we read about the descendants of Cain.

So there was Adam and Eve, followed by Cain, followed by Enoch, until we come down to Jubal. And here's what verse 21 says about Jubal.

He was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe. Now, that could mean a number of things. He might have invented those musical instruments.

He might have raised a family of musicians. It could be both. It's hard to say exactly. Historically, most commentators have believed that he created these instruments.

But if nothing else, it's probably safe to say this detail in Genesis indicates that this was a turning point in musical history.

[ 7 : 08 ] In other words, this seems to have been the moment music was brought into our culture. And of course, it has remained ever since. Now, you'll notice in Genesis 4, and even as you move through the Bible, that music is really presented as morally neutral in and of itself.

In other words, it's a perfectly good thing until maybe it's not. It's a good thing. It's a gift from God until man finds a way to use it for evil.

It's like most anything else. Fire, for instance. You know, fire can be used to warm a home or burn it down. It's simply a question of how we use it.

Now, it won't surprise you to know that the most important use of music in the Bible is for the purpose of worshiping God.

In the Old Testament, music was an essential part of worship in the tabernacle and later the temple. King David, who himself was a very talented songwriter and musician, organized thousands of Levite musicians to play in the tabernacle.

- [ 8 : 25 ]     1 Chronicles chapter 15 says, In chapter 23 of the same book, David tells the Levites, 4,000 shall offer praises to the Lord with the instruments that I have made for praise.
- In chapter 25, he sets apart nearly 300, I think 288 trained singers to sing praises to God.
- In 2 Chronicles 5, we're told about when, under Solomon, the Ark of the Covenant was first brought into the newly built temple.
- And it says, All the Levitical singers and their sons and kinsmen arrayed in fine linen with cymbals, harps, and lyres, stood east of the altar with 120 priests who were trumpeters.
- And it was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison, in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. And when the song was raised with the trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever, the house, the house of the Lord was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God.
- [ 10 : 05 ]     And again, David himself was a songwriter. He wrote the majority of the psalms in our Bible, which have been sung by both Jews and Christians ever since.
- The final psalm of the book, Psalm 150, says, Praise the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary. Praise him in his mighty heavens.
- Praise him for his mighty deeds. Praise him according to his excellent greatness. Praise him with trumpet sound. Praise him with lute and harp.
- Praise him with tambourine and dance. Praise him with strings and pipe. Praise him with sounding cymbals. Praise him with loud crashing cymbals.
- Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord. Then as we come to the New Testament, we're told, Ephesians 5, 19, address one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart.
- [ 11 : 16 ]     Colossians 3, 16, Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with thanksgiving or thankfulness in your hearts to God.
- So, it's apparent in Scripture that music's most important purpose is for worshiping and praising God. But, I think there is a necessary distinction to make here.
- Music can and should be used to glorify God. But music itself cannot accomplish this. And here's what I mean.
- In Amos chapter 5, verse 23, What was the problem?
- Had they changed the words to their songs? Were they playing instruments somehow in an ungodly way? Why did God reject their music? Well, as Jesus would later quote, These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.
- [ 12 : 39 ]     If the heart of the musician or the heart of the singer isn't sincere, then the music can't possibly honor God in worship.
- It's not worship. As he says, it's just empty noise. It may be beautiful music to the ears. The words could be theologically rich, of course, but apart from a sincere heart, it does not glorify God.
- Now, the Bible also hints at the fact that music is not limited to worship. We see it used throughout Scripture to celebrate, to mourn, and even to be used or sung during ordinary mundane moments.
- So, let me give you some examples of that. In Exodus 15, after Moses and the Israelites escape from the Egyptians, Miriam leads the women with tambourines and dancing.
- Now, there was certainly an element of praising God in that, but it was also a very spontaneous expression of pure joy. It was pure celebration.

[ 13 : 53 ] We see the women of Israel do the same thing in 1 Samuel 18, after David kills Goliath. The prodigal son's father in Luke 15, what does he do when his son returns home?

He throws a party to celebrate. And culturally speaking, music was certainly a big part of that. So, music is used in the Bible as an expression of joy, but it's also used to express sorrow and grief.

The Psalms are full of painful lament. Psalm 13, How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? Psalm 22, My God, my God, Why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me from the words of my groaning? The book of Lamentations is essentially one long funeral song for Jerusalem.

And even Jesus alluded to the use of music in funerals when he said, We sang a dirge, and you did not mourn. That's Matthew 11, 17.

[ 15 : 05 ] And notice how that music was meant to elicit an emotional response. A sad song leads to, or at least resonates with, sad feelings.

We know this from experience. And that speaks to what I was saying before about music being incredibly powerful. It's almost supernatural in the way that it resonates with emotions.

It can even stir emotions that you weren't feeling before you heard the song. But more to the point, even the Bible shows us how music conveys a range of emotions.

And the Bible also shows us how music is incorporated into our everyday activities. And I'll give you some examples of that. So as God is pronouncing judgment on Israel in Isaiah 16, he says in verse 10, joy and gladness are taken away from the fruitful field, and in the vineyards no songs are sung, no cheers are raised, no treader treads out wine in the presses.

I have put an end to the shouting. So God was bringing an end to their singing, but implied in that is the people were singing while they were working in the vineyards.

[ 16 : 30 ] We also have the songs of ascent from Psalm 120 to something like Psalm 134, which were songs that people sang as they were traveling toward Jerusalem.

Yes, there's praise of God in those songs, but they were not in a formal worship setting, but they were singing. In the New Testament, Jesus and his disciples, they sang after they shared the Passover meal together.

Paul and Silas sang while they were in prison. We have a note from Pliny the Younger writing in the early part of the second century who indicates singing was a constant part of the Christian life.

He says Christians were singing wherever they went. It wasn't just a Sunday morning thing. Now, looking back through history, we get a good sense of how music evolved, particularly among God's people.

In the Old Testament, music in the temple was pretty extravagant. I mean, again, thousands of people sang and played instruments, and it was all very organized.

[ 17 : 46 ] But then the Jews, as we know, went into exile, and synagogue worship became a standard practice. And music in the synagogues was almost entirely vocal.

The people would sing or do some sort of what might sound more to us like chanting anymore, and they would generally sing or chant the psalms or other scripture.

And I haven't found much evidence that they used musical instruments, at least not heavily. I don't think it was feasible in light of their circumstances. And it's that style of worship that carried over into the New Testament church.

And they seem to have sang the psalms of the Old Testament, but we also have evidence of the early church writing new hymns. So I actually brought an example with me.

[ 18 : 58 ] Back in the late 19th century, a collection of ancient Christian manuscripts was found in Egypt. And among them was a song from at least the 3rd century.

And it's the oldest known piece of Christian music with both lyrics and musical notations.

Translated, the words say, let the world be silent, let the luminous stars not shine, let the rushing waters be still.

[illegible]

It was sung in unison, without harmony. It was usually very slow and flowing and meditative, and this seems to have been very intentional on their part.

As for musical instruments, they were used very lightly until probably the tenth century or somewhere in that ballpark, and that's when the organ was introduced.

And the organ added power and grandeur in these large cathedrals. But these choirs and organs also had unintended consequences.

Eventually, that part of worship became a performance in which most of the congregation stopped participating over time.

[ 23 : 40 ] They didn't sing. They just sat back and they listened. And keep in mind that as this part of church history progressed, eventually all the songs were sung in Latin.

And fewer and fewer and fewer people knew Latin. Well, all that changed with the Protestant Reformation. You may know this, but Martin Luther was a huge advocate for music.

He once said, Next to the word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world. So, in addition to translating the Bible into German, he also translated Christian hymns into the common language of his day.

He also wrote new hymns, such as, A Mighty Fortress is Our God, which we still sing today. Now, not everyone knows this, but not all of the reformers agreed about music in the church.

Some of them loved the power of choirs and organs, always, as long as the entire congregation could join in and sing along.

[ 24 : 53 ] But, John Calvin, for instance, he believed worship should be much simpler, almost wholly focused on God's word.

So, he actually banished musical instruments and restricted singing to only the psalms of the Old Testament. Of course, this is the kind of disagreement that still persists to our modern day.

In the 18th century, we saw an explosion of hymn writing with people such as Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley.

They wrote songs that were both theologically rich and very musically accessible to the people, easy to sing. Think, When I Survey the Wondrous Cross, or Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing.

Then, as we move into the 19th and 20th century, the revival movement, particularly in America, brought a new style of songs that we don't think of as new, but at the time they were new, and among some very traditionalists, kind of controversial.

[ 26 : 08 ] These were simpler songs. They were meant to evoke more emotion. Think, Blessed Assurance, or I Love to Tell the Story. And we could go on, but I just want you to see that Christian music, even in the worship setting, has continually evolved.

It changed from one generation to the next. It changes from one culture to the next. It changes even from one congregation to the next. And as I think about what the church should insist on when it comes to music and worship, well, I came up with just four basic principles that at least give us a starting point for evaluating worship music.

And the first is, our songs should be doctrinally sound. They should be theologically and biblically accurate.

Second, they should be singable. Christians have written some powerful, beautiful songs over the years, not all of them can be easily sung by a congregation.

In worship, songs need to be singable. That's kind of the point. Third, worship should be about exalting God, not ourselves.

[ 27 : 34 ] And our songs should reflect that. And fourth, the church should always be careful to avoid creating some sort of concert atmosphere where music is played and sung, but most of the church just sits and listens.

If we're not singing together, we have really missed the point. Now, you'll notice I didn't say anything about traditional hymns versus modern music. Well, it seems to me the church has a long history of embracing a healthy balance of both tradition and innovation as long as that innovation stays within biblical boundaries.

But what I really want to focus on for the remainder of our time is music in general. And the first question that is often asked is, should Christians listen to secular music?

But I think that's the wrong question. I believe in what theologians often call common grace.

This is the idea that God gives good gifts to more people than just Christians, right? So, for example, God may gift an unbeliever with the ability to paint beautiful pictures.

[ 28 : 58 ] Now, if I see a painting of a, let's say, a breathtaking sunset, should I not enjoy it because an unbeliever painted it?

No, and I believe the same principle applies to music. There are many beautiful songs written and performed by those who don't believe in Christ. Yet some of those songs are not only beautiful, but many of them can actually reflect truth and goodness.

So instead of asking, is this a Christian song or a secular song, it might be helpful at times to ask, is this wise to listen to?

Is this edifying? Does this point me to Christ or pull me away from Christ? Now, we have a tendency to focus on words and maybe music styles when we evaluate songs, and that makes perfect sense, of course.

But sometimes we need to pull back and ask what a song does to us emotionally, what it does to us spiritually. And this is something Christians have wrestled with for a long time.

[ 30 : 15 ] Augustine, back in the fourth century, wrote his Confessions, right? And in it, he admitted that when he heard beautiful church music, he would get caught up in the sound so much that he forgot the words.

He wasn't even paying attention to the words. He describes this tension between enjoying the beauty of music and truly, truly worshiping God. And he admits that music can stir the emotions in a very powerful way, which can be good if it helps focus the heart on God or good things, but also dangerous if it points us away from God and good things.

And this is why the Bible offers warnings such as Proverbs 4.23. Keep your heart. Guard your heart with all vigilance.

You see, music can lift us up. It can calm us down. It can even lead us into sin. And that's why we need to be very discerning, not just about the lyrics, but about the way a song affects us, affects our attitudes, affects our desires.

Or our spiritual focus. For example, maybe a song fills us with lust or anger or self-centeredness, even if the lyrics aren't blatantly evil.

[ 31 : 46 ] On the other hand, maybe a song inspires gratitude or hope or reflection on truth, even if it's not a worship song. So rather than always passively listening to music, maybe we evaluate the music we're listening to.

We ask ourselves, is this helping or is this hurting my walk with Christ? Of course, the Bible doesn't give us a list of approved songs or genres, but it does give us principles to guide our listening habits.

And among them is one that I apply to entertainment in general. It's found in 1 Corinthians 10.23. This is where Paul says, All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful.

All things are lawful, but not all things build up. In other words, just because something isn't explicitly sinful doesn't mean it's good for us.

We should listen to music with discernment. Asking ourselves, is this helpful? Is this good for me? I mean, to some degree or another, music, the music we listen to is going to shape us.

[ 32 : 58 ] It's going to have an influence on us. So listen carefully and identify those potential red flags in the music we're listening to. For example, does this song glorify sin?

Materialism, anger, pride, whatever. Does it stir up thoughts and emotions that are contrary to holiness? Does it contradict the truth of Scripture, casually planting maybe seeds of doubt or lies into our hearts through our ears?

When I was in high school, I became a pretty big fan of rock music from the 70s. Perhaps unsurprisingly, my pastor father was concerned about this.

And he gave me a cassette tape to listen to. And this was a sermon preached by someone years before. And the whole sermon was about the dangers of rock and roll music.

And to tell you the truth, at the time, I was pretty intrigued. I wanted to hear it. But then I listened. And first, the preacher, he spoke about the immoral origins of the name rock and roll.

[ 34 : 14 ] Now, I won't tell you what he said. I don't even know whether it was accurate. But then he spent the next 30 minutes or so talking about the hidden messages that the devil has been planting into rock music.

Have you ever heard of backmasking? Okay. If you're young enough, probably never. Backmasking is where hidden messages are put into songs.

But the only way to hear them is by playing the song backward. Well, according to this preacher, rock music contains a lot of this. And he provided example after example after example.

And his point was that the devil is actively and heavily involved in rock music. Now, as a teenage fan of rock music, I thought his sermon was absurd.

Even then, I thought, who is playing the song backward? I didn't have a record player. I couldn't play the song backward.

[ 35 : 19 ] Plus, and this was my thought as a teenager, I'm listening to bands with names like Black Sabbath and songs like Sympathy for the Devil.

I don't have to play a song backwards to know the devil's influence over this music. It's not all that subtle. But I suspect, or hope anyway, most of us aren't listening to Black Sabbath.

Most of us are trying to navigate what we call the, we might call the gray areas of music. But what about the music that's not blatantly evil, but not overtly Christian either?

Well, let's consider at least a few ways we can evaluate music to determine whether that music belongs on our playlists. First, and this is the most obvious, what do the lyrics say?

Do the words promote immorality or violence or rebellion or any kind of sinful behavior? Does the song glorify things that God condemns?

[ 36 : 33 ] Does it take God's name in vain? Does it mock biblical truth? We might ask ourselves this, if you heard someone speak the lyrics in conversation and rather than hearing them sung on the radio, would you still be comfortable with them?

Second, what is the overall message or the worldview of the song? Does the song reflect a biblical view of life, of love, of purpose, of morality?

Even if the words aren't blatantly sinful, does the tone, does the mood, does the theme of the song encourage things like hopelessness or materialism or maybe a distorted view of relationships?



Third, how does the song affect your heart and mind? This is a very personal question, but does it stir sinful thoughts or attitudes or desires?

Does it make you angry or lustful or prideful or perhaps spiritually numb? Does it encourage godly emotions like joy or peace or gratitude or humility?

[ 37 : 54 ] Fourth, what is the song's cultural or spiritual impact? For example, is this song commonly used to glorify ungodly behavior in pop culture?

Does it subtly desensitize you to things the Bible warns against? Fifth, what is the effect of the music itself?

Does the style or the sound of the music stir up sinful emotions in you?

Be it aggression or lust or vanity or whatever it is, is the tone, the tempo, the rhythm manipulating your emotions rather than edifying you?

Sixth, could the musical elements distract you from the message or somehow make sin feel more attractive? Sixth, is this song helping you glorify God?

[ 39 : 02 ] Can you thank God for this song as something that's beneficial to your walk with Him? Does it make you love Christ more or does it make you feel more spiritually apathetic?

Of course, not every song needs to be a worship song, but every song will have some degree of influence on us. And as Christians, we should strive to fill our hearts and minds with what is true and pure and praiseworthy.

See, Philippians chapter 4. So if a song hinders your faith or it dulls your love for God or it tempts you towards sin, it's worth reconsidering whether it belongs in your life.

Now, as I was thinking about this subject, all kinds of songs were running through my mind and I began testing them. And I thought that maybe we could test a few of these songs together real quickly.

So here's what I'll do. I'll describe a few songs, perhaps read some lyrics, and you just contemplate whether that song is appropriate. Now, this first song wasn't recorded by a Christian, at least not an Orthodox Christian.

[ 40 : 13 ] The artist, as I understand it, has dabbled in Christianity and Catholicism and even Judaism. But here are some of the words to his best-known song.

I see trees of green, red roses too. I see them bloom for me and you. And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.

I see skies of blue and clouds of white, the bright blessed days, the dark sacred nights. And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.

Now, this song isn't written by a believer. It makes no mention of God. But it does seem to carry some biblical themes. Genesis 131, and God saw everything that he had made and behold, it was very good.

Psalms 74, 16, the day is yours and yours also the night. You established the sun and moon. Psalm 118, 24, this is the day that the Lord has made.

[ 41 : 12 ] Let us rejoice and be glad in it. So, is this an appropriate song for Christians? How about this one?

Now, you have to imagine this being played on soft piano and sung with a very soothing, attractive melody. As the singer says, imagine there's no heaven.

It's easy if you try. No hell below us. Above us only sky. Imagine all the people living for today. Imagine there's no countries. It isn't hard to do.

Nothing to kill or die for. And no religion too. Imagine all the people living life in peace. Oh, it's such a beautiful sounding song. And the author clearly wants to promote peace in the world, right?

But is it appropriate? How about this one? Some of the lyrics say, You gave me breath and tell me to rest.

[ 42 : 16 ] You never left. I can, I can, I can hear you calling me by name. Pulling me up from under my shame. Never be the same. I can face anything.

So let it rain. You are my anchor. Now, I will tell you this song was written explicitly about God, to God. And it begins with this soft piano part.

However, a moment later, you will hear heavy drums and loud distorted guitars come in because it's a song played by a Christian heavy metal band.

Is it appropriate? Of course, we could do this all day. And I'm guessing not everyone would agree on every song.

But that's kind of the point. I feel we can confidently say God created music as a good thing. But we also live in a fallen world.

[ 43 : 18 ] That so often distorts God's good design. So we're left sorting through the mess. Now, we do have God's word to guide us.

But it doesn't necessarily give us black and white answers to every question we have. So in many cases, music being one of them, we have to evaluate things carefully according to biblical principles.

And I would say pay close attention to what our conscience is telling us. And I'll leave you with a question that I often ask myself. Let's say I'm evaluating a song or a piece of music.

It could be anything. It could be a TV show, a movie, a book, whatever. But I'll ask myself, do I feel like I can sincerely thank God for this song?

And that usually tells me what I need to know. Well, we're out of time, so we're dismissed. We're dismissed.