

# *Evaluating Our Activities*



By Philip E. Busby

In this world, we all have things we like and enjoy, but as a believer, how do we make choices about what activities to involve ourselves in and what we should avoid? The writing contained in this article is a Q&A segment, and though the questions are specifically about music and youth activities, the guidance given in the answer is valuable for making the right choices concerning any activity!

**Question A** - “What is your stance on the use of instruments in church music eg: drums, electric guitar? How do you feel about having modern music in church (sounds modern but is still Bible and Jesus based.)”

**Question B** - “How do you feel about youth ministries eg: mosh pits, concerts, loud music - all fun things youth like to do but under the teaching and covering of Bible-based teaching and the belief that true joy comes only from an intimate relationship with the Father (only obtained by knowing Christ)?”

**Answer** - All of these questions, with the exception of a few details, are answered with much of the same teaching. If I were to separate them, we’d be going over a lot of the same information more than once.

So, I’ve chosen for this Q&A to just put all these questions together.

The base information we need to answer these questions is given by Paul in I Corinthians 10:23 where he says, “All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not.” Now, simply reading this scripture answers your very first question, for the most part. There are no instruments which should be banned from use in church simply because they are what they are. To be clear, a singular instrument may have certain logos, symbols, pictures etc. on them which would make them inappropriate for use in church, but we are strictly talking about instrument types here. A drum set, an electric guitar, a synthesizer or any other instrument is not evil simply because of what it is, what it has been used for, or even what it was initially created for. This is what Paul was explaining in I Corinthians 10.

Paul says that when you buy food from the market or when you are served food at a gathering which someone invites you to, simply thank the Lord for the food and eat it. You are under no obligation to question whether the food has been offered to idols or not. This is because there is nothing in and of itself which is evil about food. Food is food. It may come in all ranges of quality, but man’s superstitions and beliefs can’t change the nature of what it is. However, if it’s pointed out that the food you are being sold or served has been offered to idols, then you should avoid it. Again, this is not because it has any power over you, but because of what it looks like to others! This simple point answers much when it comes to these questions.

The Bible would truly be bigger than one could carry if God had included instructions on every specific situation, and many specifics of today would have made no sense to people of the past. So, in the Bible, we are not given a “Thou shalt not...” on everything unrighteous, but we are given instructions which help us make choices, even today. Paul talks about food because he lived in a day and a society where offerings were made to many false gods on a regular basis. Many times, food would be offered to these false gods before it was served or sold. This was simply the way the world did business. As a believer in God, we live in this world and there is nothing we can do about it. We must do things like

eat food, and because of the society man has built, we can not all grow all of our own food; thus, we cannot know every detail of what has happened to it. That's the bad news. The good news is, it doesn't matter, because man's false beliefs are simply that - false! Therefore, food is not affected by man's beliefs. However, man is affected by man's beliefs and that is why Paul explains where the line should be drawn. If nothing is said about the food being offered to idols, then don't bring it up; but if partaking of the food is, in the mind of others, about worshiping, serving or honoring a false god and you know this, then don't! Because, when you do, you become an active participant in their practices.

One of the biggest points taught to us in the Word of God is that our actions reflect who we are, and who we have chosen to be. If we want to call ourselves followers of the One True God, we must care what others see us partaking of and involving ourselves in. In Romans we are told, "So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God. Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way." Romans 14:12-13 Far too much of the church has stopped teaching this value, and we don't seem to care that it's a foundational principle. When we do things which others see, it's not just about what is evil at the core, but about how it affects others!

Now, we can't always know what others are thinking. We are not mind readers, and God does not expect us to be. This is why Paul explains that we don't have to ask about the food. What people may have in their own mind is not something we have to prod at. However, when the facts are in the open, it becomes our responsibility to show others that we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. (Matt. 6:33) We can face this on a very, one-on-one level, such as Paul's example of when a person invites you to dinner and then informs you it's in honor of a false god. In that case, it may be simply you and them which know that detail, but the same principle can also be true on a comprehensive level. This is the case when we involve ourselves in activities society at large understand. In these cases there needs to be no specific explanation by any individual. For example, when I was a child we had a small market just down the street from us. We used to go down to this

little store once in a while to buy cold sodas. As the years went by, this little store closed and the building was rented by new tenants, who opened a liquor store. They still sold cold sodas but that's when we stopped buying anything from that location. It's about appearance! I stopped going into the little store on the corner even though I still only wanted to buy a cold soda, because if people saw me going in there, they would likely assume I was going to buy something else.

Now, the days of having little markets in our town is long gone. Today, my town is truly a city, and it has many large grocery stores which we shop at regularly. These large stores also sell alcoholic products and other things we, as true believers, should not partake of. However, when I go into one of these stores, there is no automatic assumption that I am going in to buy anything other than daily supplies. This is what Paul was talking about. We have to live in this world, and can't know everything, nor should we stress about it, but we must avoid those things which have obvious association with things contrary to God's will for our lives.

The truth that we must care about what affects others is why churches, at least, used to teach very strict standards in modesty. Many people today will take on the attitude that modesty is not much of an issue, especially when there is so much immodesty in the world. They believe if the world is going to be so bad, what does it help for Christians to be modest? The answer is simple. We aren't supposed to be judging what others do; we are all supposed to be judging our own actions. The other point is also something which should be simple for us to understand. We may all be vexed by the world and the sin in it, but if the church is going to have value as a group, it's that we are a group in which people can find relief from this world and its temptations. (Matt. 5:43-48) When people come into a church filled with believers, it shouldn't be a place where they face the same temptations which they have in the world, and in no part of the church is this more crucial than in the area of youth ministry!

You see, the church should be a place where kids, as well as adults, can learn to let things of the world go. Peter made it clear: we are in this world but we are not of it. (II Peter 2) Paul instructed that we

should come out from among them and be separate. (II Cor. 6:14-18) This means we should be living by higher standards than the world. We should be caring more about what others struggle with than what makes us feel good! These are the principles of Christian living that set us apart and show our love. If we simply walk like the world, act like the world, and smell like the world, it doesn't matter how we label it, we are no better than the world.

Some may think by believing in higher standards we are just trying to be snooty, but that is only true if we allow high-mindedness to enter our lives. Being considered snooty when we are not truly of this mindset is a far smaller problem than seeming to offer the world nothing different than what they already have. Conviction which leads to repentance is what we are striving for. So, what people are, many times, feeling, is not that you are snooty but that they need a change in their own lives. This is why we are told in John 3:17 that Jesus came not into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. This is also a point many Christians no longer teach or understand. Living by a higher standard is not judging the world or condemning the world, it's about saying to the world that there is something higher to be obtained than just what this world has to offer. It's about saying, through our actions, that there is nothing in this world which is more important to us than seeking the righteousness of God; and if we truly understand what awaits us after this life, then there is nothing in this world worth holding on to!

This is a vital point which the church has almost ceased to show the world, because we have become so enamored with the idea that looking and acting like the world is a way to reach the lost. Then when we do reach those willing to hear the true message, we no longer have anything to offer. Sure, we may fill our churches with people, but what are we teaching them? Are we teaching them to live a life of righteousness, or are we teaching them that everything they had in the world is fine to have now, just as long as it's "Christianized?" This gives the message that living for God is not a different road, it just has different lyrics to the same worldly beat.

What we fail to understand is this world is not waxing worse and worse just because their tee shirts

say something different, but because of the philosophies which shape their lifestyle. Much of what the world has created is tailored to the flesh, and what makes it feel good. This is why Paul asks in Romans 6:2, "How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" The answer is that we can't! We have to make a choice. We are either putting off the things of the flesh and choosing to walk in a way not part of that broad path which leads to destruction, (Matt. 7:13-20) or we are still headed down the broad path.

With all that in mind, let's look at our questions specifically. Again, there is nothing wrong with any specific instrument. Drums are not more evil than a piano or organ. What matters is how they are used, and that takes us into your next question about modern music which is Bible and Jesus based. When it comes to talking about music, the problem we are running into is definition. It's hard to categorize music. Even a word like "modern" is a very broad term. By definition, I suppose it refers to something which is currently being used, but most would agree it also refers to something which has not been around for a long time. Even at that, some may simply think we are talking about rock music, others may think of contemporary in general, and what culture you come from will also affect what you see as modern music. However, this is not much of a problem, because we can simply look at general guidelines for music. I think far too many people get caught up on the idea that something is bad just because it's new, and I want to make the point clear that it's dangerous to judge anything in this way. We can't afford to judge something as bad, simply on the basis of when it came to be. Just because your grandparents liked it doesn't make it good, and just because your grandchildren like it doesn't make it bad. There is good and bad in all generations and times.

When we talk about the things adults, youth and children like to do, we may find there are many differences in enjoyed activities, but we are all humans. Another point which is lost on the church is how much the world doesn't care about the family. This idea that the children, the teens, and the adults should be separated for almost all of their activities, is not right; but I'll leave that discussion for another time. There are obviously some things which we will want to offer children which teens will find boring,

and to adults which teens would find boring, etc. However, no matter what category we are tailoring an activity to, the rules are the same!

In choosing what is right and what is wrong to offer, we must first look at the question, is it edifying? Most Christians get this point to, at least, some degree. This is why we see the point of making the activity about the Bible or Jesus directly. We understand that a song which talks about shooting people, doing drugs, being promiscuous and the like, is not really appropriately edifying for a group of believers. So, while keeping the style of music, we change the lyrics to something about living for God, but does this truly make something, like a song, edifying? The answer is, not necessarily.

All things can technically be lawful, but all things are not edifying! Even if you try to cover them with Bible terminology. A good example of this truth is what the Catholics have done with idol worship. The Catholic church developed in a time and place where idol worship was very popular among the population. In other words, idol worship was the in thing! So, if you go into a Catholic church, even today, you are sure to find many statues. If you ask someone to tell you exactly which Bible or Christian character each statue is supposed to be of, you will find they all have some Bible or "Christian" connection. The most prominent statue will likely be of Jesus or Mary. Other statues will be those of the apostles, saints, and likely some angels, to name a few. With the exception of some saints, most of these characters will be things straight out of the Bible, but does that make it right? The second commandment clearly tells us not to make unto ourselves any graven images. (Ex. 20) This commandment simply means we are not to make images for the purpose of worship. There is nothing in this commandment which tells us it's OK if the image is representative of a Christian, a Bible character, or even God Himself. It tells us not to do it. Making images which are supposed to be of or are representative of a worshiped figure, power or god, is forbidden with no exception!

This is because of a simple truth. Man in the flesh has trouble not thinking in the flesh. It's hard for us to get past all the distractions of this life and world so we may truly have a true relationship with God! We would rather have something tangible. Something we

can see and touch with our flesh. Having something tangible even gives us a sense that the object or god can see us, in a way. This does two major things. First, it, many times, creates a situation where the object itself becomes the god. We see this in many false religions through history. People would start out worshiping the sun, and even as tangible as the sun may be, they would create an image to represent the sun. Though it's not true in all cases, these images, many times, were not a replica of the sun. They could look more like an animal or a human. In truth, there is no end to what people might choose, but in any case, the point is, that more times than not, the image itself became more important than the thing it was originally meant to represent. The image became the god!

The second main problem with idols is, as they become more real to people, it becomes more necessary to be, physically, with the idol. It's odd how people start out with needing to make an image of representation which will give them a more tangible "link" to their god, and it ends up being the object itself which they believe holds the power. Once this happens, their god can become very inaccessible if people cannot get to the idol. This is what causes many Catholics to have statues of Mary, Jesus, and others in their home. They may also feel the need to carry with them an amulet or the like with a saint, god, angel or etc. on it.

Both these issues are problems God does not want a true believer to have. Even though tangible representations can seem, at first, to be a good idea, they can drastically affect, if not totally destroy, a true relationship with God. God doesn't want us thinking, whether consciously or subconsciously, that He's a piece of stone, metal, wood, etc. God also does not want us to think He is not with us if we can't be in sight of an object. This is why the ark of the covenant is not an idol. On its top is a throne for God, called the mercy seat. (Ex. 40:20-21) On this seat God's presence could descend in a very physical way, but it could ascend as well. (Ex. 40:33-38) This showed the people the power of God in a very tangible way. However, unlike an idol which has to be moved from place to place, God is real, with real power! (Ps. 115:1-16) Solomon points out in his dedication prayer for the temple in Jerusalem, that even a great building like the temple cannot contain

God; and after Solomon had finished praying, the presence of God came down on the temple so strong the priest literally could not enter the temple. (II Chron. 6:12-7:3)

It's important for us to understand God does not want to restrict our creativity. It's our sinful nature of getting caught up on earthly things which causes God to put many of the rules on us that He does. God is working for our good. (Deu. 6:24, Rom. 8:28) We forget this many times, or we simply do not believe it, but in either case the truth is, God told us that giving up things of this world in order to guard our salvation is worth it. Jesus said, it's so worth it that if our hand offended us we should cut it off; if our eye offends we should pluck it out. (Matt. 5:29-30) When we read such things in the Bible and then look at a church which wants to emulate the world so greatly, it's hard to say whether our churches themselves are Bible based!

There are many things which we may be able to overlay with Bible themes but that does not really make them edifying. It simply doesn't matter if it's a type of music, an activity, or anything else. There are two basic questions we should ask about it. First, what inspired it; and second, what does it inspire? The answer to these two questions will help us judge whether these things are the kinds of things which, for conscience sake, for the sake of others, or because they truly are unholy, should be avoided. So, first we ask what inspired it? Whether it's music or something else, it is always good to know why it exists in the first place. In Paul's example about eating food, it is universally obvious why we do this in the first place - we all get hungry! However, when it comes to why God told us not to make graven images, understanding why people want to do this in the first place helps us understand why it can be a serious stumbling block, no matter how we configure it. When it comes to something like instruments, people created them to make music. Music, of course, is not a necessity, but it can be very positive. This means, unlike graven images, music is not a bad idea at its core. Music does not inherently lead somewhere bad. It's only bad when people make it bad. However, the fact people can make something bad is the reason we must always apply the second question of, "What does it inspire?"

We have to ask this question, because what things inspire can be very powerful! There have been studies done where groups of people are put in a room and given what they think is alcohol; and in almost every case, the people will act, in many ways, as if they are drinking alcohol. They do this simply because of what alcohol inspires! People who were strangers will start to talk more freely. They will get louder and laugh more. Slowly but surely they lose more and more of their inhibitions. Now, because they are not actually drinking alcohol, they never lose control of their motor skills or mental faculties, but it's the social expectation that these things do happen, which allows for the lose of inhibitions. Even if individuals don't feel they are "getting a buzz," they still feel freer simply based on what they think is allowed under the circumstances.

This is the problem with taking things which were inspired by the world and trying to make them "Christian." More times than not, things which are inspired by the world end up inspiring worldliness, regardless of whether the thing has power in and of itself. You see, our two questions are directly connected, because many times the things which inspire people to create or start certain things are the very things which they hope to inspire with them. This applies nowhere better than to the issue of music. Music, in general, is not bad, but certain kinds of music are developed by the world for purposes which are so fleshly, you cannot simply convert them to being Christian by putting different lyrics with them.

This is true when it comes to activities as well. If you see something in the world which goes hand in hand with unrighteousness, then you know it's something which cannot simply be brought into the church and offered as "Christian." Remember, we are trying to offer the world a life which is not focused on the flesh, but on God and His Holiness! Paul tells us, we must keep this flesh under submission, (Rom. 6:12-23) because the flesh is selfish. It cares not for the fruits of the spirit. (Gal. 5:22) The spirit promotes love; the flesh promotes promiscuity. The spirit wants joy and peace. Because the flesh cannot find these things, it turns to stimulants like alcohol and drugs. The spirit develops longsuffering, gentleness, and goodness. Fleshly things develop violence and hatred. The spirit grows faith, which is a relationship with God. The flesh doesn't care about others; it only

cares about what makes it feel good. The spirit teaches us to have meekness, and temperance. The flesh teaches us to get out there and get what we want no matter what the cost!

This is why the things of this world are at enmity with God. (Rom. 8:5-8, James 4:4) The Scripture tells us clearly, you cannot simply convert that which is part of the world. When things are designed by worldly thoughts which seek to promote the pleasures of the flesh, then the activity itself is unrighteous. When the world takes something, like music, which is not evil, and develops a style or class of that thing which is designed after fleshly desires, it may not affect the whole, but the new style or class will inspire the flesh. As believers, we must always be on guard against things which tempt the flesh. We should avoid these things, not try to redeem them. People, not things, can be redeemed from their sinful thoughts, but that means leaving those thoughts behind, not trying to find a way to take them with you!

The saddest part of all this is, in trying to cover worldliness with the Bible, we are driving from our churches those who are truly looking for salvation. Salvation is not something we can trick people into accepting. If we are going to be saved, we must endure this world and its temptations. (II Tim. 2:1-5) People choose to follow God when they respond to the conviction in their hearts that they need a relationship with the God who created them. Many people will ignore this conviction as long as the things of this world captivate them. Those who are ripest for salvation are those who are tired of the things of this world, or, at the very least, they have come to understand they need something different than what this world has to offer. This means when we go forward acting like the world, thinking this is a good way to draw in the lost, we are actually turning away those ripest for a relationship with God.

So, in the end, we do just the opposite of what we say we intend. Instead of bringing people out of the world, and into a life where they understand true joy comes only from an intimate relationship with the Father through Jesus Christ, we often only inspire the very same things in people which the world inspires in them. Because the world is what so many people want, this idea may fill our churches, but it's an exercise in futility. Jesus said, if you lose this life for

His sake then you will find life eternal, but if you seek to save this life, then you will lose everything! (Matt. 10:39, 16:24-26, Mark 8:34-37, Luke 9:23-25, 17:33, John 12:25) When we take things which are of the world and try to make them about God, instead of leaving them behind us, we are seeking to save this life. Choose you this day whom you will serve, (Josh. 24:15) because you can not serve two masters, "...for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon." Matthew 6:24

We need to be careful not to confuse people, especially kids! People should experience things as they exist. If something is worldly then let it be worldly. Making one thing seem as if it's another is the devil's trick. We should let people see things for what they are, and try to give solid Biblical teaching which will help them make up their own minds as to whether it's good or bad for them to be involved in. (Phil. 2:9-13) Far too many things of the world have been covered by the idea, they are now Christian, and therefore OK. If an activity is something which people should avoid in the world, it does very little good to try and convert it by adding Bible themes. Always remember, it's the spirit of the activity which causes the problem far more than the color it's painted. If it was a negative thing for people to be exposed to in the world, it will continue to carry the same general effects. The devil does a good enough job blurring the lines between right and wrong, let's not add to the problem! Jesus already told us there would be many on judgment day who would cry Lord, Lord, have we not done great works in thy name; but they will be told to depart, because they never came to a true relationship with God. (Matt. 7:21-23) They believed they knew God because they believed they worked for Him, but in the end result, they never found a true relationship. Let's teach the Word of God, so those willing to listen will learn to hear God's voice. (Rev. 3:22) Those who want this world will still have what makes them feel good, but those who desire the things of God will also be able to find what they need!