

## **Should Associations Make a Difference in our Musical Choices?**

This question looms large in our ministries now and probably always will. Let me invite you to “percolate” on this subject with me and shed some more light on it. God bless.

Fundamentalism was born out of the desire to maintain a high view of Scripture in the midst of a backdrop of theological liberalism. Conservatives desired to remain separate from those rejecting inspiration and disassociate themselves from those things that were clearly identified with error. This is noble; we should applaud these sincere, righteous, and biblical desires.

The hard thing about fleshing out this principle of separation as it relates to musical choices is that associations change over time. The answer to the associational question is complex.

First, we must go to the scriptures and glean from them biblical principles. In this particular case it is the principle of separation. (I Cor. 6; Ez. 22; I Cor. 14; Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8,10) After we have clearly identified the biblical principle we must continue the process and try to apply it with integrity to our present situation. This is not situation ethics, because we have a clear principle from the Bible that we acknowledge must be applied with integrity.

We must then make decisions in light of this principle. It is in the application of these biblical principles that individuals and churches may differ. Remember, however, that each of us must answer for how we make these choices. They will affect us, our families, and our Christian brothers. We will stand and give account for each decision. This is why we make the decision to avoid using some music. It is a judgment call that often falls to me as a leader in music ministry. I endeavor to apply the biblical principle of separation with two questions in mind.

First, what is this music or musical style associated with at this time and, secondly, with this group of believers? This assumes that I know what is happening in the lives of my brothers and sisters in Christ. You see, associations can change over time and so can people. It also assumes that I have some idea of what a composite picture of the people in my church looks like. This is also a tall order to fill. Sometimes a song that I think is associated with error turns out to have no such association, at least with anyone in my congregation. Other times a song sends a message that is associated with error and I am unaware that any such strong association existed. This makes the actual determination quite unscientific. I pray, asking the Lord for wisdom. I continually bring myself back to the Scriptures to understand God, His standards and principles. Then I make the decision based on my best application of that wisdom. I endeavor to understand my church better, understand the Lord supremely, stay faithful to the Word, and apply the principle of separation with integrity against the ever changing palette of musical style.

### **Musings**

To begin let me suggest what I consider some central tenets of all communication. All language, including the language of music, relies on the acceptance of referent meaning. Unless there is consensus by both the speaker (singer) and listener there will be confusion about what is being said. Music, aside from words, powerfully communicates emotion and volition and does so

with remarkable consistency between cultures. For a much better study of this question I would suggest John Makujina's book, Measuring the Music, pp.84ff and Appendix C, pp.253ff.)

Verbal and nonverbal communication relies both on dictionary definitions and on ideas or concepts that become associated with the speaker and the listener. Context is also critically important to understanding. ("Do not bow the knee." "He stretched the bow across his knee.") For someone to believe that associations don't or shouldn't matter in communication seems, well, crazy to me. So, I would suggest, associations do matter because music is communication and associations are a part of every form of communication.

As a further extension of this concept I believe we must also consider how the teacher that is being quoted is known and to what extent he/she is known. I am assuming that there is an appreciation for the fact that in the Scriptures we clearly see that one of the roles of music is to teach and admonish. (Col 3:16) By extension then we must understand that musicians teach. This brings into play all of the Scriptures that instruct us about teachers. The extent of knowledge and the reputation of these musical teachers must be continually evaluated because the time and location of the listener determine the extent of the association. Depending on the answer to these questions (extent and reputation) we may be "endearing" the listener to a particular teacher or perhaps a group of teachers by instrument or style choices. For this reason associations even need to be considered as to style, individual performer and perhaps even individual song. Associations matter but they also change over time and from location to location.

**I have listed below some texts and concepts that I think need to be considered. This list is certainly not exhaustive or in any particular order. Please forgive the brevity of each.**

Much of the Mosaic Law gave testimony to the purposeful distinctions that needed to be maintained between the people of God and the nations that surrounded them. These distinctions were certainly obvious in moral areas but also extended to some very mundane things that were "guilty by association."

In Josh 22:10,19-24,29, the Israelites were not even to mention the names of the foreign gods around them but were commanded to completely disassociate themselves from them. It could be argued that certainly some of these ANE (Ancient Near Eastern) religions had good things to say but the practice of quoting them was disallowed.

In David's first attempt to bring the Ark back to Jerusalem in II Samuel 6, God judged those who ignored His prescribed method of transportation and decided to bring the Ark back on a cart in the same manner that the pagan gods were transported. This passage may indeed be dealing more with obedience than associations but it is my opinion that we could at least say God was not impressed with using pagan methods to do His work. Remember the "strange fire" of Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10).

Later in Israel's history, while being rebuked for their false worship the prophet commanded the Israelites to maintain a difference between that which was holy from that which was profane (Ezekiel 22:26-28). It is not that there was any discernable innate difference between a bowl used in the temple and a bowl used in the home but it was what these objects

were associated with that was in question. At times association is the only criteria used for acceptance or rejection. Jesus alludes to the same concept in Matthew 23:16-21 when He states that it was the gold's association with the altar that "sanctifies" it.

Of interest is the approach Christ takes to false teachers in Matthew 7:15ff. Jesus doesn't go after the teaching alone but rather the fruits that are associated with the teacher and his/her teaching. This is foundational to the apostles' teaching later in the epistles. Here, associations matter to the extent they reveal the error (or rightness) of the teaching or teacher. Remember, teaching does not fly in through the window; teaching always comes through teachers.

Also consider what is written in the epistles concerning discernment about teachers by looking at what is associated with them (Rom 16:17-19; 2 Peter 2:2ff; Thessalonians 3; 2 Timothy 3).

While considering these concepts we must balance them with the reality that Christ didn't completely separate Himself from worship in the temple or synagogue even though He stood against many of their practitioners. He still attended both places challenging their worship conventions. Christ taught against the error associated with the practice and the true purpose of the practice while remaining associated with the institution itself. His approach was to redeem those things that were right and proper from the clutches of wrong associations through knowledge. Remember that later Paul does the same while clearly warning us that "knowledge puffs up."

Associations can be wrong headed. For example, John 9:31ff recounts the story of the man born blind. In this account his blindness is wrongly associated with sin or the sin of his parents. Some associations people have are just plain wrong. Jesus cleared up wrong ideas based on associations with knowledge.

Acts 15 recounts the conclusion of the church regarding those things which would clearly be on "offense" to the Jews. ("But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood." 15:20 and "That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication:..." 15:29) One word (*πορνεία, porneia*) seems to stand apart as unique from the other items listed. All the other restrictions, it would seem to me, are based on associational issues. Even *porneia*, which is the most general words used for sexual sins, could possibly be included in the list based on associational "baggage." To me the "big idea" is that these Gentile believers were to appreciate the associational issues surrounding these practices and were to avoid them. This seems to square with teaching in the epistles.

Some have intimated that Paul was unconcerned about associations. I think the logic goes something like this: At Mars Hill Paul quotes a pagan in Acts 17:28, "for we are also his offspring." Later he quotes a Cretan poet in Titus 1:12. He also uses the rhetorical method in 1 Corinthians 6:12. Some suggest that because of these occurrences associations don't matter. We don't know how well-known these authors were, the authors' reputations, nor exactly how quoting them would be considered an endorsement. The association question we must ask is: "does the inclusion of this author or style amount to an endorsement by Paul to the listener?" I

think in each case Paul starts with the quote and continues with a line of thinking that in essence disassociates him from the one being quoted.

Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 are without a doubt the “meatiest” passages dealing with associations in the New Testament. Before launching into these two passages consider the following preliminary points:

1. These two passages are dissimilar. Romans 14 deals with Jewish/Gentile issues, specifically, when it comes to kosher foods and religious holy days. “How should we, as Gentile believers, relate to our Jewish brethren when it comes to the fulfillment of the OT law?” For example, when Paul says “all things are pure” he says it in the context of the dietary laws, not as a general statement that every action, communication or idea is pure. The operative word in this verse is *things*, i.e. inanimate objects. 1 Corinthians 8 is going after *things* that have pagan or idolatrous associations.
2. When considering the whole musical association issue we must also appreciate the huge difference between music and meat. Music, as a language, teaches. Music, because of its nature, is mood altering; it affects people’s volition, their inhibitions. Observing a particular holy day, eating non-kosher food or even eating meat offered to an idol is fundamentally different than letting someone become my musical teacher and influence my personality. Paul would never say “all communication is pure.” Nor do I think he would say whatever is done with things is pure. What he did say was that inanimate “things” were pure; “...unto the pure all **things** are pure.” (Titus 1:15) The fact that marijuana in its essence is pure does not justify any use of it. The fact that a musical instrument in its essence is pure does not justify any use of it.
3. What could be said about associations here might better deal with musical instruments themselves than with musical style. Certainly style has associations but it seems to me that making applications regarding style is an application by extension and not primarily in view here. The shortest trip up the “abstraction ladder” would call for you to make the application to inanimate objects like guitars, or maybe electric guitars with flames and trap sets. Or, with Romans 14 in view, maybe organs you heard in your former religious tradition, or perhaps with tambourines that you heard in your old church.
4. I would further suggest that in both passages Paul assumes that the questions about what this communicates, what mood is being set and what volitional influences are manifest has already been addressed and given a “green light.” In other words, the only thing really in question is “What is the association here?”

Here is how a walk through Romans 14 might look:

1. Stop judging your brother about having or using organs or tambourines. Leave that final judgment to God. v 3-4
2. Come to a definite conclusion yourself. You will answer to God for your choice and how you came to make it. v 5,12

3. When making a liberty choice, don't let your liberty cause someone to stumble back into the error of their previous religion because of the baggage associated with your choice. v 13
4. Make decisions, "as much as lies in you," that make for peace, unity, and promote Christian growth. There are "bigger fish to fry," namely the growth of your brother. v 19
5. If your conscience condemns you, "cease and desist". v 23

Now, a look at 1 Corinthians 8. Remember, here Paul is talking about meat offered to idols. The question is "Is eating this meat actually endorsing or participating in idol worship?" This passage is more applicable to the use of instruments, or by further abstraction a song or style, which was birthed out of a pagan world view. I think this passage is more germane to the questions being asked today about the inclusion of rock and roll elements in our music. Remember that church worship is not necessarily in view here.

1. We know that idols are nothing and the meat is good. But remember, knowledge can lead to pride. v 1-2
2. We should live above just knowledge based decisions. We should move toward love based decisions. v 2-3
3. Idols are nothing, really, but some people can't get beyond the association they have with the meat at this time. (I personally think there **is** certainly a place for education but that is not the primary solution to the immediate situation.) v 4-5
4. Don't use things or do things that would cause your brother to violate his conscience. V 7
5. Choose your battles. Ask yourself if the inclusion of this element is really important. v 8
6. Be careful not to cause a spiritual disaster by emboldening a brother to lean back into error. If your bother is defiled you are sinning against Christ Himself! v 9-11
7. Lovingly choose to forfeit your "rights" forever, if need be, ("while the world stands!") if doing this thing, that your brother associates with evil, will embolden him to move toward paganism or endear him to a system that will lead him back into the world. v 12-13

Much the same argument is followed in 1 Corinthians 10:23-33. Perhaps this passage is a further extension of these principles. Again Paul encourages believers to "do all to the glory of God." Even after we feel confident about these two chapters in 1 Corinthians there is also the passage in Acts 15 and the condemnation we read in Revelation 2:14, 20. Still God judges those who eat things offered to idols.

We must all wrestle through the place associations should play in our worship and music decisions. To deny that associations play a part is to ignore the Word. Actually making the decisions will require not only knowledge but an unwavering love for the Lord and hunger for

His wisdom. Associations really do matter and our choices should reflect our understanding of what those associations are. Just as obviously, associations can change from place to place and time to time and our choices should also reflect that understanding. God bless you as you seek to make wisdom choices in your worship and music.