

How and Why We Should Biblically Analyze Songs

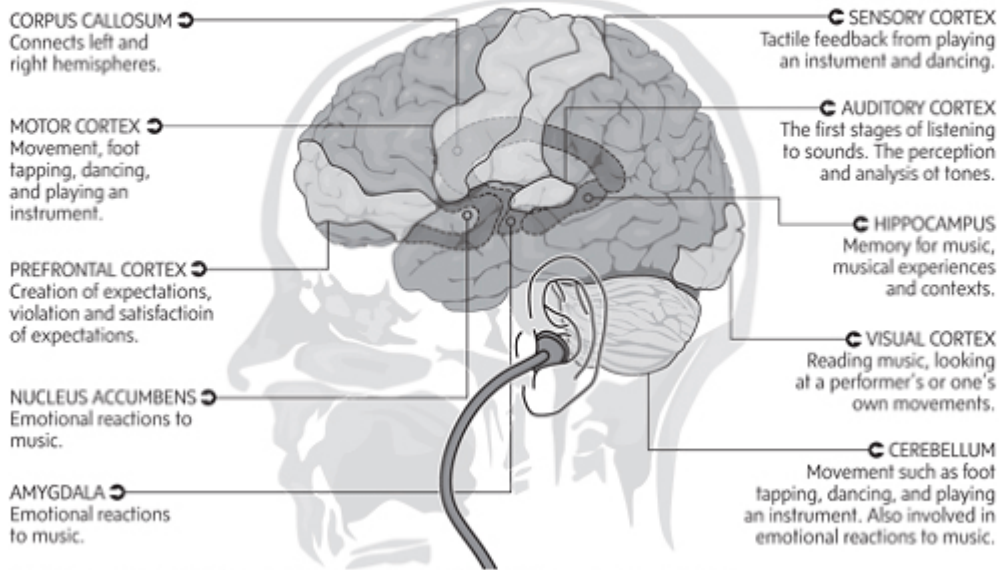
Probe intern Sarah Withers provides insight about thinking biblically about popular songs.

Numerous scientific studies have revealed that music is linked to relieving pain/stress, releasing endorphins, aiding coordination, increasing concentration, expanding memory, improving language skills, and lowering blood pressure, just to list a few.[\[1\]](#) Unfortunately, not all genres of music offer these benefits, so it would be quite misleading to say that critically analyzing songs can act as a remedy for migraines—however convenient and persuasive that claim might be!

While I may not be able to claim health advantages, powerful benefits can be gleaned for us and others by being aware and graciously critical of songs. I hope that I can provide how and why we should biblically analyze songs and challenge you to be a more thoughtful and gracious critical consumer of all types of music.

Music on the mind

When we listen to music, it's processed in many different areas of our brain. The extent of the brain's involvement was scarcely imagined until the early nineties, when functional brain imaging became possible. The major computational centres include:



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How Do We Biblically Analyze a Song?

The most obvious first step to biblically analyzing a song is to actively listen to the lyrics and sometimes even watch the music video. It helps me focus and understand if I pull up the lyrics and read along as I listen. While I listen, I think about how the song makes me feel, what the song got right or wrong in its worldview, what I appreciate about the song, and any questions about possible meanings and interpretations. I also think about if or how I can relate to the song's message. Have I ever experienced, desired, or seen something similar to the song's message? If the answer is no, then maybe I could think about how seeing the songwriter's perspective could help me relate and communicate with someone with very different desires and experiences than my own.

Ultimately we biblically critique a song by shining the light of the biblical truths on it. No secular song gets everything right for the obvious reason that the gospel is not present. For some songs all that is missing is an explicit reference to the gospel, while other songs directly conflict with the

gospel. Yet, for even the more difficult songs, Christians can understand the song's message for the glory of God.

For example, Lana Del Rey's song "Born to Die"[{2}](#) provides the message that we should enjoy life because when we die there is nothing left for us. For those in Christ, that song is radically wrong about our purpose and destiny.

However, for those who are outside of Christ, that song paints a rather apt picture of their bleak destiny.[{3}](#) So yes, the song is very dark and upsetting, yet when I hear that song I can mourn for those outside of Christ and praise God that the lyrics of that song are not true for me. In that way, that song can incite worship and foster resolve to reach out to unbelievers-something Del Rey probably would never consider possible! That is the transformative power of the gospel, the greatest good news.

However, there are songs that Christians should avoid. Songs that are overly sexualized or demonic in nature may be too difficult to redeem.[{4}](#) Also some people are more affected by music than others. If you are not able to redeem the song by countering it with life-giving truths from Scripture and the song continues to bring you down, then you should not listen to it. Christians should pray for wisdom and guidance to know when to listen and engage and when to turn it off.[{5}](#)

Why Should We Care?

Since music is so integrated into our daily lives, many of us are consumers of music whether we are intentional about it or not. [The American Academy of Pediatrics in 1996](#) (AAP) found that 14- to 16-year-olds listened to an overage of 40 hours of music per week. For a more conservative number, [RAIN \(Radio and Internet Newsletter\)](#) reported that students "spend an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes a day consuming media, 2 hours 19 minutes of which is spent listening to music."[{6}](#)

While these studies focus on teens and adolescents, it is fair to say that adults also listen to a fair amount of music, whether it is through headphones at work or the radio in the car. When it comes down to it, music is very much part of our everyday life. For some it can be avoided, but by most, it is accepted and greatly enjoyed.

Musical lyrics are also sticky. It never ceases to amaze me how I can still easily sing along to songs from my childhood the second the second it plays. Yet, when discussing my project of biblically analyzing popular music, a common response is that people often do not listen to the lyrics, but rather just enjoy the melody and beat. The AAP (1996) reported that "in one study 30% of teenagers knew the lyrics to their favorite songs," which would seem to affirm that initial claim.

With those intuitions and findings, it would be easy to undermine this project as interesting but unimportant. However, the same AAP (2009) article cited the Knobloch-Westerwick *et al.* study that "although young listeners might not understand all the details in lyrics, they recognize enough to obtain a general idea of the message they bring."

Moreover, the fact that we do remember song lyrics well after we have stopped listening to them shows that we are aware of the words even if we are not actively thinking about the message. In many respects we have become passive consumers of information and entertainment, especially when it comes to music. It is in light of this passivity that we should strive to be active listeners.

Every song with words carries a message, although some are more obvious and dangerous than others. For example, current artists such as Macklemore, Hozier, Lana Del Rey, and Lady Gaga proclaim more explicit messages and agendas in their songs-something as Christians we should be aware of and ready to critique. The AAP (1996) claimed that "awareness of, and

sensitivity to, the potential impact of music lyrics by consumers, the media, and the music industry is crucial.”

Although the rate and impact of the consumption of songs can be debated, there are still benefits of being aware of and engaging with our culture through songs.

What Are the Benefits?

Well, there are three main benefits to biblically analyzing songs. First, we refine our ability to enjoy music. For many this will be very counterintuitive. People I have talked with have feared that if they are too critical of the music’s message, then they will no longer be able to enjoy it. I will agree, there are some songs that might be ruined by listening critically to the lyrics. However, Christians should likely avoid listening to those songs anyway.

Even with songs we don’t like, we can still enjoy them for their musicality and benefit from some insights, however hard to find. The vast majority of songs are redeemable even though they may counter the gospel. Where God provides the songwriter with common grace insights, there is an opportunity to redeem the song. Remember Lana Del Rey’s song; I am still able to enjoy her powerful use of a darker sound and message, but I am also reminded of the hope I have in the gospel.

If we get to a point where we become cynical and antagonistic towards our music culture, we should remember that God gave us music and culture as a gift. The Psalms are examples of a great variety of songs that were written to offer the expression of truth about God, humanity, and our world. The obvious difference is that the Psalms are God-breathed and inspired—yet there are often truths that can be gleaned even from secular and popular songs. After all, we are all made in God’s image and bear His music-loving traits.

Another benefit of analyzing songs is the ability to learn

about our culture and the people influenced by it. Regardless of whether the lyrics are true, they are believed to be true by the songwriter and often by people in our culture. Part of the appeal of songs is that they are relatable. Relatability makes the song powerful and influential.

We can gain invaluable insight into the thoughts of our culture and younger generations through the lyrics of songs. Many songs provide commentary on our culture's view of alcohol consumption, drug use, violence, relationships, sexuality, freedom, and self-worth. By learning what the songs say about such topics, we can be better equipped to understand where people are coming from.

The final benefit which naturally flows from the previous one is being able to relate and engage with our culture. By engaging with themes in songs, we are ultimately practicing how to engage with people. I was talking with a group of high school students about one of Macklemore's songs called "Starting Over" which is about his relapse as an alcoholic. The song is marked with shame, a deep sense of failure, and loss of identity. Before listening to the song, I encouraged them to listen to the lyrics as if a person was talking with them. With that perspective, students would be less likely to immediately judge him as a failure, and instead would be more likely to empathize and relate as we are all failures and slaves to sin outside of Christ.

By being aware of songs, we can better engage the lies of our culture and counter them with the truths of Scripture.[\[7\]](#) The AAP (1996 & 2009), encourages parents to "become media-literate" which means "watching television with their children and teenagers, discussing the content with them, and initiating the process of selective viewing at an early age." Later in the article, the authors even suggest that parents should look up the lyrics and become familiar with them. Even if you are not a parent, as Christians one way we can help

correct lies of our culture is through conversations about popular music.

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:6, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” It is our hope and joy that we have been redeemed and my prayer that Christians will show others the light of Christ.

So, the goal of analyzing songs from a Christian perspective is not merely an academic exercise that challenges critical thought, but to move us to action. Peter claimed that Christians were saved so “that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”^{8} Ultimately we should be encouraged to talk, relate, empathize, and love others. Through songs we can help others to “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.”^{9}

Notes

1. Another article that was particularly helpful was from the [eMedExpert](#). However, if you just search “benefits to music” (or the like) and you will be overwhelmed by how many articles develop all the unique benefits to music.
2. The video includes sexual content, brief drug use, and a violent image at the end.
3. I should note however, that the song seems to hold the message of mere extinction at death. As Christians, we believe that souls are immortal which means even the non-believer persists. For those outside of Christ, they will experience death as eternal wrath and destruction. See John 3:36, Roman 6:23, Matthew 25:46, 2 Thessalonians 1:9, and Revelation 21:8.
4. To address briefly the pushback on the idea that we can or should “redeem culture”: The confusion rests in the nuanced

difference in meaning of the word “redeemed.” I use the word “redeemed” in this context to mean something closer to transformed by truth, not redeemed in the sense God has redeemed believers. Yes, Scriptures never call us to “redeem culture” but God does call us to let the light of truth shine. By engaging culture with the truth of Scriptures, Christians can make aspects of culture honoring to God, thus in that sense redeeming them. For example, pornography falls under the category of “unredeemable,” meaning that there is no way someone could make pornography honoring to God. However, with different aspects of culture this task is possible and I think should be encouraged.

5. See Hebrews 5:14.

6. RAIN cited [The Kaiser Family Foundation study](#) for these statistics. The report also broke down how the kids and teens were listening to the music, finding that on average per day they listen to 41 minutes of music on their iPod and similar devices, 32 minutes of music on computers (iTunes and Internet radio), and 32 minutes listening to the radio.

7. See Ephesians 6:17-20 and 2 Corinthians 10:1-6.

8. 1 Peter 2:9.

9. Colossians 2:8

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Jesus Christ Superstar

Kanye West vs. John Lennon

“Who do men say that I am?” (Matt 16:16)

In 1966, rock star John Lennon said the Beatles were “more popular than Jesus.” Lennon made the statement in the context

of his predication about the demise of Christianity; "Christianity will go," he said. "It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I'm right and I will be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now; I don't know which will go first, rock 'n' roll or Christianity. Jesus was all right but his disciples were thick and ordinary." Lennon's failed predication about the demise of Christianity, like so many since the eighteenth century, grossly underestimated the enormous appeal of Jesus.

Jesus Christ is the most popular figure in history and everyone wants a piece of him. Recent music artists tend to disagree with Lennon. The pop diva Kesha sings, "Got Jesus on my necklace." Lady Gaga sings, "The three men I'm a serve my whole life is my Daddy and Nebraska and Jesus Christ." In his acclaimed single, "Jesus Walks," a sort of Hip Hop gospel song, Kanye West raps and preaches:

*I ain't here to argue about his facial features
Or here to convert atheists into believers
I'm just trying to say the way school need teachers
The way Kathie Lee needed Regis that's the way I need Jesus.*

It is very reassuring to have Jesus on your team. There is a principle in marketing called "borrowed authority" where a spokesman such as an athlete or movie star endorses a product. Jesus represents the ultimate superstar whose intrinsic authority is borrowed to support every kind of religious and social movement. Even the apparent enemies of faith such as Secular Humanists claim to accept Jesus' social ethics of peace and equality. Today cults and religions, Christian and non-Christian alike, all claim Jesus as their own or as a great teacher or prophet. Islam claims Jesus as a prophet and teacher of Islam who preceded Mohammad and predicted his coming.

The various images of Jesus may error in one of two ways,

either in denying his full deity or neglecting his complete humanity. The biblical presentation shows Jesus Christ as the Word of God who became flesh (John 1). He is both Son of God and Son of Man. Traditional theology calls this the God/man union. This means Jesus is both fully God and fully man. This unity must be retained if we are to follow the Jesus of the Bible and not another Jesus invented by the spirit of the age to lend credibility to a given cause or religious movement.

Jesus once asked the apostle Peter, "Who do men say that I am?" Peter offered a very pluralistic answer: "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." The idea that Jesus was a prophet is not wrong, just incomplete. When Christ asked Peter again, "Who do you say that I am?" he replied that Jesus was not just another great religious leader, but the incarnate savior when he said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:13-16).

The Humanist Tradition: Jesus as the Greatest Man

The emphasis since the Renaissance in Western thought has been on humanism. This means a stress in the arts and sciences on human dignity, freedom, and beauty as well as a renewed interest in the natural world as opposed to a transcendent emphasis on divinity or the authority of the church and the Bible as in the Middle Ages. Every age tends to portray Christ in its own image. In the Middle Ages, Christ is painted as King, divine and regal such as Pantocrator, ruler of all, from the sixth century. Today our view of Jesus reflects the humanist trend from Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (1498) all the way to the *Head of Christ* by Warner Sallman (1940), which is by far the most popular portrait of Christ in history.

The famous German poet Goethe noted the sensual power of *The Last Supper*, which represents "'the boldest attempt to adhere

to nature, while, at the same time, the object is supernatural,' with the result that 'the majesty, the uncontrolled will, the power and might of the Deity' were not expressed."[\[1\]](#)

This represents the modern liberal Jesus, which has been popular since the nineteenth century. This view shows Jesus as a great man and moral teacher, a faith healer who preached social reform, the Son of Man, but not the Son of God. Modern culture tends to think about Jesus as the greatest man who ever lived rather than the Son of God.

This is also true of "The Quest of the Historical Jesus" of the nineteenth century debunked by Albert Schweitzer as modern people portraying Jesus in their own image as a good ethical man, who did good deeds.[\[2\]](#) Despite the fact that the search for the Historical Jesus was shown to be biased towards modern views, it continues in movements like the Jesus Seminar and in the famous Baur-Ehrman thesis. Both argue for a historical Jesus who is not in the Gospels but is thought to be the earliest Jesus. They baptize Christ in contemporary culture by arguing that alternative views of Jesus preceded orthodoxy in the earliest Christian community. This presents another attempt to understand Jesus from a pluralistic perspective. The latest quest seeks greater diversity in our social ethics by presenting various views of Jesus.

A very human Jesus is not necessarily a false view, except if we say this is all that he was. So Jesus is the greatest man that ever lived, but he was more than that as well. He was also the incarnate God.

The Gnostic Jesus: The Great Spirit with a Message

There is no difference between the ancient world and the modern one concerning Jesus' star power. Yesterday's Gnostics,

like today's, wanted the credibility of having Jesus attached to their movement without really accepting him as their Lord and Savior, once again tapping into his borrowed authority. Gnosticism was a second century heretical belief that has experienced a considerable revival since the discovery of some of their lost documents in 1945. Gnostics believed that the material world is basically evil, created by a demiurge [Ed. Note: "A supernatural being imagined as creating or fashioning the world in subordination to the Supreme Being, and sometimes regarded as the originator of evil," Dictionary.com] that departed from the Pleroma (the Gnostic view of God). The divine spark, or a piece of God, however, remains trapped in our physical bodies that can only be released through secret knowledge of divine messengers like Jesus.

A problem arises theologically when Gnostics reject the belief that Jesus had no physical body because the material world is evil. He only appeared as a man, like a phantom or hologram, but was really a divine spirit. Jesus was not a savior, but a teacher. Gnostics did not believe in salvation, meaning one is saved from sin by grace through faith. Instead, Gnostics taught enlightenment or the impartation of knowledge. People are not sinners, only ignorant of the divine spark within them.

Who was Jesus to the Gnostics? He was not the divine Son of God made flesh, but an elevated spirit being, an emanation sent to give special knowledge of how to ascend back to God. One of the greatest artistic expressions of Gnosticism comes from the modern Surrealist painter Salvador Dali in his depiction of Jesus in *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* (1955), which shows a transparent effeminate Jesus as a sort of exalted spirit god administering the communion table. Here Jesus is divine, but not human.

Modern Gnostics like Dan Brown, some Feminists theologians and Neo-Gnostic churches are attracted to the apparent androgyny, diversity, and collusion of opposites in the Gnostic concept

of God, which depicted the emanations in the Pleroma as both masculine and feminine. This leads to the notion that Gnosticism was more tolerant of differences and individualistic and offered a prominent role for women because its theological nomenclature spoke of "God the Father" and "God the Mother."[\[3\]](#)

Yet the Gnostic belief system is antithetical to the entire tenor of the modern materialistic worldview. Most Neo-Gnostics adopt the psychological aspects of Gnosticism that appeal to the individual's sense of superiority to the world. It is the world that is fallen in Gnosticism, not the individual. It is the creator who is at fault, not people. The unacceptable metaphysical aspect of Gnosticism to a modern materialist worldview makes it obvious that Neo-Gnostics are grasping at straws. They are looking for anything to validate their belief in diversity, androgyny, and individual superiority. What better person to turn to than the leading cultural figure of all time, Jesus Christ?

Arianism: Jesus the Creator Angel

Another major error in the history of Christian thought is named for its major proponent Arius (250-336). Arianism believes that Jesus was not equal with the Father but was a created being like an angel. In fact he is the chief of all the angels. Arius' famous line states "there was a time when he was not."[\[4\]](#) This means Jesus was a created being. All orthodox theology and teaching roundly rejects this view because it compromises the deity of Christ. In an effort to preserve the radical oneness of God, Arianism accomplishes the opposite by falling into polytheism. There is not one God, but two. The Father made the Son and the Son in turn made the rest of the world. It is similar to the modern view that says Jesus is the greatest man who ever lived with the added dimension of being like God but not equal to God. He is a god. This is one of the most common mistakes people make in their understanding

of Jesus, even thinking that the term “Son of God” suggests an inferior station to the Father. The term “Son of God” means Jesus is equal to the Father (John 5:18). The Arian heresy was revived by some Unitarians in the modern Age, Isaac Newton being the most famous, but has been especially embraced by the cult of the Jehovah’s Witnesses who argue vigorously for the idea that Jesus is not God but a created being.

The famous theologian Athanasius (298-373) argued that our view of Jesus must be tied to our salvation. If we get our view of Jesus wrong we will also misunderstand salvation by grace. Only God creates and only God saves, but it is humanity that must suffer the penalty of sin. But because people are unable to offer the sacrifice for sin God must offer it himself in human form to save us. The dual nature of Christ solves this problem by making Christ the perfect sacrifice as the God/man. An angel is not capable of offering a sacrifice for sin. This is essentially what the book of Hebrews says: “He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs” (Heb. 1:3, 4 cf. Heb. 2:14-18).

New Age Jesus: The Ascended Master

The New Age Jesus is very popular today. This is the belief that Jesus is one of the greatest religious leaders of all time, an “ascended master” much like Buddha or Krishna. Jesus is not the unique Son of God but one of many divine incarnations. He does not come to deliver us from sin but to enlighten us. He came to show us how we can achieve God-consciousness or to help us realize we are God within. This is similar to Gnostic idea of a divine spark left in humanity after the creation of the world.

Because of this the New Age is often confused with Gnosticism. There are correlations, but there are also substantial differences between the two. New Age thinking is pantheistic. This means God equals the all pervasive force of the universe, which makes it more happy and world-friendly as expressed in the modern ecology movements that find God in nature. Gnosticism is not pantheistic, but radically dualistic; the world is evil and the individual is good but trapped in the material world. Gnosticism tends to be dark and foreboding with other worldly hopes of escape and ascension. New Age tends to have hope in the current historical continuum of change. There is a New Age of Aquarius dawning right around the corner. We don't find that optimism in Gnosticism.

The New Age version of Jesus expresses another aspect of Jesus' popularity among non-Christian religions as well as spiritual but not traditionally religious Americans. Like Gnosticism, it absorbs Jesus into its belief system, but it also acquires greater credibility for itself by adopting Jesus. Most of the popular views of Jesus are a way of accepting a semblance of spirituality without really committing oneself to the message of Christ as the only way to the Father. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6). The great offense today in Christianity is given by our belief in the exclusivity of Christ as the only way to God. Every alternative view of Jesus compromises this central idea, making Jesus one of many ways to God. The enormous popularity of Jesus need not create confusion. The Bible is very clear that Jesus is the Son of God and the only way to the Father. John Lennon and the Beatles have been relegated to the oldies station, but Jesus is still here and more popular than ever. We need to help refocus the culture's acceptance of Jesus as the greatest man and religious leader with the biblical message of salvation that says Jesus is the incarnate Word sent to save us from sin and restore us to the Father.

Notes

1. Quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in History of Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 146-147.
2. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: MacMillian, 1964).
3. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, 1979); Bernard Simon, *The Essence of the Gnostics* (Edison, NJ: Chartwell Books, 2004), 203-220.
4. Quoted in Tony Lane, *Harper's Concise Book of Christian Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 28.

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