

# Theological Reflections on the Roles of Music in Missionary Endeavours

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## Abstract

This article is a study of the theological reflections on the roles of music in missionary endeavors. The people, angels and Jesus Himself too sing. The role of music in missionary endeavors is biblical. The objective was to determine how the roles of music contribute to missionary endeavours. The study also sought to investigate how employing music in missionary endeavors can bear deep testimony that in joy and sadness, in praise and lament, in victory and temptation, the people of God raise their voices in song to Him. A wide range of books and other sources, primarily on music were consulted. Apart from books, an in-depth theological foundation on the roles of music connected to the birth and life of Christ, in Old Testament scriptures, in Hebrew schools, apostolic and a contemporary time was attempted. The findings showed that music should be considered an effective missional tool to carry information and promote the presence of the Seventh day Adventist church where there is none. It was also found that music is a strong missional tool for teaching children values, new information and history. Furthermore music is a unifying force to help people carry missionary work together.

This study motivated and prepared believers to appreciate the role of music as missional tool to reach out to people. Based on the study, it is noted that music has remained essential to institutional life; hence must be employed on missionary endeavors. Therefore the church particularly in Africa is encouraged to accommodate Africans to express themselves to God as Africans in order to be missional relevant to them. God decorated the world with diversity; we need not blend in everybody but celebrate diversity and simply rid both Western and African music from demonic elements.

**Keywords:** role of music, missional, music in ministry, biblical songs, earliest hymns, musical styles.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the leading 20th century African theologians began his book by asserting that “Africans are notoriously religious” (Mbiti 1969, p. 2). Religion is a way of life in traditional Africa. Good or bad conduct may be informed by religion. As Christian workers, it is vitally important for us to understand African customs and values because it is the basis of numerous cultural beliefs and practices which can enhance missionary endeavors among the African people.

The intention of the article is attempting to explore predominantly selected South African Zulu customs and values which are consistent with biblical principles with a view of coming up with possible bridges that enable African people to appreciate Christianity within the context of Africa. This article further intends to employ selected Zulu customs and values as bridges that can bring Christianity in harmony with African culture. The intention is not to address missiological concepts such as inculturation, enculturation contextualisation and so forth, but to present similarities between Christianity and African Zulu cultures which the Christian missionary can be exposed to for the purposes of bridging the gap between Christianity and African culture. Klaus Fiedler (cited by Hoschele (2008, p. 350) argues that, “African is what is relevant for Africans, of whatever origin a value or practice may be”. Writing from an inculturation perspective Kuene (2012, p. 1) suggests that: there are specific aspects of African culture and tradition that clearly illuminate scripture and can be useful to biblical interpretation without uprooting the African from his/her context as an African.

To reject African culture and tradition as pagan and unbiblical, as did the early missionaries who brought Christianity to Africa is to throw away the baby with the bath water. There is no need for Africans to be stripped of their identity

before they can be Christians. Of key importance is the need for Africa to have a breed of theologians that will reasonably redefine African theology.

## **SINGING IS A MINISTRY THAT BELONGS TO ALL THE PEOPLE OF GOD**

The congregation is always the primary choir. The role of professional or volunteer choirs and musicians is to aid the whole people of God in their worship. While anthems or vocal and instrumental solos may be offered, they do not have to be. Congregational singing, however, is essential. While it is possible to be actively engaged in worship and in prayer while listening to an anthem or solo, a diet of worship which does not regularly include ample opportunity for all the members of the congregation to join in song will be impoverished worship, and the life of the church and the faith of its people will suffer.

## **MUSIC AND THE LIFE OF JESUS**

### **Biblical Songs Connected with Christ's Birth**

1. Song of Elizabeth
  - i. "Blessed art thou among women..."
  - ii. Luke 1:42-45
2. Song of Mary
  - i. "My soul doth magnify the Lord..."
  - ii. Called the "Magnificent"
  - iii. Luke 1:46-55
3. Song of Zacharias (or Zechariah) – when he opened his mouth and praised ...
  - i. "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He hath visited and redeemed His people..."
  - ii. Called the "Benedictus" means blessing in Latin
  - iii. Luke 1:68-79
4. Song of the aged Simeon- Revealed to Simeon that Jesus was the one predicted to bring salvation to human kind.
  - i. "Lord, now let Thou Thy servant depart in peace..."
  - ii. Called the "Nunc dimittis"
  - iii. Luke 2:29-35

### **Christian Earliest Hymns**

1. Song of Praise- Disciples/Apostles used to sing Holy, holy...
  - i. "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts  
Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory.  
Glory to Thee, O Lord Most High. Amen."
  - ii. Called the "Ter sanctus" (Latin for Thrice Holy)
  - iii. Earliest of the Christian hymns
  - iv. Isaiah 6:35; Revelation 4:8.
2. Song of the Angels- Sang to the Shepherds.
  - i. "Glory be to God on high and on earth peace, good-will toward men."
  - ii. Called the "Gloria in excelsis Deo"
  - iii. Isaiah 6:35; Desire of Ages, pp. 47, 48

3. Song in Praise of the Trinity- a Doxology

i. The Greater Doxology, or the Doxology

"Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

Praise Him, all creatures here below.

Praise Him above, ye heavenly host!

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!"

(SDA Hymnal, # 689; New SDA Hymnal, #660)

**Ellen White and Music in the Life of Christ**

1. Songs of Christ's Childhood

i. "When Christ was a child like these children here, He was tempted to sin, but He did not yield to temptation. As He grew older He was tempted, but the songs His mother had taught Him to sing came into His mind, and He would lift His voice in praise ." (Manuscript 65, 1901)

ii. "The Lord had directed that even from babyhood the children should be taught of His goodness and His greatness, especially as revealed in His law and shown in the history of Israel. Song and prayer and lessons from the Scriptures were to be adapted to the opening of mind." (Desire of Ages, p. 69)

2. Songs in Christ's daily work

i. "While Christ was working at the carpenter's bench, others would sometimes surround Him, trying to cause Him to be impatient, but He would begin singing some of the beautiful psalms, and before they realised what they were doing, they had joined with Him in singing, influenced, as it were, by the power of the Holy Spirit which was there." (Adventist Home, p. 443)

ii. "This was the work that Christ did in His youth....

When He was blamed for being so particular about His work, He answered by words of song from the Psalms, and those who had been scolding Him often found themselves uniting with Him in singing, 'O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good; because His mercy endureth forever.'" (Review and Herald, August, 25 , 1904)

3. Songs in Christ's Worship

i. "With the voice of singing He [Jesus] welcomed the morning light." (Manuscript 52)

ii. "Often He [Jesus] expressed the gladness of His heart by singing psalms and heavenly songs. Often the dwellers of Nazareth heard His voice raised in praise and thanksgiving to God." (Desire of Ages, p. 73)

**OLD TESTAMENT SCRIPTURES, THE HYMN BOOK OF CHRIST**

**Biblical Songs and Integral Part of Christ's Heritage**

1. Music part of the regular worship and national festivals

i. "The service of song was made a regular part of religious worship, and David composed psalms, not only for the use of the priests in the sanctuary service, but also to be sung by the people in their journey to the national altar at the annual feasts. The influence thus exerted was far-reaching, and it resulted in freeing the nation from idolatry." (Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 711)

ii. "Evening and morning join with your children in God's worship, reading His word and singing His praise.... If it was essential for Moses to embody the commandments in sacred song, so that as they marched in the wilderness, children could learn to sing the law verse by verse, how essential it is at this time to teach our children God's Word .... Let us do everything in our power to make music in our homes, that God everything in our power to make music in our homes, that God may come in." (Review and Herald, September 8, 1904).

2. Music in the Hebrew Schools

- i. "The chief subjects of study were the law of God with the instructions given to Moses, sacred history, sacred music, and poetry." (Fundamentals of Christian Education, pp. 97, 98)
- ii. "The history of the songs of the Bible is full of suggestions as to the uses and benefits of music and song.... The value of songs as a means of education should never be lost sight of." (Education, pp. 167, 168)

3. Jesus and Apostles in Music

- i. Hymn singing was practiced by Jesus and his disciples (Matthew 26:30).
- ii. The Apostle Paul instructed the Colossians, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3: 16-17).
- iii. The Apostle Paul vows, "I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also" (1 Cor. 14:14-15).

4. Music in Africa

- i. Alter (1985, p. 25) submits that music in an African society is part of life. Life without music is incomplete. It is also considered an art and carrier of information. The art aspect referred here calls for creativity, beauty and aesthetic value; this aspect calls for giftedness on the part of the composer, and choreographers who lead in creative dances, and body movements that accompany singing in Africa.
- ii. In my interaction with Africans, I have observed and concluded that Africans sing with their spirit, emotions, body and vocal chords. A song leader begins the song (be it at church or during any ceremony) then the rest follow. This idea has influenced the way they sing even church hymns and this must not be discouraged at the expense of 'anything African is evil.'
- iii. In Israel, music played a major role in motivating and uniting them together at work (2 Kings 3:13). In the African society, music is a unifying force too. Like the Israelites, Africans sing songs when working in the fields, as they hoe their fields, (*ukuhlakula*) songs are sung to divert the attention from the burden to a completed task. This indeed creates unity and rhythm; they also sing as they pound, shell and winnow their crops, "*ukubhula, ukuhulula lokweba*" that helps to rejuvenate the tired and to maintain the same working pace for everyone. Kamien (2002, p. 584) states that "there are work songs to accompany digging, grinding, chopping, and harvesting." It should be noted that music in work places by Africans which motivates and unites them together can be employed as missional tool to reach out to Africans.
- iv. There is a lot of creativity and beauty in African singing that needs to be appreciated and encouraged. Music aids the memory, so it is a vehicle for education among the Africans. One can easily recall things learnt a while ago if were learnt through music. Hence Africans creatively teach infants values, new information and history through music. The same is true for their elderly people as well. Kamien (2002, p. 582) noted that in Africa, music making is a social activity in which almost everyone participates. The major reasons why African package their values in music is because they are easily grasped and remembered with passage of time. Africans also creatively designed sacred songs, such song like "*Inxhwala*" meaning taboo, which were only sung during sacred ceremonies and (*ukweluleka*) the rite of circumcision for boys entering manhood. In addition, Africans have special songs and dances for special moments, such as "*Iqhuzu*" (dancing by bringing both feet together) and "*makoti phuma sikudlalele*" (bride come out we dance for you), *angisozengilale ngohayezi mina umakoti ekhona*" (we will not have porridge for supper when the bride is there).
- v. The collective participation characteristic of music is retained in African music when it is performed among the communities. Lugira (2009, p. 111) points out that African music presents religious, usually Christian, sentiments in a distinctly African style. Hand clapping, finger popping, vocal prompting, and foot tapping during performances are not considered offensive but viewed as signs of ardent approval that help to motivate the performing artist. In addition, Karmen (2002, p. 580) says, "Music permeates virtually every aspect of African life. It is used to entertain, to accompany dances, plays, religious ceremonies and magic rites, and to mark such events as birth, puberty, marriage and death."

5. Spiritual Songs Still Relevant Today

- i. "God loves His believing people. Go through the psalms, and find all the places where God has promises, and make them your own." (Review and Herald, April 14, 1904)
  - ii. "Amidst the deepening shadows of earth's last great crisis, God's light will shine brightest, and the song of hope and trust will be heard in clearest and loftiest strains....[Isaiah 26:4 is cited] In that day shall this song be sung." (Education, pp. 166, 167)
  - iii. "Let the talent of singing be brought into the work. The use of musical instruments is not at all objectionable. These were used in religious services in ancient times. The worshippers praised God upon the harp and cymbal, and music could have its place in our services." (Letter 132, 1898)
- "How Majestic is Your Name"

6. Christian writers and music in ministry

- i. Reformed theologian Karl Barth points out that singing is not an option for the people of God; it is one of the essential ministries of the church:
- ii. "The Christian church sings. It is not a choral society. Its singing is not a concert. But from inner, material necessity it sings. Singing is the highest form of human expression....What we can and must say quite confidently is that the church which does not sing is not the church. And where...it does not really sing but sighs and mumbles spasmodically, shamefacedly and with an ill grace, it can be at best only a troubled community which is not sure of its cause and of whose ministry and witness there can be no great expectation....The praise of God which finds its concrete culmination in the singing of the community is one of the indispensable forms of the ministry of the church."
- iii. John Calvin recognized the power of congregational singing and unison prayer in helping the church express and experience the unity of the body of Christ. Asserting that the human tongue was especially created to proclaim the praise of God, both through singing and speaking, he noted that "the chief use of the tongue is in public prayers, which are offered in the assembly of the believers, by which it comes about that with one common voice, and as it were, with the same mouth, we all glorify God together, worshipping him with one spirit and the same faith" (Institutes of the Christian Religion).

Calvin cautioned that "we should be very careful that our ears be not more attentive to the melody than our minds to the spiritual meaning of the words....[S]uch songs as have been composed only for the sweetness and delight of the ear are unbecoming to the majesty of the church and cannot but displease God in the highest degree."

**Jewish Music Styles**

1. Folk Music of the Hebrews – This is music that reflect nationality and and cultural identity

- i. Biblical examples are:
  - Song of the well, Numbers 21:17,18
  - Song of love in the vineyard, Isaiah 5:1-4
  - Song of Moses at the Red Sea, Exodus 15:1-8, 20,21.
  - Song of Deborah and Barak, Judges 5
  - Choir that led the army to victory, 2 Chronicles 20:20-28
  - Women's song in praise of David, 1 Samuel 18:5-8

**Example of a Song**

- "You shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace

The mountains and the hills will break forth before you

There'll be shouts of joy and all the trees of the field

Will clap, will clap their hands.

Chorus

*And all the trees of the field will clap their hands,*

*The trees of the field will clap their hands (X2)*

*While you go out with joy."*

ii. Technical features:- Middle-East short melodies and often repetitive

- Rhythm of music similar to that of other peoples of the Middle East
- Melodies short, often repeated, in a narrow compass of four
- Monophonic: harmony, as we know it, was not used at all
- Antiphonal and responsorial singing frequent :- group vs group
- When the Rabbi"

## 2. Music in the Temple and Synagogue – Well organised

i. Biblical examples are:

- Dedication of Solomon's temple , 2 Chronicles 5;11-14; Prophets and Kings , pp. 28, 29
- Organisation of the musicians , 1 Chronicles 25:1-7
- Musical instruments of God, 1 Chronicles 16:42; Psalm 150
- Dedication of second temple: 200 male and female singers, Ezra 2:65; Nehemiah 12:40-43
- Christ taught and read (chanted) in the synagogue, Matthew 9:35, 13:54; Luke 4:15-20

ii. Types of public singing (responsorial) customary in temple services

- Responsorial: leader intones (say) the first half verse,
- Antiphonal (group vs group): groups answering each other in song
- Unison and solo: all intoning (saying) together or one singing alone
- Examples of the use of these forms: Hallel (praise psalm), Psalm 136, Psalms 113-118, and songs of sea, Exodus 15

## **The Hebrew Cantillation, a Type of Chant**

### 1. Used for intoning (saying) poetic texts from the Scriptures

i. Pentateuch frequently sung, Deuteronomy 32:44-46; Patriarchs and Prophets, pp. 467, 468.

"This was the wisdom of Moses to present the truth to them in song, that in strains of melody they would become familiar with them and be impressed. It was important for the children of to learn the song; for this would speak continual sermon." (Manuscript 71, 1897)

ii. Prophets often wrote in poetic form appropriate for chanting (Isa 26:1-4)

iii. Psalms were sung rather than read (Psalm 140 and hearings for each psalm).

### 2. Sources of information regarding early Jewish music

- i. Isolated societies such as Yemen in Arabia
- ii. Research of A. Idelsohn, Jewish Music
- iii. Archaeological discoveries
- iv. Biblical and other manuscripts



3. Musical declamation (recitation)

- i. Melody closely parallels the inflection of normal speaking
- ii. An oral rather than a written tradition
- iii. Hand signals (cheironomy) reminded of the melodic inflection
- iv. A melodic pattern (mode) imposed upon the singer a specific pitch, scale, accent, tempo and mood, but allowed room for elaboration
- v. Rhythm not restricted by metric system of Western music
- vi. Long sustained tones avoided in favour of ornamental melodies
- vii. Microtonal intervals common (microtone smaller than half-tone)
- viii. Harmony not present, as we understand the term

**Use of Musical Instruments**

1. While instruments were used, note that emphasis was on voice not instruments
  - i. Instruments served as an accompaniment or embellishment
  - ii. Term “Selah” believed to be a cue for instrumental interludes
2. Israel borrowed practically all of her instruments from surrounding countries.
  - i. Instruments came from Arabia, Babylonia, and Egypt
  - ii. Shofar (typical Israel instrument for special events) was a ram’s horn, used in temple for solemn occasions
3. For description of types of instruments, the SDA Bible Commentary, Volume 3, pages 27-32 list these:
  - i. Stringed instruments: harp/psaltery/viol, lute, lyre/harp
  - ii. Woodwind/wind instruments: flute/organ/pipe, horn/shofar, trumpet
  - iii. Percussion (hand drum) instruments: castanets/rattler-sistrum, tambourine/tabret/timbrel
4. Instruments frowned upon when imitating heathen practices, Amos 6:3-6
5. Instruments encouraged for the temple and synagogue, 2 Chronicles 29:25-30. “The sacred choir lifted their voices in praise to God, and the melody of their voices was accompanied by all kinds of musical instruments. And while the courts of the temple resounded as it had formerly filled the wilderness tabernacle.” (Review and Herald, November 9, 1905).

Finally, it must be appreciated that Africans are noisy in their singing and the researcher assumes even the day they shall get to heaven it shall be felt and heard that they have arrived. This background influences the way people sing. So Africans cannot be still while singing and worshipping their God. Africans have loud vocal chords. Thorpe (1991, p. 35) noted that theatre, dancing, singing and music are communal forms of religious expressions. They may act as a prelude to war, celebrate a good harvest, and mark a birth, a marriage, or a death. It was noticed that African dancing and singing sometimes are planned and formal, but often they are simply spontaneous expressions of emotions. The African pattern is life – affirming and life – sustaining.

Another thing which must be considered in African singing is the use of musical instruments. African instruments are condemned as evil whereas those from the west are considered good. Turbull (1976, p. 171) admits that the marimba, in a Shona culture, for example, is thought to represent a soul that can do away with the evil spirits. It has its equivalent in the piano that is generally acceptable in the worship of God in church. Again Africans are community conscious, hence audience participation, a type of communal singing has greater importance in African music than in most western music. Interaction is closely related to the ceremony and ritual. Mbiti (1969:67) God is often worshipped through songs, and African peoples are very fond of singing. In Africa many of the religious gatherings and ceremonies are accompanied by singing which not only helps to pass on religious knowledge from one person or group to another, but helps create

and strengthen corporate feeling and solidarity. This too is a ritual, but the behavior is generally restricted to a stylized expression of appreciation at the conclusion of a performance, and a spontaneous response at other times is prohibited by tacit agreement.

The collective participation characteristic of music is retained in African music when it is performed among the communities. Lugira (2009, p. 111) points out that African music presents religious, usually Christian, sentiments in a distinctly African style. Hand clapping, finger popping, vocal prompting, and foot tapping during performances are not considered offensive but viewed as signs of ardent approval that help to motivate the performing artist. In addition, Karmen (2002, p. 580) says, "Music permeates virtually every aspect of African life. It is used to entertain, to accompany dances, plays, religious ceremonies and magic rites, and to mark such events as birth, puberty, marriage and death."

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, our study demonstrated that music is more than just an aesthetic complement to worship or missionary work; it is a divinely sanctioned, biblically founded, and theologically rich missionary tool. From the songs performed at Christ's birth to the early hymns of the Christian church and the lively musical traditions of African civilizations, music has always served as a vehicle for education, unification, spiritual growth, and cultural expression. The study emphasized music's unique ability to bridge the gap between African traditional values and Christian truths, especially in settings where oral tradition and social engagement are important. Music improves memory, elicits emotion, and creates group identity—all aspects that make it vital in mission.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church, particularly in Africa, is urged to embrace music that expresses local cultural identity while adhering to biblical principles. Rejecting African musical genres based on their cultural origins risks suppressing genuine expressions of worship. Instead, the church should appreciate God's gift of cultural diversity by allowing African believers to worship Him as Africans. When music is used intelligently and biblically, it not only improves worship, but it also serves as a compelling testament to the gospel that transcends generations and cultures. Let the church sing, teach, and witness openly and gladly.

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