

## Christian Music versus Secular Music on Christian Radio\*

**NB.** This was originally a letter I wrote to a Christian radio station that was wrestling with the issue of whether to add secular label music to its playlist or continue with its Christian-label-only-music policy.

I once tuned into a Christian radio station as I was driving around and was thrilled to hear the occasional well-chosen, quality mainstream/secular song as part of the station's playlist. This is exactly what God did in the Old Testament when He used a pagan king by the name of Cyrus to achieve His purposes for His people (check out Isaiah 44:28 & 45:1 where God even calls Cyrus 'his anointed' and uses him to allow God's city [Jerusalem] to be rebuilt, as well as setting the Jewish exiles free to return to their homeland). This is exactly what Jesus did when He taught the people parables. He drew from *everyday* life and culture to share spiritual truths about God's rule - the Kingdom of God. This is also what the Apostle Paul (one of the greatest apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ) did when he shared the Gospel of salvation with the Greeks in Athens (check out Acts 17:22-33). Paul referred to an altar that was built in Athens which had the words inscribed on it 'To The Unknown God'. From there, Paul made known to the Greeks just Who exactly this Unknown God is. In reaching out to the nonchristian Greeks Paul used the culture and language of the Greeks. In doing this, he was building a bridge to the Greeks – a bridge that they could relate to. Do you want to know Paul's evangelism technique? He says in 1 Corinthians 9:19-22: 'Though I am free and belong to no one, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law...so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law...so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. *I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.*' The Apostle Paul says that effective evangelism takes place when we become 'all things to all people'.

God doesn't change. The one true holy God still uses sinful, flawed music, art and people (like me and you) to achieve His purposes. God used a flawed rock opera with all its inconsistencies called 'Jesus Christ Superstar' to get some people thinking about Jesus Christ for the first time – thereby putting them on the path to salvation. With me, God used a secular song by the band Supertramp called 'The Logical Song' to get me thinking about the emptiness of my life without Him. He used the music of Pink Floyd to show me how useless life is without God.

For the majority of nonchristians contemporary music is the language of the people. We need to use that language selectively and with discernment to reach out to these people and share the Gospel.

Of what use is a Christian radio station (or church for that matter) that stays safe and comfortable and only looks after and nurtures its own? Christian radio programmers do need to provide programs that nurture and help believers to grow, but they also need to take risks and reach out to the nonchristians who tune in to the station. Staying safe and separating the music world into neat categories of 'Christian label' and 'secular label' music is the kind of thing that the Pharisees were on about to protect themselves from being contaminated by the unclean, outside world. By doing this they ended up cutting themselves off from the very people God wanted them to reach out to with His love. Jesus and Paul crossed the boundaries

and were brave enough to touch the unclean and, in the process, transform them from unclean to clean.

Let's beware of holding a false and simplistic mindset (a mindset which I too once held) that upholds the view that all Christian label music is good and inspired by God, and all secular label music is evil and 'of the devil'. This opinion makes no allowances for the increasing number of Christian artists (Amy Grant, P.O.D., Sixpence None The Richer, Creed, U2, The Call, Maire/Moya Brennan, etc.etc.) who also or solely record on secular labels to bring the Gospel message, their faith and Christian values to a wider audience. It also seems to deny the fact that all musical creativity originates with God (even if it has been distorted by satan or used selfishly by some artists and bands). Remember that the devil can't *create* anything – he can only *distort* the God-given creativity of a musician (be they Christian or otherwise).

It is my conviction that a Christian radio station needs to have a mix of mainstream/secular and contemporary Christian artists and bands. To play only quality Christian label artists and bands is in my view to play only to the converted. (This approach, by the way, is just as narrow and prejudiced as mainstream/secular stations who will only play secular label artists.) Realistically speaking, how many nonchristian listeners who happen to tune into a Christian radio station would stay tuned to it if they recognized none of the songs? Why not also play a *range* of quality mainstream music that addresses life issues in a positive way?

I believe God at one time gave me a picture to help me with the whole Christian-versus-secular-music struggle I was going through. I imagined that I went and visited an art gallery – leisurely taking my time to look at various paintings. While I was doing this, it was like God was saying to me: 'You are looking at each painting and appreciating each one on it's own merit. That is right and good – so you should. Sadly, some of My children, before they even look at the paintings and take time to see what the artist is trying to get across, look first for the name of the artist and if the artist is not a Christian, then they immediately walk on by to the next painting – they write him or her off. This makes Me sad because what they don't realise is that whether the artist believes in Me or not – the creativity they have comes from Me.' It was like God was saying to me, 'This is what many of My people are doing with music – although they would never dream of doing that with art. I only wish that they would trust Me and use the discernment I have given them to assess each work of art or song on an individual basis.'

Also, how realistic is it to expect a Christian artist or band to mention 'Jesus' in every song they perform? It's like expecting a Christian painter to always paint a portrait of Jesus and never veer from that. Surely Christian artists and musicians have the God-given freedom to paint and sing about all sorts of issues with a God-given discernment and perception.

Jesus said, '*Whoever is not against us is for us.*' (Mark 9:40) Christian radio stations are definitely *for* Christ – Christ is the very reason for their existence. It makes sense then to use the methods Jesus and the apostles themselves used to reach out to the lost.

Yours in Christ,  
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