

---

## POETRY, SINGING, AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

Mark J. Hatcher

As the last words of the preacher's sermon were spoken, the congregation sat quietly in the midst of a hush that was filled with a sense of the Divine Presence. Several people had come to the front of the congregation to weep and pray before God. When they had finished praying, the song leader spontaneously began to sing the words, "I will serve Thee, because I love Thee. You have given life to me." With radiant faces the congregation joined in the singing, the words of the song capturing the response of their hearts to God in that moment. Poetry put to music became an articulation both of their worship of God and the experiential meaning of their faith in Jesus Christ.

Poetry and singing have accompanied Christianity from the time of the first Christian disciples to the present. H. T. McElrath states that music was "admitted early to Christian activity because it provided a language for the deepest expressions of the soul."<sup>1</sup> The images, narratives, and melody that poetry put to song go beyond mere cognitive expression and involve the affective and volitional dimensions of people. Songs communicate a complexity of experience that cannot be expressed through abstract language. Their ability to capture complex dimensions of life and relationships make them significant vehicles for interaction and communion with God.

---

<sup>1</sup>Keith Crim, ed., *Perennial Dictionary of World Religions* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1981), s. v. "Music, in Christianity," by H.T. McElrath, 503.

It is significant that poetry and singing have frequently played a prominent role in new Christian movements and in Christian revitalization movements. They have functioned within those movements as an effective means for spreading knowledge of the gospel, stimulating faith, encouraging Christian growth, and expressing the various dimensions of Christian experience. Such functions suggest that poetry and singing are significant means for forming, expressing, and diffusing an understanding of God, the gospel, and Christian life and speak powerfully to a people's contemporary situation. In other words, they facilitate the contextualization of theology.

Stephen Bevans states that a theology that is contextual will take into account "the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the Christian people; the culture in which one is theologizing; and social change in that culture."<sup>2</sup> Dean S. Gilliland defines contextualized theology as "the dynamic reflection carried out by the particular church upon its own life in light of the Word of God and historic Christian truth."<sup>3</sup> Common to both of these definitions is the introduction of experience into the arena of theological reflection. The concern is to have a theology that connects the meaning of God's revelation through Jesus Christ with the life issues and the contemporary experience of a local Christian community. Various models have been proposed to facilitate the development of that connection, but most models have given little consideration to the role that poetry and singing play in the contextualizing process.

The following will argue that poetry and singing provide a powerful tool for contextualizing theology by facilitating the incarnation of Christian meaning into contemporary Christian experience. Their use of the language of image, narrative, and melody make them a suitable vehicle for bringing the concerns of gospel, tradition, and local cultural

---

<sup>2</sup>Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Faith and Culture Series (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 1.

<sup>3</sup>Dean S. Gilliland, "Contextual Theology As Incarnational Mission," in *The Word Among Us*, ed. Dean S. Gilliland (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1989), 12.

experience together into a creative synthesis that is authentic to each. Through several historical examples, the ways that poetry and singing have functioned as a means for forming, expressing, and diffusing contextual Christian theology will be identified. The power poetry and singing have for connecting sacred reality to daily Christian experience will then be interpreted from the perspectives of Clifford Geertz's understanding of religion and Victor Turner's concept of *communitas*. The paper will conclude with some suggestions of how poetry and singing could be intentionally employed as a means for facilitating the contextualization of theology.

### **Poetry and Singing in the New Testament**

The early church was a singing community. In Ephesians 5:19-20 the apostle Paul instructs the Christian community to "speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>4</sup> This passage, along with the Christian poetry/songs that are quoted in such passages as Philippians 2:6-11; Colossians 1:15-20; Ephesians 2:14ff; 1 Timothy 3:16; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Hebrews 1:3; the Prologue of John; Revelation 5:9, 12f; 12:10ff; 19:1f; and 19:6, has led K. H. Bartels to argue that songs "formed a central part of early Christian liturgy." He sees this to be in continuity with the worship of the Old Testament community.<sup>5</sup>

Singing in the early Christian community functioned as a means for spiritual formation, incarnating the meaning of the gospel into the lives of those participating in worship. Colossians 3:16 says, "Let the word of Christ  *dwell in you richly* as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with

---

<sup>4</sup>All Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*, 1984.

<sup>5</sup>Colin Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), s.v. "Song, Hymn, Psalm," by H.K. Bartels, 674.

gratitude in your hearts to God.” In conjunction with teaching and admonishment, the practice of singing in worship facilitated the penetration of the word of Christ into the *experience* of Christian believers. It was one of several vehicles through which the Holy Spirit spoke to the inner person, and the reality of the meaning of Christ took up residence within Christians. The prayer of Paul in Ephesians 3:16-19 indicates that the penetration of the word of Christ into the inner person establishes Christian believers in love, a love which in turn must become manifest in the kind of transformed social relationships spelled out in Ephesians 4-6. Singing, therefore, functioned as a vehicle for the meaning of the gospel to be received in the inner self in such a way that it demanded an ongoing application of its meaning to the details of everyday social interaction.

Singing and poetry also functioned as a means for individuals and the Christian community to express joy, thankfulness, and devotion to God in response to God’s gracious activity among them. Examples of such expression are found in Luke’s account of the birth and infancy narratives (the *Magnificat* and the *Benedictus*), the doxology Paul wrote in Romans 12:33-36, and the numerous hymnic responses of angels and Christians recorded in Revelation. Common to all of these examples is the inter-penetration of Old Testament language and imagery with language referring to the person’s or people’s present experience of the activity of God. In the *Magnificat*, Mary takes phrases from numerous Old Testament psalms and applies them to what God is doing in making her pregnant. Paul echoes Isaiah 40:13 and Job 41:11 in his response to his new understanding of how the merciful purposes of God for both Jew and Gentile are being fulfilled through his present ministry to the Gentiles. Revelation 5:9-10,12 takes the imagery of Old Testament sacrifice and the priesthood of Israel and applies them to the redemptive activity of Christ that the worshipers have received. The inter-penetration of the old, sacred story with the present experience of God indicates the power of poetry and singing to enable people to perceive and articulate that they have entered into the sacred story. The sacred history is their history, and the God who acted in the Old Testament and through Jesus Christ is the God who is acting in their situation. Their response of love and devotion to God joins with the response of all of God’s people who have gone before them.

## Poetry and Singing in the 18th Century Methodist Revival

The Methodist revival provides an example of an intentional use of hymns to awaken people to the call of the gospel and to facilitate their spiritual formation. Prior to the 18th century revival, hymn singing in Britain was largely confined to Dissenters and small religious societies within the Church of England. John Wesley recognized the powerful effect hymn singing could have in bringing people to religious convictions and in increasing their understanding of the Bible. From the early days of the Oxford Methodists onward, Wesley made the singing of hymns a regular feature of public evangelism, Methodist meetings (societies, classes, and bands), and Methodist devotional practices. "Methodists everywhere became well known for their singing."<sup>6</sup>

Oliver A. Beckerlegge states that the content of the hymns used by the Methodists arose out of the reflections of the Methodist hymn writers upon the spiritual experiences of the poor and unlettered who were impacted by the revival.<sup>7</sup> These experiences were reflected upon in the light of Scripture, so that a characteristic feature of many of the hymns is the application of biblical phrases and images to the personal life of the one reading or singing the hymn. For example, observe the appropriation of the language found in 2 Corinthians 1:22 and Ephesians 1:13-14 to the Methodist believer's aspiration to receive the Holy Spirit in the following hymn:

I want the spirit of power within . . .  
I cannot rest in sins forgiven;  
Where is the earnest of my heaven?  
Where the indubitable seal  
That ascertains the kingdom mine?

---

<sup>6</sup>Oliver A. Beckerlegge, "The Hymn-Book In Methodist Worship," in *The Works of John Wesley: A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, vol. 7, eds. Franz Hildebrandt, Oliver A. Beckerlegge, James Dale (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 61-69.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 62.

The powerful stamp I long to feel,  
The signature of love divine!  
O shed it in my heart abroad,  
Fullness of love—of heaven—of God.<sup>8</sup>

This kind of wedding of biblical phrases and images to personal Methodist experience expressed in a powerful way that the biblical word was a word to the contemporary person. It connected what Methodists were experiencing to what the Bible was describing, promising, or warning against.

Beckerlegge gives some examples of the effective way Methodist hymns conveyed the meaning of the gospel to the contemporary experience of people. He states that a man named Joseph Cownley heard Wesley preach and became convicted of sin. As he struggled to sleep that night, the words of a hymn he had heard during the preaching service came to his mind:

To save what was lost, From heaven he came;  
Come, sinners, and trust In Jesus's name!  
He offers you pardon, He bids you be free;  
If sin be your burden, O come unto me!

As those words sang in his head, Joseph received assurance that his sins were forgiven.<sup>9</sup>

Another man named Billy Bray was a Cornish miner who had recently been converted. As he passed by a mine shaft where some people he knew had fallen to their death, he began to struggle with fears about his own mortality. Then he remembered that Jesus had overcome the devil who was frightening him, and he began to sing a Methodist hymn he had learned:

---

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 65.

Jesus, the name high over all  
In hell, or earth, or sky;  
Angels and men before it fall,  
And devils fear and fly.

The hymn both expressed and confirmed to him that Jesus' victory over the devil in the Bible was also a victory over the fears he was currently experiencing.

Richard P. Heitzenrater states that Wesley intentionally used hymn-singing to implant Methodist teaching in the minds and memories of the people.<sup>10</sup> Wesley himself states that his 1779 collection of hymns was "a little body of experimental and practical divinity" that illustrated all the important truths of Christianity and proved them by scripture and reason. He saw them functioning as a means for stimulating spiritual devotion, confirming people in their faith, enlivening their hope, and increasing their love to God and people.<sup>11</sup>

## **Poetry and Singing Among Contemporary Ethiopian Christians**

Lila W. Balisky states that in the middle 1960s a charismatic renewal movement in Ethiopia began to create indigenous Christian music, expressing Christian meanings through Ethiopian poetic and melodic patterns. Within a few years hundreds of these new Christian songs were being produced by both soloists and choirs and were being sung by congregations of all denominations throughout Ethiopia. Balisky credits the use of these songs as "a major factor in the spiritual dynamics which

---

<sup>10</sup>Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 231.

<sup>11</sup>John Wesley, "A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists," in *The Works of John Wesley: A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, vol. 7, eds. Franz Hildebrandt, Oliver A. Beckerlegge, James Dale (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 74-75.

sustained the Ethiopian church through the 17 difficult years following the [Marxist] revolution that began in 1974.”<sup>12</sup>

Balisky examined the songs of a prominent song writer named Tesfaye in order to answer the question, “Why do people, weep, cluck, and respond so fervently to these songs?”<sup>13</sup> She identified five major features that suggest why these songs function as a means for forming, expressing, and diffusing a Christian theology that is contextual to the Ethiopian experience. The first feature is that the songs employ images of the natural world that surrounds the experience of Ethiopians. Such images fill Ethiopian literature, expressing deep levels of Ethiopian consciousness. They are the language of Ethiopian experience. The second feature is the wedding of Old Testament narratives to contemporary personal Christian experience. For example, the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s trial by fire becomes in the songs the story of the Ethiopian Christians’ trial by fire under the persecution of a Marxist government. Contemporary history and biblical history have interpenetrated. A third feature is a focus on the suffering of Jesus *for* us and his subsequent resurrection. This enhances an awareness that God knows the undue physical affliction the Ethiopians experience, is present in their midst, and is calling for an authentic Christian response according to the model of Jesus. A fourth feature is the prominence of the theme of deliverance. Deliverance is applied to various forms of physical, emotional, and spiritual persecution that Ethiopians face. Jesus’ salvation works in the spheres of life with which Ethiopian Christians struggle. The fifth feature is the setting of catechisms and biblical passages to tunes in the Ethiopian style. Such musical renditions have not only enhanced memorization of the passages but have also enabled them to be appropriated at deeper levels of meaning.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup>Lila W. Balisky, “Theology in Song: Ethiopia’s Tesfaye Gabbiso,” *Missiology* 25/4 (October 1997): 449.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 451.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 451-455.



The above indicates that these indigenous Ethiopian songs powerfully connect the meaning of God's revelation through Jesus Christ with the life issues and the contemporary experience of the Ethiopian Christian community. Their wide spread acceptance among all Ethiopian Christians, the strength of emotion by which they are sung, and the correlation of faithful Christian life style with their use testify that they bring together what is both Christian and Ethiopian. As such they might be considered to be both a means to and an expression of a Christian theology that is contextual to the Ethiopian situation. They exercise a power to bring gospel, church tradition and cultural experience together in a way that call and empower Ethiopians to live authentically as Christians and Ethiopians.

### **Poetry, Singing, And The Construction Of Symbol Systems**

The power of poetry and singing to facilitate the contextualization of theology is connected with both the work of the Holy Spirit and with several roles poetry and singing can play in the construction of a people's religious symbol system. Clifford Geertz argues that

a religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.<sup>15</sup>

Geertz understands religious symbol systems to function as both models *of* reality and models *for* reality. By that he means that symbol systems give an objective conceptual form to social and psychological reality (and I would add spiritual reality). They are shaped in such a way that they themselves are congruent with this reality and provide a template for

---

<sup>15</sup>Clifford Geertz, "Religion As A Cultural System," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (London: Tavistock Publications, 1966), 4.

people to live in a way that conforms to reality.<sup>16</sup> The construction of such systems within people orients and motivates people to live in conformity with the reality the symbol system conceptualizes.

The historical examples in the previous sections indicate that Christian poetry and singing facilitate the construction of these kinds of Christian symbol systems within people. Songs contribute to “the word of Christ” dwelling in believers (Col 3:16). The Methodist miner remembers and applies a Christian song’s reference to the symbol of Christ’s victory over the devil to his fear of mortality. An Ethiopian Christian receives guidance in facing persecution from a song’s reference to the symbol of the three Hebrews facing the fiery furnace. It must be understood that poetry and singing are not the source of the content of these symbols. That content is supplied by the work of the Holy Spirit who illuminates people’s understanding of the reality to which the biblical images, narratives, and sayings point (John 14:26; 16:12-15). But poetry and singing do work as a vehicle for the illuminated biblical symbols (images, narratives, sayings) to join with symbols in the cultural environment to serve Christian believers as models *of* and *for* reality.

### ***Communitas***

The work of Victor Turner on ritual process and worship provides a perspective that helps to explain the dynamics by which poetry and singing can function in such a powerful way to construct religious symbol systems within people. Turner distinguishes two major modes by which people interrelate with others in their society.<sup>17</sup> The first mode is the normal patterns of social structure by which a culture organizes people into various statuses and roles and provides rules by which people interact with each other in accordance with the statuses and roles

---

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>17</sup>Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1969), 96.

they occupy. For example, I relate to my children as a father, to a store clerk as a shopper, to my boss as a worker, to the police as a citizen, and so on. The second mode occurs when people are moved to the margin of the normal patterns of social structure and experience their common humanity and oneness with each other. Turner gives this mode of interrelating the name *communitas*. People sometimes shift into this mode in spontaneous ways, such as at an office Christmas party where through the singing of Christmas carols employees of all ranks get caught up in a feeling of awe and oneness with each other. Ritual processes, such as a church service, deliberately try to invoke this mode through asking people of all statuses to interact with God as one people through the corporate activities of singing, praying, giving, listening, sitting, standing, etc.. The ritual process removes the differentiation of people by kinship, economic and political domains and asks people to relate to each other and God in the structure of the symbols and symbolic activity that are embodied in the ritual.<sup>18</sup>

Turner observes that as people move to the margin of social structure and enter into the mode of *communitas*, they experience a sense of lowliness and sacredness.<sup>19</sup> Turner's focus was on the stripping away of such things as status, property, nomenclature, gender distinctions, etc. that people would undergo during rites of passage.<sup>20</sup> As people are brought low in this way, they experience an "unprecedented potency" that is often termed to be sacred or holy.<sup>21</sup> Some observations of other situations in which the mode of *communitas* occurs suggest that this sense of lowliness and sacredness can be experienced in other ways as well. For example, a group of people singing songs around a campfire can enter into a *communitas* experience in which they realize a togetherness

---

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 132-33.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 96.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 106.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 128.

that transcends their normal awareness. Though to their knowledge, they have not been ritually stripped of anything, the awareness of their individualities has been brought low in relation to their sense of togetherness, and they are impressed with the special (sacred) power of that togetherness. Another kind of example may be seen in a Christian communion service. Many people testify that while participating in the ritual of communion, they experience the presence of God and God's forgiveness of their sins. They simultaneously experience their lowliness before God and the sacredness of God's acceptance of and communion with them as people adopted into God's family.

Turner states that through this experience of a sense of lowliness and sacredness, people become open to symbolic instruction from the sacred (or what transcends them) concerning fundamental patterns of human values, meaning and relationships.<sup>22</sup> The content of that symbolic instruction will depend upon what is in view during the experience of *communitas*. During a communion service, it is the mystery of what God has done through Christ. The experience of this instruction makes deep impressions on people's minds and becomes connected to visual and auditory symbolic representations that carry the experience potentially inside them even after they exit the mode of *communitas* and re-enter the normal mode of social interaction. The connection between the symbolic representations and the *communitas* experience is such that when the symbolic representations are used at a later time in certain ways, they have the power to reinvolve the *communitas* experience and its instruction.<sup>23</sup> This reinvoking may occur through deliberate use of those symbolic representations in a subsequent ritual, or it may spontaneously enter into the normal mode of social interaction through some event or thought that triggers it.

An experience I had in the early years of my Christian life provides an example of what Turner is talking about. During those years I would

---

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 105.

<sup>23</sup>J. Randall Nichols, "Worship as Anti-Structure: The Contribution of Victor Turner," *Theology Today* 41 (January 1985): 404.

often attend a Saturday night prayer service at my local church. The prayer service was held in one of the adult Sunday School classrooms. About ten to thirty people would kneel on the carpeted floor in front of folding chairs for about an hour to commune with and present petitions to God. We would take turns praying out loud, and sometimes several people would pray out loud simultaneously. Initially my attention would be on the mechanics of what we were doing, but after five or ten minutes I would begin to experience a sense of God's presence. In Turner's words, I experienced both a common bond with the Christians praying with me (*communitas*) and a sense of lowliness and sacredness. The verbal forms of the prayers people uttered provided me with symbolic instruction. These forms were often a mix of biblical (KJV) and contemporary phrases that formed a prayer language for this group of people. The prayers would recall various biblical expressions of praise and promises, and they would ask God to heal the sick, provide security for those facing some danger, conversion for those who were not Christian, and sanctification for those who were Christian. The instruction from the content of those prayers made deep impressions on me, shaping my understanding of God and God's involvement in human affairs. Some of the biblical promises recited in those prayers in the language of the KJV Bible became so imprinted on my mind that I memorized them without any intentional effort to do so. The mention of just a short phrase from any of those verses can at times give me a sense of the presence of God and what I learned about God in those prayer meetings. That particular Sunday School classroom also became a symbol of those experiences of prayer. Just seeing the classroom or remembering it can reinvoke the sense of *communitas* that I experienced there.

### **The Functional Relationship Of Poetry And Singing To *Communitas***

In the light of the above it can be observed that poetry and singing bear three functional relationships to the experience of *communitas* that help to explain their power to facilitate the contextualization of theol-

ogy. First, they are an effective means for moving people to the margin of normal structures and invoking the experience of *communitas*. Through doing this they help people to become open and responsive to the work of the Holy Spirit within them. Second, they provide an effective language during the experience of *communitas* for interacting with God and the sacred meanings found in scripture. Third, they provide auditory symbols that can reinvolve into consciousness what one has experienced and learned during the time of *communitas*. The following will explain these functions in more detail.

1. The corporate singing of hymns and other Christian songs helps people to transition into the mode of *communitas*. Just the act of singing together begins to strip away the normal structures of interrelating. The melody, the imagery, and the message of the songs make an appeal to the cognitive, affective and volitional dimensions of people. Through that appeal songs draw people to the margin of normal affairs and bring their corporate attention toward God. Revivalists have long recognized that singing Christian songs form people into a congregation ready to hear the preached word (*communitas*), and it is the common practice of revivalists to precede their preaching by a sufficient amount of congregational singing for this to occur. Wesley found it valuable to begin every Methodist meeting with a hymn, whether it be open air preaching to unevangelized crowds or the meetings of bands, classes, or prayer meetings.<sup>24</sup>

2. Once people have entered into the mode of *communitas*, Christian songs provide an effective symbol system for interacting with God. Their capacity to express devotion, intent, and emotions make them a multi-dimensional vehicle for hearing from and responding to God. Their poetry often makes use of picture words to express complexes of meaning. John Shea states that such images “are not so much what we

---

<sup>24</sup>Beckerlegge, 63-64.

see as what we see through.”<sup>25</sup> They present concentrated theologies relating to various aspects of a Christian people’s relationship to God, other people, and the world.<sup>26</sup> For example, observe the complex of theological meaning concerning God, the threat of evil, and deliverance that a song composed by the Ethiopian Tesfaye Gabbiso expresses through the picture of a Father rescuing a child from a roaring lion:

Your enemy the devil is roaring to swallow you.  
Don’t be scared due to the noise.  
For your Father is with you.  
He will snatch you out of the enemy’s mouth  
And will lock his jaws.  
He will show him clearly that he will never leave you.<sup>27</sup>

The picture in this song employs and interprets images and sayings from the Bible (1 Pet 5:8-9; John 15:18-25; Heb 13:5-6) that resonate with Ethiopian experience and communicate by analogy an understanding of God’s personal care, God’s power to deliver, and a Christian response to the threat of persecution or some other disaster. It presents a symbol system that can serve as a model of reality consistent with biblical teaching and a model for reality that can serve as a template by which Ethiopians can live when they face persecution and difficulty.

3. The impression made on a person by a Christian song during the experience of God’s presence while in *communitas* has a mnemonic effect, storing within a person both the experience of God’s presence and the model of and for reality expressed in the symbol system of the song. It becomes possible for the mention of a phrase from the song to reinvolve both the song and an awareness of God’s presence. It also becomes

---

<sup>25</sup>John Shea, “Theological Assumptions and Ministerial Style,” in *Alternative Futures for Worship*, vol. 6. Leadership Ministry in Community (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1987), 107.

<sup>26</sup>Stephen Bevans, “Seeing Mission Through Images,” *Missiology* 19/1 (January 1991): 46.

<sup>27</sup>Quoted in Balisky, 454.

possible for a relevant life situation to call forth the song from memory along with its template for living and the awareness of God's presence. For example, when my son was born prematurely and was often close to death as an infant, the following refrain would often appear in my mind, helping me to trust God and experience God's peace in the midst of my anxiety:

Some thro' the waters, some thro' the flood,  
Some thro' the fire, but all thro' the blood.  
Some thro' great sorrow, but God gives a song  
In the night season and all the day long.<sup>28</sup>

Through the above three functional relationships to *communitas*, poetry and song may be used by the Spirit of God to construct a religious symbol system in people's minds. The symbol system receives its form content from both the Bible and the local culture that are in view during the experience of God's presence, and its meaning content from the reality that the Holy Spirit illuminates through the forms taken from those sources. Poetry and song capture the forms with their illuminated meanings and become a vehicle through which God impresses them on people's minds. Poetry and song further become a means through which the models of and for reality that they contain can be recalled and applied in appropriate life situations.

### **Employing Poetry And Singing In Contextualization**

Marcus Paul Bach Felde observes that the creation of Christian songs "has been an occasional enterprise, prompted by personal or ecclesiastical crises." In other words, these songs are inspired by a person's or church community's experience of the activity of God, an experience usually received in relation to a specific situation or problem. For example, Haldor Lillenas created the hymn, "My Wonderful Lord," in response to an assurance he received from an experience of God's

---

<sup>28</sup>"God Leads Us Along," in *Sing To the Lord* (Kansas: Lillenas Publ., 1993), 92.



presence at a time when he was doubting his vocation. Steve Adams was inspired to compose the song, "Where the Spirit of the Lord Is," during a time of prayer at the close of a service that was filled with a sense of the presence of God. Charles Widmeyer wrote "In The New Jerusalem" as a God-inspired statement of faith in the resurrection during a time when the doctors said his wife might die.<sup>29</sup>

This relationship of poetry and songs to actual experiences of God by people within a culture is part of what gives poetry and songs their power to facilitate the contextualization of theology within that culture. It is through the inspiration of God that gospel meaning will be brought together in a synthesis with forms that will resonate that meaning in the culture. This indicates that the creation and employment of Christian songs for the purpose of encouraging contextualization of the gospel will generally be outside the competency of a cross-cultural witness. It is the task of Christians within the local culture whom God inspires to create the songs, and it is the task of the Christian communities within the local culture to accept, reject, or modify the songs that are created.

However, both cross-cultural witnesses and indigenous church leaders can take steps that will stimulate the creation and use of songs that will facilitate contextualization. One step would be to encourage Christians to compose indigenous songs that reflect their experience of the meaning of the gospel. For example Balisky encouraged the Ethiopian song writer, Tesfaye Gabbiso, in his formative years to be open to composing and singing indigenous Christian music by helping him to write down the words of indigenous Christian songs that were aired on the radio.<sup>30</sup> Church leaders could become pro-active in recognizing the value of existing indigenous Christian songs, in giving opportunities for indigenous Christian songs to be introduced and used in the church, in encouraging people to write such songs, and in leading

---

<sup>29</sup>Keith Schwanz, "Song of Spiritual Experience," *Herald of Holiness* 86/11 (November 1997): 29-31.

<sup>30</sup>Balisky, 449.

the church in evaluating the authenticity of the songs' theological and cultural meaning.

The hymns of the Wesleyan revival and the Christian songs that have become such a force in Ethiopia indicate the value of seeking for musical forms that both resonate with the people and are possible for them to sing easily. Wesley put the poetry of Methodist hymns to tunes that were already well-known and commonly used among the poor of England. In his "Thoughts on the Power of Music," Wesley strongly argues against the use of harmonies such as counterpoint because they weaken the clarity and force of both melody and text.<sup>31</sup> Balisky speaks of little Ethiopian boys singing an indigenous Christian song as they ran down a hill in play.<sup>32</sup> If the objective is the contextualization of theology, musical forms that people can naturally carry within themselves would be the ideal. These musical forms would not necessarily have to be indigenous. There has been enough diffusion and enthusiastic acceptance of non-indigenous Christian songs across cultures and history to indicate that the primary issue is their agreeableness to the musical tastes of the people, their effectiveness in lodging within people's minds, and their suitability to a clear communication of gospel meaning.

The poetry of Christian songs needs to draw on and integrate biblical and cultural materials through a process of inspiration and spiritual reflection. Felde suggests some good questions that can assist Christians in their selection of materials: What symbols do Christians use to talk about their faith?<sup>33</sup> What images of salvation do they use? What are the situations for which there are no songs? Wesley was

---

<sup>31</sup>John Wesley, "Thoughts on the Power of Music," in *The Works of John Wesley: A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, vol. 7, eds. Franz Hildebrandt, Oliver A. Beckerlegge, James Dale (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 766-69.

<sup>32</sup>Balisky, 447.

<sup>33</sup>Felde, 20.

concerned about having hymns available that would express and illustrate every important practical and speculative truth of the Christian faith.<sup>34</sup> He wanted the language of the hymns to be simultaneously eloquent and simple English.

Samuel K. Ada observes that errors can creep into the poetry and songs used by a Christian community due to their dialog with the surrounding culture.<sup>35</sup> As Bevans warns in regard to a contextual theology, there is always a danger that a theology can become a “culture theology” that “compromises and betrays Christianity.”<sup>36</sup> Theological reflection in the church must therefore evaluate the meanings that are being expressed through the language of the poems and songs, and correct them when necessary. As models of and for reality, the meaning they model is all important. Robert J. Schreiter suggests five criteria that are useful for making such an evaluation: 1) the way it coheres with the rest of Christian doctrine; 2) the way it affects and fits in with the rest of Christian worship; 3) the way it affects Christian practice; 4) the way it stands up to the critical scrutiny of churches in other cultural contexts; and 5) the way it challenges the self-understanding of the entire church.<sup>37</sup>

When poetry and singing are employed within the worship liturgy for the purpose of contextualization, the way they can function to construct religious symbol systems in connection with the mode of *communitas* must also be kept in mind. Questions such as the following need to be asked: In what way can they be used to facilitate transition into the mode of *communitas*? In what way can they be used to express communication between the worshipers and God? In what way can they become a symbolic expression that will capture the meaning that is

---

<sup>34</sup>Wesley, “A Collection of Hymns,” 73-74.

<sup>35</sup>Samuel K. Ada, “In Dialogue,” *International Review of Mission* 52 (January 1975): 53-54.

<sup>36</sup>Bevans, *Models*, 17.

<sup>37</sup>Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), 118-21.

in focus during a particular worship time and become a symbol that can reinvoke both Christian meaning and a sense of God's presence?

### **Conclusion**

Poetry and singing are a significant means for forming, expressing, and diffusing an understanding of God, the gospel, and Christian life and for speaking powerfully to a people's contemporary situation. They provide a powerful tool for contextualizing theology by facilitating the incarnation of Christian meaning into contemporary Christian experience. Through their contributions to the formation within people of a religious symbol system that functions as a model of and model for reality, they bring the biblical history and the meaning of the gospel into inter-penetration with the cultural world of Christian believers. Historical examples during times of Christian expansion and renewal give evidence of their power to function in this way. A more intentional use of poetry and singing may be one of the best ways to advance the contextualization process.