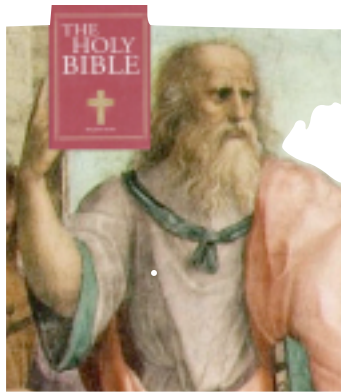


# *Hi-Fidelity in Church Music: Our Greek-ified Musical Tastes*



At the **Fellowship of Mere Christianity 2013 Annual Convocation**, Pastor Brad Stephens<sup>1</sup> (writing his Th.D. dissertation on a Dooyeweerdian interpretation of the 19th century background of rock music) was on a biblical tirade against ancient pagan (i.e., Hellenic) notions of music which have deeply infected the church: and this is where (e.g.) Christians get the idea that rock music is inherently sinful. Below is the text of his talk:

**I want to thank you all** for being here and Andrew for asking me to speak. It is an honor to be here. The title of my talk is “Hi-Fidelity in Church Music.”

What does it mean for the church to be faithful biblically in regard to music? In seeking some clarity on this issue I want us to turn to Genesis chapter one verse 1. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Coupled with that is Psalm 111:10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who DO his commandments... Those two verses are foundational for learning to think biblically about any topic.

In the beginning God... this is where we must begin if we are going to understand the world in which we live. It is also where we must begin if we are going to begin to understand music. To be honest the scripture has very little to say on the subject of music. It speaks of making melody and of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs but it doesn't define those things. It speaks of musical instruments but it doesn't tell us how to play them. It speaks of dancing but it doesn't give us any dance steps. Nowhere in scripture is music ever said to be sinful.

Our concepts of music come not from scripture but from the Greek philosophers and others. To be honest, it seems like in the last two thousand years and more the Greeks have had more influence on the church than the scriptures have because they have been the strongest influence

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on the interpretation of scripture. We love to say that scripture interprets scripture but we rarely think about the non-biblical presuppositions that we hold before we begin to look at scripture. It is here that the fear of the Lord comes in. You can know the word of God and not fear the Lord. If we are going to rightly divide the word of the Lord we are going to have to check our hearts for the appropriate fear. In our culture we fear a lot of things. We fear being not liked by the right groups, we fear not being cool. We fear looking different or standing out or in some cases we fear not standing out. But there is only one fear that matters and that is fearing the living God with all our heart. Scripture also calls that humbling yourself before God. And if we are going to make music or do anything in a biblical manner that is where we must begin and I will expound on that later.

Getting back to the influence of Greek thought upon our understanding of the world: Let's look at some examples: The concept of some musical forms being evil and causing evil effects in people comes from the Greeks. The concept of the sensual being sinful is a Greek concept. The concept of the physical world as evil or at least less than purely spiritual...Greek. The concept that there is something dirty about sex...Greek. Emotions being of less value than the intellect...Greek. ...reason as supreme...Greek. The need to regulate music to stifle its evil influence...Greek.

You see in Greek philosophy the world of pure thought was the perfect world and it was out there somewhere...separated from the earthly material world which was inherently evil. The goal was to leave the material world and get to the real world, the spiritual world of ideas. From this concept came the misunderstanding among Christians that heaven is our home. However, the scriptures tell us that the earth was created for us. Having bodies that experience creation through senses is how human beings were made to experience the world. It is how we will always experience the world. That is why we believe in a bodily resurrection of Christ. Bodies are who we are as human beings; we are living souls. We are a unity of clay infused with the breath of God.

In case you haven't figured it out, we don't do a good job of thinking biblically about much in the church; mostly because we don't believe that it is possible to think biblically at all. We have, for the most part, believed the lie that thinking is neutral; everybody just thinks – it has nothing to do with God. Hook line and sinker we have swallowed that lie and because of it culture as we know it is in the sad shape that it is in.

I don't know if you are old enough to remember the tv show Dragnet. Sargent Friday would always say "just the facts ma'am" as if facts could exist all by themselves...but they can't. From the perspective of human beings all facts are interpreted facts. Our presuppositions about how things came into being go into how we understand the facts. Cornelius Van Til has pointed out another fact about facts: They are all created by God. There is no fact in the material world that God did not create.

This takes us back to the beginning in which God created the material world: All of it. God spoke and it came into existence and when he was through creating he said this about his creation: it is good. Never in his word does God take that statement back. After the fall God

doesn't say: "oops sorry, you screwed up, so the material world is now evil." On the contrary, the world is cursed, yes, but not evil. The world being cursed is an outcome of a broken covenant between mankind and God but the creation is not separated from God like mankind is. In fact, the rest of creation is looking forward to being restored to its previous glory.

The rebellion of man increases the difficulty of life for the covenant breakers as an added burden for the rebellion but it doesn't make the physical world evil. It is important to understand that difficulties in life, the storms of life, tragedies, tornados, towers falling down are not evil. They are consequences of the evilness of man's rebellion against God.

It is with the concept of evil that we find perhaps the biggest influence of the Greeks upon the church and that is the concept that evil is a thing. The problem with this idea is that for evil to be a thing it either has to be non-created and pre-existent like God or it has to be created by God. Scripture tells us that the God of creation is nothing but good and can produce nothing but good therefore evil is not a created. It also tells us that everything except God began when God spoke and that it was very good therefore evil was not pre-existent.

From a biblical perspective evil is nothing more than a twisting and deforming of the good. Sin is lawlessness nothing more nothing less. Without good, evil cannot exist. But good can exist without evil. That is the hope of the gospel right? That someday we will live in a world without sin and without evil.

You see from a scriptural point of view there is nothing wrong with the structure of the universe. It is not evil. The evil resides only in the hearts of men and women (as well as in rebellious angels). It is the direction of our hearts that produces evil in the good creation. The good creation is then used to further the evil intents of our hearts but it is not evil in and of itself.

Because of the fall, apart from the work of Christ, EVERYTHING a human does is sin. That is the depth of the fall. Proverbs 21:4 in the King James says it most clearly: "a high look, a haughty heart, and the plowing of the wicked is sin." Have you ever thought of farming as sin? Probably not. Why? Because it falls in the imaginary neutral zone. It's just a thing neither good or bad right? Proverbs here is telling us that there is no neutrality to anything in the created world. If your heart is going in the wrong direction then everything you do is sin, even your so called worship of God, the loving of your family; every breath you take is sin against your Creator if your heart is in rebellion against him. You don't fear God therefore you have no wisdom.

Now if my neighbor is an unbelieving farmer and his farming is sin does that mean that if I eat of his produce I am therefore sinning? Not at all because sin is a matter of the heart. It is sin for the unbeliever but the believer is free to use God's creation in any lawful way without sin. The product of a sinner does not cause sin. That too is something we have truly got to get in our heads and hearts. Sin is a direction not a commodity, not something tangible. Now it certainly can have effects in the tangible world but effects are not sin they are the result of sin. There is a huge difference between the two.

Think of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden. It was a good tree. It's fruit was good, perhaps the best in the whole garden. The tree and the fruit were not evil. The command was not to destroy the tree it was simply to not eat of the fruit. The act of eating is not sin. The sin was found in breaking the law of God. Rebellion against God was the sin.

What have we learned so far? The physical structure of the universe is Good. Evil comes from the direction of a person's heart in relation to God not from outside a person. As James says in chapter 1 verses 14-16 of his letter: 14 But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. 15 Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. 16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

What does this have to do with music? Everything. From these basic biblical principles of creation we can understand that there is no such thing as an evil chord. There is no such thing as a wicked beat in music. Music doesn't cause us to sin. Sin comes ONLY from our own hearts. WE ARE THE SOURCE OF ALL SIN within the human race.

But what about that lustful, sexual rhythm of Rock and roll music that we've all heard so much about? Well, go back to what we know about creation. First, Rhythm is not lustful, humans are. The rhythm of rock music is said by some to be the rhythm of sexual intercourse and therefore evil. Statements like those are based upon non-biblical understanding of the created world. Nowhere in scripture is sex or the so called rhythm of sex said to be bad. It is not bad; it is God created and good.

Again we better make sure we are thinking biblically with regard to sex. Adultery is lawless, sex is not, the rhythm is not, the passion is not, the emotions are not. For the believer it is context that makes the sexual relationship holy or unholy. If you are an unbeliever then every single part of the sexual act of it is sin regardless of the context because your heart is moving in an anti-law direction or if you prefer an anti-God direction. This type of thinking is what it means to begin to think Christianly about the world in which we live. I didn't say it was popular thinking, I said it was biblical.

We have spent too much time thinking in the contrast between secular and sacred or holy and profane. It is not the creation that is either holy or profane, secular or sacred it is the direction of our hearts. We have split the world up in ways that the scripture doesn't. "Oh, that is secular music you shouldn't listen to that. I'm going to go work at my secular job; it's a shame I can't work in ministry full time." Those kinds of statements are fallacious. They are not based on the truth of the universe as created by God.

The only reason that secular music exists is because the church has refused to be the church and produce mature Christians that can think biblically. What area of life can be separated from God? What area of life can exist apart from God? None.

It is important that we understand that we have nothing to fear from the creation. In fact, creation is revelational of God. It is just as much the revelation of God as scripture is. Sorry if that offends you but it's true. Now the subject matter of those two types of revelation is completely different. Scripture is given to us to reveal our covenantal relationship to God, the condition of

our hearts, and the way to redemption. Creation is given to us to reveal the creator and the created order to us. It is a lawful place that we are called to explore the depths of to bring out its fullness as commanded by God. That is our original, and continual reason for existence. Some call it the cultural mandate. We were created to take dominion over the earth, to care for it and uncover its hidden treasures and secrets to the glory of God.

Sacred and secular are based upon the condition of your heart. If you are in rebellion against God there is nothing sacred in the entire universe. If you worship God with a heart that is in the wrong direction you are secular. If you sing a praise chorus in that condition you are secular. If you keep a commandment of God with your heart in the wrong direction you are secular. EVERYTHING is secular to the unbeliever remember?

If you are a believer then every godly task, every good work is holy. There is nothing secular. Certainly there are still sinful things. Adultery will never be holy. Murder will never be holy. However, if you are in Christ Jesus God will use such things to bring about good in your life because the scripture says that all things work to the good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose. But that doesn't make sin good, it makes it a tool in the hand of God to bring you to further repentance through discipline.

There is no such thing as secular music for a person with a right heart condition before God, and I speak of musical notation here. I'm not here to talk about lyrics, that is a whole different topic. There are no secular chords or rhythms or tempos, or harmony, or disharmony because all of those things are nothing more than a part of the lawful structure of the created universe. Sound waves were created by God for his glory. Every single wave of sound is lawful in and of itself and even in combination with other sounds. It's important to understand that good things combined cannot make evil things.

Sound waves are only tools to be used by created beings; in our context they were created for human beings. Human beings with hearts going in the wrong direction create music of rebellion even if it is the most beautiful music ever made. It is always sin for them. That is the nature of the fall.

Human beings with hearts going in the right direction can take that music created by non-believers and can use it to the glory of God because their hearts are going in the right direction. It is not sin to them because there is nothing evil in the structure of the created world. I can't see people's heart conditions; only God can. But if Handel's heart was not right before God then his writing of the Messiah was sin for him. That is the depth of the fall. And yet God can take that music and bless generations of believers with it.

These things are only the beginning of thinking biblically with regard to music, really with regard to any endeavor by humans in the material world. People talk about the need for a Christian Aesthetic, a Christian approach to the arts but to be perfectly honest we are decades away from a biblical understanding of the arts because we are decades away from being able to think biblically at foundational level.

Until we fear the Lord more than we fear the culture that we live in we will never be able to think biblically in this rebellious age. Why? Because we will be a part of the rebellion. Many times people who hear me speak on this subject think that I am pro-rock music. I don't have a problem with the musical form. What I have a problem with is the heart of rock and roll that thinks it is autonomous apart from God. The heart that writes the best Christian praise and worship song ever but who still thinks it is the captain of its own ship is a heart that doesn't fear God; and even that glorious song is for them sin. As long as we refuse to humble our hearts before the living God and don't fear the consequences there is no hope of a biblical music being birthed. But if, by the grace of God a generation arises that fears the Lord so much that it rejects the autonomy of self. The world will see and the world will fear and say what a wise and wonderful God they serve.

Let's pray.

Father, save us from ourselves. Humble our hearts. Let us think your thoughts after you. Let us be cognizant of that fact that we are utterly dependent upon you for everything we are and have. Then let us make music to honor you in every style and with every instrument. In Jesus' power and authority I ask these things. Please make it so. Amen.