

THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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Throughout the history of Christianity and God's interaction with the human race, music – mainly in the form of songs – has made a dynamic contribution in forwarding the work of the Kingdom of God. Martin Luther claimed that:

Next after theology, I give to music the highest place and the greatest honor. I would not exchange what little I know of music for something great (Bainton 1951:346).

Luther valued music immensely. The irony of his statement about possessing a limited knowledge of music is that Luther was very well-versed in music. He considered music a crucial element in theological education and ministry, emphasizing that “. . . before a youth is ordained into the ministry, he should practice music in school” (Plass 1959:980). For Luther, music went hand in hand with his theology. Not only did he honor music, but he employed music as the servant of his theology. Indeed, the Catholic Church recognized the power and efficacy of Luther's hymns; a Jesuit once testified that “the hymns of Luther killed more souls than his sermons” (ibid:346).

Music in theological education has an important role to play, especially on the African continent. As theological educators in Africa, we are concerned with the training of godly, knowledgeable, and practical men and women of God (see Adeyemo 1989). Servant leaders committed to building up the church and ministering in people's lives are urgently needed today. Music has two major contributions to make to the development of such leaders. First, when appropriately understood and applied, music has the potential to impact deeply the spiritual development of theological students by shaping them as godly, committed Christians. Second, training in music provides theological students with an indispensable tool for powerful ministry.

How does music fulfill this dual role in the shaping and training of church leadership? At least five major functions of music can contribute significantly in the training of effective church leadership. Music is able to serve as: 1) an effective ministry tool, 2) a worship facilitator, 3) a developer of theology, 4) a medium of Christian communication, and 5) an initiator of contextualization. Let us take a look at each of these functions.

1. Music Serves as an Effective Ministry Tool

First and foremost, music serves as an effective ministry tool. Church leaders often consider music to be outside of their domain. They rightly believe that they are trained to preach the Word of God. They do not consider, however, that music also plays a role in making God's Word known. Leaders in the Bible set a different example. They wisely included music in their theological preparation and ministry styles. Moses may well have been educated by the Egyptian priestly caste. Since such education included training in mathematics, music, and dance, one might say that Moses trained at the equivalent of a "Sacred Academy of Music" (Sendrey 1969:480).

Throughout his ministry, Moses used music as a major means to perform his leadership tasks. Following God's instructions to make two silver trumpets, Moses had these instruments used as signaling devices to call the Israelite community together and to sound battle cries, and for musical accompaniment at feasts and New Moon festivals as memorials to God (Num. 10:1-10,35-36).

Moses also employed song to provide a celebrative response of faith in the God who had delivered His people from the Egyptians. The "Song at the Red Sea" (Ex. 15:1-18), for example, takes on multiple approaches to ministry. It served initially as an immediate act of worship, then became a historical device quoted throughout Scripture, and ever since has functioned as a model for praise and victory songs.

On another occasion, again following the instructions of Yahweh, Moses taught the Israelites the song composed by God (Deut. 32), wisely using it as a teaching device. Thus Moses incorporated music into his leadership skills and ministry, integrating it within his total approach. In addition to his roles as priest, judge, and prophet, Moses is credited as the first music educator of the Hebrews (Sendrey and Norton 1964:4).

Other Biblical leaders also employed music in their leadership styles. Among them are Solomon with his literary output of 3,000 proverbs and 1005 songs (I Kings 4:32) and Hezekiah who restored the musical worship of Yahweh as the temple was reopened (2 Chron. 29).

David, however, is perhaps best known for musical prowess. Significant to David's development as a leader was his training as a prophet when he stayed with Samuel. Prophets such as Samuel had established brotherhoods that developed training schools. Included in their curriculum was apparently training in music— considered to be a necessary course in the "well-rounded education of religious leaders of the nation" (Sendrey 1969:531). If David trained in music at Samuel's school of prophecy, it had a major impact, for it was David who later established the essential musical organization entrusted to the Levites, and who composed numerous Psalms that contributed to the worship of God.

Music was not a separate aspect in the lives of these biblical leaders, isolated from their training and from their ministry styles. Rather, music formed an integral part of their personal spiritual development, their walk with God, and their leadership skills. And today also music can serve as an indispensable tool in effective ministry, when appropriately developed and utilized. Theological students need the opportunity to develop not only musical skills but also a working philosophy of music *in* ministry.

2. Music Serves as a Facilitator of Worship

Primary to effective ministry is meaningful worship; worship is at the heart of the Christian faith. Ultimately the Christian believer's greatest challenge is to worship the Father "in spirit and in truth" (Jn. 4.23, NIV), for God seeks those who worship in such a manner. Worship, as encounter with God, must be the main motivator for Christian living. Servant leaders must know how to lead God's people in genuine worship and praise.

An area of training that is sorely lacking in most theological institutions is the practical skill needed for leading in worship. Yet once theological students are in their field of ministry, they participate and lead in worship that most often uses singing.

Consider how often Christians meet for worship. Indeed, worship services are the most frequent and regular activity of the church. Now visualize those worship services without singing. Omitting music certainly would save time, but people would go away and perhaps not come back, commenting that they had not worshiped. Worshipful singing allows us to offer a meaningful "sacrifice of praise" (Heb. 13:15) to our God, and to encounter God in a way that shapes how we live out our Christian lives during the week.

One reason for including music in theological education is to train men and women to participate in and lead in worship. We need to develop in godly men and women the regular habit of worship through music, and the ability to lead such worship corporately, recognizing that "God operates on the power of praise, sacrifice and humility of heart" (Hayford 1987:82). By equipping our students with such experience and such skills, we will powerfully affect the church as a whole, enabling music to serve its proper biblical role in our churches as a facilitator of worship.

3. Music Serves to Develop Theological Understanding

It is in the midst of worship that our theology is shaped at its deepest levels. And music, as worship, therefore participates in theological development. Song texts play a major part in establishing our theological opinions; what we sing most often becomes the essence of our theology. In analyzing the growth of Christianity in the Solomon Islands, for example, Alan Tippett points out that:

In the absence of Bible, prayer-book and an adequate catechism, it was natural for the hymns to serve as the theological frame of reference for the belief and practice of the emerging church 1967:286).

Tippett goes on to demonstrate the theological understandings of two differing church groups by measuring the frequency and theological content of songs sung in Sunday morning worship services. His findings show that one church had a strong emphasis on works, while the other church dwelt on faith and the worship of a high God. Neither group of believers had a balance of the two teachings, and this was reflected in the practical outworking of their village life. The theological content of the songs shaped their fleshing out of the Christian faith.

Similarly in Africa, the theological development and understanding of Senufo Christians in Cote d'Ivoire can be seen by comparing the texts of early Senufo Christian songs with those that have developed in more recent years (see King 1989:205-238). Senufo Christians have developed their own unique singing styles and created their own hymnody. And growth in their understanding of God is reflected in their songs. The early picture of Christianity was one of "displaying glimpses of the potential of freedom from slavery to the spirits," whereas "concepts of God and growth in relationship to Him have developed and are revealed in the later songs" (ibid:238). The songs encapsulate the essence of their Christian growth, both reflecting and developing it. The sermons they have heard, their own personal study of Scripture, and times of worship and prayer become the well-springs for their musical thoughts.

Understanding the influential role of songs in relationship to theological development calls for a change in our perception and understanding of music. Music and songs are not merely fillers or entertainment. Neither are they only a prelude to the sermon, although they may help to prepare for receiving a sermon. Rather, Christian songs function as sermons in their own right. The singing of songs allows participants to internalize the message of the songs and expressions of faith intimately related to the Word of God. Songs shape our understanding of God. It is crucial, therefore, for theological students to recognize the influence of music in shaping a people's theological understanding and to learn to employ it effectively for the Kingdom.

4. Music Serves as a Medium of Christian Communication

Not only does music effectively articulate a people's theology but it also serves as a medium of communication. Indeed, music is communication. This is a major assumption within African societies. Traditionally music has been used to communicate a great variety of messages. On the coast of Senegal a Wolof woman, with fruit piled high in her bowl balanced atop her head, sings her announcement of the type of fruit for sale and its price. Jomo Kenyatta used

music for political communication by setting his election platform to song. The songs traveled across the country informing the people of Kenyatta's position.

Theological institutions need to recognize the importance of music as a means for Christian communication. Music's capacity for Christian communication is not limited to worship services and occasional mass evangelistic meetings. Rather, it can be effectively employed for communicating the Gospel in evangelism, discipleship, prayer meetings, spiritual warfare, and leadership training.

Senufo believers, for example, claim that songs instruct them "like the word of God." They explain:

The songs help us as far as they teach us, showing us the path of truth and praising the Lord. Their teaching goes to the depths of our hearts, teaching your heart if you are good or bad. Then they tell you what you should do about it (King 1989:269).

As they are singing their songs, whether at an all-night evangelistic meeting or at a morning worship service, they are processing the content of the songs and applying them to their particular life situation. They find the songs helping them in their commitment to Christ, in calming their emotions, in participating in church life, and in applying Scripture to their lives.

Theological education in Africa has been functioning on a borrowed model that limits the use of music for effective Christian communication in Africa. Thankfully, this has not stopped the church in Africa, on a non-formal level, from successfully employing music as communication. Such an approach needs to be developed more fully and to be officially recognized. Africa, with her dynamic models of music communication, can offer the world new, bold, and creative approaches to employing music wisely for the advancement of the Kingdom. Such an approach needs to be developed at our theological institutions.

5. Music Serves as an Initiator of Contextualization

Finally, the use of culturally appropriate music serves as a major means of bringing the gospel message home, of making it relevant and meaningful to people within their own worlds. The problem of making the Christian message relevant within various societies, including the African context, remains an on-going issue confronting the serious Christian communicator. Too often in church history the Gospel has been presented as a foreign religion. Too often it has been accompanied by the introduction of culturally unrecognizable musical instruments and forms. Suggestions for change abound. Indeed, Byang Kato recognized years ago that:

Musical instruments such as organ and piano can be replaced or supplemented with such indigenous and easily acquired instruments as drums, cymbals, and cornstalk instruments. . . . While the content of God's word should remain what it is, the expression of it in teaching, preaching, and singing should be made relevant (1985:24).

Beyond the mere substitution of musical instruments, however, music in culturally appropriate forms can serve as an initiator of meaningful contextualization. Appropriate musical forms must spring from the cultural heritage and musical vocabulary of a particular nation or ethnic group. At the same time, such musical expression must be regulated and evaluated by Christian guidelines and exigencies. Indeed, the content of God's word expressed through relevant singing stimulates a more genuine understanding of the Gospel message, resulting in creative contextualization.

Creative contextualization communicates by means of culturally relevant forms, but goes beyond the mere borrowing of previously existing forms. It is the process of developing new forms (i.e. songs), appropriate to the Christian faith, from within a cultural context. Again we can see how Senegalese Christians initiated such a course on their own. Their newly created song style, an adaptation from storytelling songs, allows them to present and reflect upon a large text load. As they compose songs based on Scripture, they are naturally processing theological concepts (see King 1989). This is done at a level that allows them to digest the content to such an extent that local Christians are nourished in satisfying ways and can make their own personal applications of the text. This song form also allows the people to express meaningfully the ways in which God is dealing in their lives, with the result that they are not just living vicariously on the experience of foreign Christian composers. Rather, God speaks to them as they interact with His Word through music in the midst of their own situation.

The composition of new Christian songs drawing from the repertoire of African musical idioms affords a new approach for meeting the need "to make Christianity culturally relevant while holding fast to its ever-abiding message" (Kato:31). Christianity must become relevant not only in outward forms but also in biblically-sound theological concepts and life-changing applications for the incarnation of Christianity in Africa. Through appropriate musical training, theological education needs to take up and facilitate meaningful, creative contextualization that says that God is at home in Africa, that He is for us.

6. A Concluding Challenge

Africa today faces a great challenge. Some years ago Kenneth Kaunda claimed that "Christianity is preached in Africa, but it is not practiced" (Desai 1962:2). The role of music in theological education offers an opportunity to go beyond well-intended yet often surface-level communication of the Gospel. Appropriately developed Christian music grooms godly men and women in the disciplines of holiness and prepares them for potentially powerful ministries. Such music helps Christians not only to acquire head-knowledge, but also to become committed people of God who live out their faith and express it in love (Gal. 5:6).

Music training in theological education needs to be based on a philosophy of music as an integral part of ministry. Our theological institutions need to recognize music as an essential, integral part of their curricula, for music holds in its grasp the ability to function as a servant in worship, in theological development, in effective communication of the Gospel, and in the meaningful contextualization of Christianity.

The challenge for theological educators, then, is to go beyond the recognition of music's potential for shaping servant leaders and for building up the Church. Music is an indispensable tool for Christian leaders which should automatically be included in the theological student's total educational package. Such music training must include not only practical skills in music but also music leadership skills relevant to our African context. It is an exciting and imperative challenge that our institutions can no longer afford to overlook. We must act.

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