

# Music, Affections, & Fruit:

## *What Shapes the Heart?*

Discussions surrounding Contemporary Christian Music often focus on the words being sung. Yet Scripture directs us to look deeper—not only at what is said, but at how the heart is being moved. This article examines the nature of music itself, the affections it stirs, and the biblical test of fruit by which such influences must be judged.

**T**he debate surrounding Contemporary Christian Music is often framed in terms of lyrics. If the words are sound, it is assumed the music is safe. Yet this assumption fails to reckon with a deeper and more searching question: not only what is being *said*, but how the music itself **shapes and stirs the response of the listener**.

Scripture directs us beyond surface considerations and presses us to examine both the **nature** and the **fruit** of what we embrace. As James writes,

“Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?... so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh” (James 3:11–12).

What something is in its **nature** determines what it produces. Our Lord’s words establish the corresponding principle: “Wherefore by their **fruits** ye shall know them” (Matthew 7:20). This applies not only to teachers and doctrines, but to influences that shape the heart. If something consistently produces a certain kind of spiritual effect, that effect must be traced back to its source.

### **The Power of Music Upon the Affections**

It has long been recognized that music is **not neutral**. It does not merely accompany words, but gives them weight and expression. It moves, stirs, calms, excites, and inclines the heart in particular directions.

This is not controversial. A march, a lullaby, and a romantic ballad do not affect the listener in the same way. As much as speech has a language, music has a **language of its own**.

This was not overlooked by John Calvin, who, in speaking of the singing of Psalms, warned that the song must not be “light or frivolous,” but marked by weight and majesty. He was not re-



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ferring to the words alone, but to the manner in which they were sung—an acknowledgment that the form of music carries its own influence and must be rightly ordered.

The question, therefore, is not whether music affects us, but **how**.

Jonathan Edwards, in his careful treatment of religious experience, distinguishes between affections that arise from spiritual causes and those that arise merely from natural influences. He observes that some may be very much moved, but merely from “natural principles,” and that “there may be religious affections [which are] raised to a very high degree, and yet [there be] nothing [in them] of **true religion**” (*Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 1*, page 246). Thus, powerful emotion in a religious setting is no proof of **spiritual reality**, for it may arise from influences that **act upon the senses** rather than from the truth of God apprehended by the mind.

### **When Music Bypasses the Mind**

True worship follows a **God-ordained order**: truth is understood, and the heart responds. The mind

apprehends the glory and excellency of divine things, and the affections follow. Our Lord teaches that worship must be “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24), joining together inward reality and the truth of God as its foundation.

But music can **alter that order**.

When a musical form is structured to produce emotional response—whether through dominant rhythm, swelling intensity, or intimate tone—it may move the feelings directly, without requiring **corresponding understanding**. In such cases, the emotion does not arise from **truth**, but is carried along by the **medium itself**.

Scripture itself acknowledges this. When David played before Saul, “Saul was refreshed, and was well” (1 Samuel 16:23), showing that music may act directly upon the spirit and the affections.

This is where the **danger lies**. The presence of sound doctrine in lyrics does not settle the question. The issue is not only what is *said*, but whether the response is **grounded in the meaning** of those words, or in the sensory effect of the music.

If the same words, apart from music and spoken plainly, would not produce a similar affection, then we must at least ask whether that affection arises from the truth itself.

This is not merely theoretical. Consider the well-known lines of Martin Luther’s hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is our God*:

“And though this world, with devils filled,  
Should threaten to undo us,  
We will not fear, for God hath willed  
His truth to triumph through us.”

Even when read quietly, without melody, these words stir the heart—not because of musical setting, but because of the **truth they express**: God’s truth triumphs through us, though devils should threaten to undo us. It may be said that such a response arises from the beauty of the poetry. Yet the deeper question remains: would such words move us if they were not true? Their power lies not merely in form, but in the **reality they declare**. This illustrates the proper order: truth apprehended by the mind gives rise to **affection in the heart**. Music, at its best, serves this process; it does not create it.

### Why Singing, and Not Mere Speech?

It may be asked, if such concerns are valid, why God commands singing at all, rather than mere speech. The answer lies not in the removal of

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affection, but in its **proper ordering**. Scripture joins truth and song together so that the Word may not only be understood, but warmly embraced. Indeed, we are commanded to “let the word of Christ dwell in you **richly**” (Col. 3:16), even as we are “singing with grace” unto the Lord, showing that truth must **dwell richly** within the heart before it is rightly expressed in song. Singing in worship is designed to deepen and express affections that arise from truth, not to create them independently.

The danger, therefore, is not that music moves the heart, but that it may move it in a way that **bypasses understanding**. As D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones repeatedly emphasizes, the Holy Spirit works through the **truth**, not by bypassing the understanding or acting directly upon the emotions. Where emotion is produced apart from **truth rightly apprehended**, it cannot be confidently attributed to the Spirit of God. When music serves the truth, it fulfills its purpose; when it generates feeling apart from the truth, it exceeds it.

God gave us singing in worship to carry the truth into the heart, not to carry the heart **beyond the truth**.

Paul likewise says, “I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also” (1 Corinthians 14:15). The pattern is consistent: truth received, affection stirred, and expression given. Music, therefore, is not the source of spiritual movement, but its servant—carrying what truth has first produced.

The principle, then, is clear. Music is not indifferent. It shapes the affections, and those affections must be tested—not by their intensity, but by their source. Where truth governs, the affections are safe; where the senses lead, they are uncertain.

Yet this is not the only danger. There is a further and distinct concern—not merely that the affections may be stirred apart from truth, but that they may be stirred in the wrong way altogether. It is at this point that the question of sensuality must be considered.

### Sensuality and the Direction of Affection

It must be made clear at the outset that the concern is not with affection itself, nor with expressions of love and tenderness in their proper place. Scripture does not condemn emotion, but rather **directs and governs** it. There is such a thing as holy affection,

rightly **ordered** and shaped by truth.

The issue, however, is with **sensuality**—where affections are stirred in a manner detached from **holiness** and shaped by a carnal understanding of love. In the world, expressions of love are often reduced to what is physical, indulgent, and self-centered, and the music associated with such expressions reflects and reinforces that distortion. It is this disordered form of **affection**, not affection itself, that is in view.

This concern extends beyond overtly rhythmic forms. Even softer music may be problematic when it is performed in a manner that is intimate, breathy, or emotionally suggestive. Music can borrow the tone and expression commonly associated with human romance and use it to stir affections that are **sensual or physically suggestive** in character.

In such cases, the affection may be real, but it is **not of the right kind**. What is being stirred is not a response **shaped by the truth of God**, but a form of feeling more closely related to **natural or sensual response**. The listener may interpret this as devotion, when in fact the experience is being produced by influences that **act upon the senses** rather than by the truth of God **rightly understood**.

Such considerations bring us back to the central question: not merely how music is used, but what it is in its **nature**, and whether that nature is fitting for those who would worship God in spirit and in truth.

This is not a light matter. Scripture warns that there are experiences which appear religious, and yet are not the work of the Spirit of God (Matthew 13:20; Hebrews 6:4-5). It is possible to be deeply moved and yet **remain unchanged**, to feel something that seems like devotion and yet arises entirely from natural causes. In such cases, what is attributed to the Spirit of God may in fact be the work of the **flesh**. This raises a sobering question: how many may be resting in such experiences, without ever truly examining whether they know the Lord in truth?

The question is not whether something is felt, but whether the affection is **rightly ordered**—whether it arises from the **truth of God**, or from influences that act upon the natural man.

### Private Listening and the Formation of the Heart

It is often argued that certain forms of music, though unsuitable for public worship, may be enjoyed privately as



a matter of personal taste. Yet this raises a serious question: whether the Christian life admits two different **moral standards**—one for worship, and another for personal enjoyment.

Scripture does distinguish between corporate worship and the ordinary activities of life, yet it does not permit a division in **holiness**. “Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the **glory of God**” (1 Cor. 10:31). While corporate worship is uniquely regulated, the call to holiness extends to all of life.

This is not to suggest that the same focus required in public worship—where the truth of God is central and determinative—must govern every instance of private listening in the same way. There is a place for enjoyment, for beauty, and for forms of expression that are not directly didactic. The question, however, is not whether music is suited to convey truth, but whether it is morally **fitting** in the affections it tends to produce. Some forms of music, by their very nature or manner of performance, are ordered toward **sensuality**, emotional indulgence, or the stirring of **fleshly desires**. Such effects are not made

acceptable by a change of setting, for they concern the character of the affections themselves.

If a form of music is judged unfit for worship because it stirs the affections in a morally disordered way, it is difficult to see by what principle it becomes suitable for private enjoyment, since the same affections must, in every context, remain under the rule of **holiness** and purity. What is cultivated in private inevitably shapes the **heart**, and the heart, in turn, shapes our worship. Not all music must be suited to worship, but all music must be consistent with **holiness**. The question, therefore, is not simply one of category or label, but of character: whether a given form or manner of music is ordered toward affections that accord with purity, or toward those that tend toward sensuality and indulgence. This requires not a superficial judgment based on genre alone, but a careful consideration of what the music, in its form and expression, is fitted to produce.

### Is This Merely Subjective?

It is sometimes objected that to identify sensual tendencies in certain

forms of music is merely **subjective**, or even a reflection of the listener's own disposition. Yet this misunderstands the issue. Music, by its very nature, communicates and evokes particular kinds of response. Just as a march stirs resolve and a lullaby quiets the mind, so certain musical forms are plainly ordered toward **intimacy, excitement, or bodily response**.

This is further illustrated by the way such music is commonly used and received. Forms characterized by dominant rhythm or by breathy, intimate vocal styles are widely employed to express **sensuality**, romance, or emotional intensity, and are readily embraced by the world for precisely these effects. This does not prove the argument on its own, but it does confirm that such music is naturally suited to produce these kinds of responses.

To recognize these tendencies is not to impose meaning upon the music, but to acknowledge what it is **fitted to produce**. The question, therefore, is not whether an individual happens to feel something, but whether the music itself is suited to stir affections that accord with **holiness and truth**.

### The Test of Fruit in History

When we step back and consider the broader development of Contemporary Christian Music, the question of **fruit** becomes especially pressing.

From its roots in the Jesus Movement, closely tied to experiential and charismatic influences, the movement emerged with a strong emphasis on immediate religious **experience and feeling**. As it developed, it often moved alongside streams that elevated emotional experience and atmosphere, sometimes at the expense of doctrinal precision.

In later decades, it became increasingly associated with a broad ecumenical spirit. Unity was frequently framed in terms of shared **feeling** rather than shared **conviction**, and doctrinal differences were minimized in favor of common experience.

It would be neither fair nor accurate to judge a movement solely by individual failures. Yet when a consistent **pattern emerges**—when emotionalism, doctrinal looseness, and a blurring of distinctions appear repeatedly—we are bound to ask whether there is a connection between the **means** employed and the **outcomes** observed.

If a form of music tends to produce shared feeling more readily than

shared **understanding**, it is not surprising that unity becomes defined in emotional rather than doctrinal terms. In such a context, agreement is often

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**One simple test may be applied. If a piece of music stirs the heart, ask what follows when the sound ceases. Does it lead the soul to quiet reflection upon the truth of God?**

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assumed where truth has not been carefully examined, and differences that ought to matter are more easily set aside.

### Conclusion: Music, Affections, and Fruit

The issue before us is not one of **taste**, nor merely of tradition. It is a question of how the **heart is moved**, and by what means.

Scripture calls us to examine **fruit**. Theology teaches us to distinguish between affections that arise from **truth** and those that arise from **natural causes**. Experience confirms that music has the power to shape the inner life in profound ways.

This is not a light matter. It is possible to be deeply moved and yet **remain unchanged**, to feel something that seems like devotion and yet arises from natural causes alone. Where

affections are stirred apart from truth **rightly apprehended**, what is attributed to the Spirit of God may in reality be no more than the movement of the **natural man**. In such cases, the danger is not merely confusion, but **deception**.

Taken together, these points lead to an unavoidable conclusion.

If music is capable of producing strong feelings apart from **truth understood**, then those feelings cannot be trusted as evidence of **spiritual reality**. If a musical form consistently appeals to the senses in a way that **bypasses the mind**, it risks cultivating affections that resemble true devotion while lacking its **foundation**. And if, over time, such influences are associated with patterns of emotionalism and doctrinal decline, the question of their fitness becomes all the more urgent.

The Christian is not called to suppress affection, but to see it rightly **ordered**. True worship is not cold, but it is governed by **truth**. The heart must be moved—but moved by the knowledge of God, not by **external forces acting upon the senses**.

It is possible to feel something that resembles worship, and yet never have truly worshiped God. It is possible to be carried along by powerful impressions, and yet never have known the transforming work of the **Spirit**, as Scripture itself warns. Therefore, the question is not simply whether we have felt deeply, but whether our affections are **rooted in the truth of God** and produce the **fruit of a changed life**.

This is not to say that every form of music must serve the same purpose as public worship, but that all music must be judged by the character of the **affections it stirs**, and whether those affections are consistent with **holiness and purity**.

In the end, the question is both simple and searching:

Are our affections being **shaped by the truth of God**, or by influences that **act upon us apart from it**?

One simple test may be applied. If such music stirs the heart, ask what follows when the sound ceases. Does it lead the soul to quiet reflection upon the truth of God, and to a desire to meditate upon His Word? Or does the feeling fade with the music itself, leaving little inclination toward spiritual thought? If the affection cannot be sustained apart from the musical influence, it calls into question whether it arose from the truth, or from the medium that carried it. •