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Emmett G. Price III

Northeastern University; Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

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Singing the Sermon: Where Musicology Meets Homiletics¹

Emmett G. Price III

In the Black Church good preaching and good singing are almost invariably the minimum conditions of a successful ministry. —C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya²

The writings of Zora Neale Hurston and James Baldwin are well known for their descriptive storytelling, their ability to fuse fact and fiction in a captivating manner, and their clever portrayals of old-fashioned Black preaching. Most notable in this style of preaching is the pivotal moment toward the end of the sermon when the preacher turns into part preacher and part singer, using rhythmic phrasing to deliver melodic statements that are improvised, emphatic, and often exaggerated in the form of melismata. The practices of “whooping” or “tuning up” are most often witnessed in traditional, mainline churches within the Black Christian Experience.³ To some, they appear as emotive tools to stimulate the congregation as the preacher moves from her/his penultimate section of the sermon to the final cadence. To others, they are styles or genres of performance practice made prominent within Black churches across the United States while simultaneously being appropriated in non-Black worship spaces. To the outsider, the tradition of “singing the sermon” is a unique aspect of the Black Christian Experience and a practice that characterizes, as the above epigraph infers, a baseline of expectation for a successful ministry. Although this metric of success in the Black Christian Experience is not so often articulated in writing, it is a perceived expectation that creates a great challenge and an even greater opportunity to explore and better understand the connectivity between singing and preaching, not just in the Black Christian Experience, but also within Christianity in toto.

The notion of “singing the sermon” (and “singing as sermon”) is much broader than the practice of “whooping” or “tuning up.” In fact, from the very beginning of the Christian movement, singing and preaching were inextricably linked not only as dominant components of congregational worship but also as major methods of articulating and explicating personal and communal theologies across the diverse and expansive expressions of Christianity. From the singing and preaching of Jesus, to the ponderings of the Apostle Paul, to the musings of early church patriarchs and sixteenth-century reformers, to contemporary practices across the multitude of old and new expressions of Christianity, scholars have much to learn about the delicate yet dynamic duo of singing and preaching. This article will utilize the disciplines of

¹ An earlier version of this article was presented at *Marching to Zion: Celebrating and Preserving Black Sacred Music*, 2014 Pruitt Symposium at Baylor University. This particular paper was sponsored by the George W. Truett Theological Seminary’s Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching.

² C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 346.

³ In “Whooping: The Musicality of African American Preaching Past and Present,” Martha Simmons masterfully distinguishes the traditions of “whooping” and “tuning up” while giving a chronological master class on the varying approaches to “whooping” over the generations. This piece is published in *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present*, ed. Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010).

musicology and homiletics to offer insight into why it is imperative to study singing and preaching together, in addition to studying them separately. In order to effectively use the two aforementioned disciplines to guide analysis, this paper will offer the Black Christian Experience as a case study in order to draw perspectives from the longstanding traditions of singing and preaching.

From Jesus, the Christ, to Luther, the Reformer

The Old Testament is full of examples of both individual and congregational singing. The songs of Moses (Exodus 15:1–18; Psalm 90; Deuteronomy 32:1–43), David (2 Samuel 1:19–27; 2 Samuel 22:2–51; Psalm 18; 1 Chronicles 16:8–13, 28–36) and Isaiah (Isaiah 5:1–7, 12:1–6, 26, 35:1–10, 38:9–20, 40:1–31) are well known. Also familiar are the singing of Deborah and Barak (Judges 5:1–31), Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1–10), the Israelite women (1 Samuel 18:6–7), the Levitical choirs (2 Chronicles 5:12–14), and all of Israel (Psalms 1–150). These songs are not an exhaustive list but a mere representation of the chronicled events that reveal the importance of singing in the Old Testament. As Herbert Lockyear, Jr. explains:

The emphasis on music in the Old Testament offers assurance that music played an important part in the Hebrews' worship of Yahweh. References to music, praise, and singing in the Bible outnumber references to prayer and praying almost 2 to 1; in other words, twice as many biblical passages mention music as do prayer!⁴

Extra-biblical commentaries known as *targumim* sometimes offered additional accounts of Old Testament songs ascribed to individuals such as Adam and Joshua that are not mentioned in the Old Testament.⁵ Also within various *targumim* are additional descriptions and correlating accounts of many of the songs mentioned above. Regarding the song of Adam, Lockyear writes:

In the earliest Targum, several songs are highlighted as particularly meaningful. Tradition attributes the first song to Adam, who rejoiced when his sins were forgiven. According to the story, when the Sabbath came, he put a covering on his lips and sang a psalm for the Sabbath day, though the actual song is lost and goes unrecorded in the translation.⁶

In the New Testament, the great majority of the recorded singing occurs around the birth narrative of Jesus (Luke 1:46–55, 68–79; 2:10–14, 29–32) and in John's Revelation (Revelation 4:8–11; 5:9–14; 7:9–12; 11:15–18; 12:10–12; 15:3–4; 16:5–7; 19:1–8). Great speculation has surrounded the diminished presence of singing in the New Testament; however, church music scholar Andrew Wilson-Dickson offers a valuable perspective on the implied continuity of the importance of singing from the Old Testament to the New Testament:

⁴ Herbert Lockyear, Jr., *All the Music of the Bible: An Exploration of Musical Expression in Scripture and Church Hymnody* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 6.

⁵ *Targumim* are spoken paraphrases of books of the Old Testament that were eventually written down, often in Aramaic, the increasingly common-use language of many Jews by the first century. Since scripture readings, particularly from the Law and the Prophets, were a part of communal worship, the Hebrew text had to be translated and, in the case of the *targumim*, paraphrased.

⁶ Lockyear, *All the Music of the Bible*, 10.

Connections between Jewish and early Christian worship are well documented and new links are still being discovered. Even the temple worship is relevant here, not so much as a direct influence—Jesus and his disciples were generally antagonistic to what went on in the temple, but through the synagogue—which had adapted the ceremony of the temple to its own use. Surprising though it may seem, Christianity did not require an entirely new set of principles to guide its worship.

These links may provide one of the reasons for the relative scarcity of musical reference in the New Testament, for there would be no need to record the detail of established worship. Because Christians saw their faith as a completion of Judaism, they were able to continue to use many parts of Jewish liturgy, but to see them in a new light.

The traditions of the synagogue continued to be absorbed into Christian worship for some time, in spite of the persecutions of AD 44 and the Council of Jerusalem, which in AD 49 ruled that pagan converts to Christianity need not keep the Law of Moses. Cantors, trained to lead the singing in the synagogue and then converted to the Christian faith, continued to put their skills to use in their new church.⁷

Raised in a Jewish household, Jesus was taught the songs, understood the importance of singing, and must have sung himself. The only biblical reference to Jesus singing is immediately following the institution of the Eucharist as recorded in Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26. As an extension of the annual pilgrimage to observe the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Jesus understood the teachings and the significance of the praise songs that were sung as part of the ritual following the third cup. According to Lockyear, “these praises came from Psalms 115–118 and sometimes Psalms 120–137.”⁸ So, although it is not very prominent within the biblical text, we know that Jesus not only sang but also participated in communal and liturgical singing.

It is well documented that Jesus came to proclaim/preach the Gospel (Matthew 4:17, 23; Mark 1:14–15, 38; Luke 4:14–21, 42–44; John 10). At the core of Christianity, in all of its expressions, is proclamation/preaching the Word of God. Yet, while singing also plays a dominant role within the worship experience of all expressions of Christianity, it does not, and should not, equate to the role of preaching within congregational worship. This reality leads to one of the major tensions that this article aims to interrogate: With a clear understanding of the hierarchal relationship between singing and preaching, are we undervaluing the importance of how they work together because of the limited treatment of singing in the New Testament? Further, is there a possibility that greater understanding of how they work together may strengthen our understanding of how they work apart? The biblical account of the life and ministry of Jesus has led us to believe that he was not much of a singer, although his singing is clearly inferred from his cultural and religious background.

Furthermore, we are led to an imbalanced understanding of the power of singing in the New Testament, particularly during the time of Jesus, due to the emphasis on preaching and the lack of emphasis on congregational singing. In order to return to a balanced view where preaching is the central activity of the Christian church, yet singing is of critical importance as well, it is imperative to understand that Jesus not only sang but, judging from the importance of singing in

⁷ Andrew Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music: From Gregorian Chant to Black Gospel, an Illustrated Guide to All the Major Traditions of Music in Worship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003 [1992]), 24–25.

⁸ Lockyear, *All the Music of the Bible*, 41.

Jewish culture and worship practices, sang frequently. In my own imagination I wonder if Jesus ever “whooped,” “tuned up,” or, better yet, sang any of his sermons.

The Apostle Paul

In the New Testament there was no greater chronicler of the importance of singing and preaching than the Apostle Paul. Although John the Revelator wrote more music (lyrics) in his lengthy Apocalypse, Paul gives us instruction on what to do with the music. In the fifth chapter of his letter to the church at Ephesus, while encouraging the area congregations toward moral and ethical living, Paul uses an excerpt of a hymn familiar to the region in order to offer an illustration of his teaching.

Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.⁹

This tactic underscores the power of song not only as a subtle illustration, but as a unifying force to build community around a principle and to assure that through Christ’s model of discipleship, everyone learns together. His clever use of cultural data—the well-known song—helps us to see the importance of understanding the repertoire of a particular region in order to reach its congregations socially, emotionally, and intellectually, and thereby to share and reinforce the good news of the Gospel. While articulating the urgency of spiritual alignment, Paul exhorts the Ephesians to rely on the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit rather than external influences to seek joy and sustained fulfillment. Paul offers these words to teach his readers about the transformative power of the Holy Spirit:

Then you will sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, making music to the Lord in your hearts. And you will always give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁰

Paul offers insight not only on genre distinction but also on the role and function of musical creation and performance. Drawing on his years as a committed and learned Jew, Paul offers a rare but important teaching on the critical role that music plays within Christian worship as a mechanism of praise and a medium to express gratitude. He accomplishes this same goal in two other moments within his voluminous missives: 1 Corinthians 14:15–17 and Colossians 3:16–17. With brilliance and an astute understanding of the value, importance, and power of music, Paul teaches the congregations (and, by extension, us) how to use the gift of singing effectively as a response to the work of the Holy Spirit and an affirmation of our relationship with God.

⁹ Ephesians 5:14b (ESV). This passage is not the only time Paul referenced a hymn in order to make a practical connection with the shared memory and cultural milieu of a particular regional area. In his letter to the believers at Philippi, he uses a similar approach to empower his teaching. In Philippians 2:5–11, Paul paraphrases a hymn that would have been well known to the believers in order to offer a reference point to his teaching.

¹⁰ Ephesians 5:19–20 (ESV).

Perhaps these teachings are best exemplified in the horrific yet victorious experience that Paul and Silas shared, as recorded in Acts 16:16–40. Around midnight, tortured, maimed, and imprisoned, the two men “were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening. Suddenly, there was a great earthquake, and the prison was shaken to its foundations. All the doors flew open, and the chains of every prisoner fell off!”¹¹

Although the singing was only one of the powerful offerings that Paul and Silas gave to God in advance of the liberation of all the prisoners, this experience best displays the critical importance and power of singing. It should not go unnoticed that the experience was witnessed by “other prisoners” and that “every prisoner” was freed as a result of both praying and singing!

Beyond Jesus, there was no more consistent and effective preacher, evangelist, or revivalist in the New Testament than Paul. Peter was gifted, Philip was captivating, but Paul was in a class of his own. From his first homiletical moments in Damascus (Acts 9:20) shortly after his conversion and onto Salamis (Acts 13:5), Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–4), Berrea (Acts 17:10–12), Ephesus (19:8 and 20:20–1), and Rome (Acts 28:17–29), Paul’s preaching grew stronger and stronger as he traveled across the Roman Empire. Over his three missionary expeditions, Paul, a former Pharisee, emerged as one of the greatest proselytizers of non-Jews. New Testament scholar Christopher Rowland writes:

The accounts of Paul’s preaching in Acts indicate that among his hearers were non-Jews: those sympathizers with the Jewish tradition who took upon themselves some basic requirements but refused circumcision, and were known as the God-fearers (Acts 13:26). This was probably the group which formed the heart of the Pauline churches.¹²

In fact, it was Paul’s preaching, more than that of any other preacher in the New Testament, that expanded the reach not only of the Gospel, but also of Christianity. Although none of Paul’s sermons are completely transcribed and chronicled, T. Harwood Pattison’s 1903 analysis gives us something to ponder:

His sermons, reported only in brief outlines and no one of them taking more than five minutes to read, can easily be filled out. At Antioch in Pisidia, at Lystra, and at Athens he delivered, apparently at length, addresses which are alive to-day with rhetorical vigor. The sermon on Mars’ hill is a noble example of Christian oratory, and, unlike Peter’s address at Pentecost, it bears the evidence of careful preparation.¹³

Not only was Paul a singer, he was also a skilled homiletician and scholar of the art and practice of preaching. Again, this rather whimsical question is one that I ponder quite frequently: Did the Apostle Paul ever “whoop,” “tune up,” or sing any of his sermons?

¹¹ Acts 16:25–26 (ESV).

¹² Christopher Rowland, *Christian Origins: The Setting and Character of the Most Important Messianic Sect of Judaism* (London: SPCK, 2002 [1985]), 214.

¹³ T. Harwood Pattison, *The History of Christian Preaching* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1903), 38.

Augustine of Hippo

After the Apostle Paul, Augustine, the acclaimed Bishop of Hippo, remains iconic, exemplary, and widely influential in his study, teaching, and practice of both singing and preaching. As scholar and biographer Agostino Trapè once wrote, “Augustine is undoubtedly the greatest of the Fathers and one of the great geniuses of humanity, whose influence on posterity has been continuous and profound.”¹⁴

Born Aurelius Augustinus on November 13, 354 in the town of Thagaste in the Roman province of Numidia on the continent of Africa, Augustine is well known for his numerous writings during the Patristic era. He had a deep and passionate relationship with music and, more specifically, singing. It was Augustine who, while studying the writings of the Apostle Paul, cleverly and concisely defined the ubiquitous term “hymn”:

A hymn is a song containing praise of God. If you praise God, but without song, you do not have a hymn. If you praise anything, which does not pertain to the glory of God, even if you sing it, you do not have a hymn. Hence, a hymn contains the three elements: *song* and *praise of God*.¹⁵

Later, in his autobiographical *Confessions*, Augustine wrote of his fascination with the power of singing, admitting that every now and then he gets distracted and loses focus on the message of the song because of the beauty of the singing. On these occasions he acknowledges his sinful nature. In his own words, “Yet when it happens that I am more moved by the singing than by what is sung, I confess myself to have sinned wickedly, and then I would rather not have heard the singing.”¹⁶

Reflecting on the rising importance of hymns within the expanding church, Augustine writes that

the church at Milan had begun to seek comfort and spiritual strength in the practice of singing of hymns, in which the faithful fervently united with heart and voice. . . . Ever since then the custom has been retained, and the example of Milan has been followed in many other places, in fact in almost every church throughout the world.¹⁷

Understanding the power of music, and concerned with the role and function of music in the private life of the Christian and in public worship, Augustine wrote a six-part treatise titled *De musica* (On Music). Even though it is not solely focused on music, Augustine is clearly intrigued and consumed by the topic. He argues that since music has the power to distract one from the sacred and create obstacles to one’s spiritual journey, there is a need to justify the use of sacred music. Thus Augustine makes it his purpose, among other objectives, to justify the use of sacred music to draw one closer to the presence of God and to serve as a medium and mechanism of

¹⁴ Agostino Trapè, “St. Augustine,” in *Patrology*, vol. 4: *The Golden Age of Latin Patristic Literature from the Council of Nicea to the Council of Chalcedon*, ed. Angelo di Berardino (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1986), 342.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 72:1, quoted in Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music*, 25.

¹⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. and ed. Albert C. Outler, Book X, Chapter 33 <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/conf.pdf>. Accessed July 19, 2015.

¹⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*; quoted in Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music*, 35–36.

worship and praise. Whether hymn, antiphon, cantillation, or Alleluia, Augustine would affirm any manner of singing where the focus is on praising God and serving as a sonic response to the move of the Holy Spirit.

As prolific as Augustine was in writing about singing, he is even more important as a theologian who had a compassionate approach to pastoring and the powerful gift of preaching. According to preaching scholar O. C. Edwards, Jr., Augustine emerged as an internationally renowned and widely influential leader of the Catholic Church during his day:

Aurelius, the bishop of Carthage, recognized the talent of his junior colleague [Augustine] and used him in every way possible to advance the Catholic cause in Numidia, often inviting him to preach in the capital city. Augustine became the Catholic champion in theological controversy, acting as chief spokesman against the Manichaean, Donatist, and Pelagian heresies. By his writings, Augustine achieved a worldwide prominence and authority. He was linked in correspondence to church leaders throughout the Mediterranean area. Yet his main and ordinary activity was to serve as head of the Catholic community in Hippo, counseling the anxious, settling disputes between members, and, most of all, thrilling his small-town flock week after week with some of the greatest preaching in the history of the church.¹⁸

Although there is little written account of congregational reactions to Augustine's preaching, what is known about Augustine is enough to corroborate the few accounts that scholars have uncovered from other church patriarchs, chroniclers, and opponents. Augustine was equally prayerful and passionate. He believed in spending much time in dialogue with God empowering his sense of spirituality and firmly undergirding his commitment to the faith. Augustine was also a passionate believer, theologian, apologist, and preacher. His in-depth study of the power of human emotions and the effect of his utter commitment to serve as a pragmatic exemplar of his beliefs led him to develop a very appealing and captivating approach to preaching. As Edwards adds,

One of the many qualities that separated his preaching style from the canons of the rhetoric he had taught and could practice with ease was that his speech was always popular. His vocabulary was that of everyday life, and he used figures of speech such as puns, assonance, rhymes, alliteration, and antithesis to give zest to his thought. He could always find an apt analogy that would make the most abstruse point seem clear and even obvious. His instinct for the right word was infallible, and well-turned phrases were the rule rather than the exception.¹⁹

Our knowledge of Augustine's preaching comes primarily from his own words. His enormous volumes of writings are as impressive as they are informative. In addition to *De musica*, he published a similar treatise on Christian preaching titled *De doctrina christiana*, which Augustinian scholar and translator Edmund Hill refers to as *Teaching Christianity*. He writes,

Teaching Christianity is how I think the title of the work should be translated. Christianity is, or ought to be, pre-eminently taught by preaching; so the work leads up to the fourth book as to its goal. But Christian

¹⁸ O. C. Edwards, Jr., *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 105–106.

¹⁹ Edwards, *A History of Preaching*, 112.

preaching is, or ought to be, in terms of scripture; so the would-be preacher must first be taught how to interpret the Bible.²⁰

According to Hill, parts 1–3 of *De doctrina* were composed at the same time, yet there is a 30-year gap between parts 3 and 4. Although there is great controversy as to what caused the disruption, it is important to understand that Augustine, like the Apostle Paul, was not merely an effective preacher; he also studied and wrote a methodology in order to train, nurture, and develop future preachers to be not only homilists but homileticians. Once again, I am left to imagine whether Augustine, with his penchant for captivating language and his passion for music, ever “whooped,” “tuned up,” or sang any of his sermons.

Martin Luther

Like the Apostle Paul and Bishop Augustine, the reformer Martin Luther was not only passionate about music and preaching but was extremely articulate about his theological reasons for the appropriate use and methods of both. Born in Eisleben (Saxony) on November 10, 1483, Luther spent his early years as an Augustinian monk devoted to prayer and committed to praising God through music (among other spiritual disciplines such as fasting and pilgrimage). As a musician, skilled in singing and playing the lute, Luther is well known for stating that “next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise.”²¹ Like Augustine, Luther recognized that music could be used as a means and method of praising God, or it could serve as an obstacle to one’s relationship with the divine. His desire to understand the power of music to control, soothe, agitate, or reflect emotions was a huge consideration as he moved away from the medieval Catholic tradition in pursuit of his not-so-subtle changes to the liturgy and the music of the church. With the goal of being more inclusive, Luther called for even more singing, utilizing a model that not only encouraged congregational participation but also empowered German, and later other vernacular languages, over Latin. In translating Latin hymn texts, he often simplified them to fit the rhythms and cadences of German with an eye toward using familiar children’s songs, folk songs, and other popular melodic formulas to get more and more people singing. As Wilson-Dickson writes,

Not only did Luther recognize the power of music as an aid to devotion, to enhance and to elevate worship, but he was also keenly aware of the need to educate the younger generations into Christian ways. Music had a part to play here too. Young people, he believed, could be encouraged to turn away from music with bad associations by acquaintance with music of a more wholesome kind.²²

Luther translated some of the more popular hymns of the medieval Catholic tradition. For example, Ambrose’s *Veni Redemptor gentium* became *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*, an Advent song that continues to be widely sung as *Savior of the Nations, Come*. He composed timeless songs such as the famed Christmas hymn *Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her*, which is

²⁰ *Teaching Christianity: De Doctrina Christiana*, introduction, translation, and notes by Edmund Hill; edited by John E. Rotelle (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1996), 98.

²¹ Friedrich Blume, *Protestant Church Music: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 10.

²² Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music*, 63.

still sung as *From Heaven Above*. One of his best-known treasures is the all-time favorite *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*, translated as *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. The first Lutheran hymnal, *Etlich Christlich lider Lobgesang, und Psalm*, was published in 1524. Translated as *Some Christian Songs, Canticle and Psalm*, this collection of eight songs, four of which were by Luther, is often called the *Achtliederbuch* (Book of Eight Songs). Luther remains an extremely influential musician, hymnist, and scholar of the power and impact of music, yet he is even more noted for his profound influence and impact on preaching.

At the core of Luther's preaching was a firm belief in the authority of the Word of God and an equally firm Christology. Luther was a Gospel preacher par excellence. He believed that the Word of God was incarnate, written, and proclaimed: incarnate through the Trinity (God the son), written through divine revelation as the Holy Scriptures, and proclaimed through the work of preaching. Each of these three paths reveals Christ. Luther was adamant throughout his writings that the preaching of the church and the role of the preacher were the primary activity/action of the Christian church. As he aged he placed more and more emphasis on the role and power of preaching, suggesting that as a vehicle of salvation, preaching must be front and center. Thousands of Luther's sermons have survived in outline form (from which he was known to preach) and through the notes, observations, and chronicles of congregants and observers. It is universally agreed that his preaching developed over time to be extremely unique and very effective.

Few people in history have been more influential or effective in shaping the future development of preaching than Martin Luther. . . . Yet every student of preaching, of whatever ecclesial allegiance, must admit that there is much in his style worthy of study and imitation.²³

Since Luther considered "preaching to be the most important office in the world," his preparation was meticulous, well thought out, and very strategic.²⁴ Through his preaching, perhaps even more than his writing, he was able to reveal his theological alterations while giving examples that aided his listeners in making distinctions between what would emerge as Lutheranism and what was presently Catholic. Luther preached a Gospel that hinged on the forgiveness of sins, the power of faith, and the priesthood of all believers, which was his motivation to teach others to prepare themselves with the necessary skills to preach. Luther's passion for preaching and his profound impact led to the Lutheran branch of Christianity that continues to flourish as one of the larger denominations within Protestantism. With all of Luther's contributions to singing and preaching, I remain curious as to whether he ever "whooped," "tuned up," or sang any of his sermons.

Meeting in the Middle: Musicology and Homiletics

Throughout this article it has been suggested that singing and preaching within the Christian context accomplish a wide variety of purposes. From offering praise, thanksgiving, adoration,

²³ Edwards, *A History of Preaching*, 283.

²⁴ Edwards, *A History of Preaching*, 287.

and awe to teaching theological principles and practices, singing and preaching have inspired life-changing transformation. As mediums used to draw nearer to God as well as methods to correct, convict, and cajole, singing and preaching are God-facing communicative agents for person-to-person or person-to-people connection. Both singing and preaching are interactive and participatory activities that are only as functional as the engagement of the initiator and participants. In nonministerial contexts, the audience is often entertained by the actions of those who are presenters or performers; in ministry, however, everyone is fully engaged in some manner, in order to feel and/or receive the transformative power of the Gospel within their lives. Thus, the recipients and participants of the singing and preaching are agents of their own transformation. It should be no surprise that in moments of good singing and good preaching the song leaders and/or preachers will have a transparent moment of bliss as they enjoy the spontaneous effect of their own ministerial offering.

Songs and sermons are created by people who are concerned enough about other people, and society in general, to share a message based on their own values, morals, knowledge, and beliefs through divine inspiration. These songs and sermons often have an implied narrative, or at the very least a main idea or point that is being conveyed using both sound and text. Each of these songs and sermons is constructed with an implied approach toward transmitting the message through some specific method or style of performance practice that is based on a socially and/or culturally understood aesthetic. Each of these songs or sermons is constructed with a strategic understanding of the importance of structure as well as the presence of climactic or dissonant tension. Whether the song or sermon is improvised (spontaneously composed), adapted from previous source material (arranged), or a magnum opus that has been developed over time, these aspects are inherent to the creative process and thus are a part of the conceptual construction and delivery of a song or sermon. It is at this level that the work of the musicologist and the homiletician is most helpful, not only in developing and constructing the work through which transformation may occur, but also in analyzing and assessing its effectiveness. In essence, it is at this level of inquiry that we realize how similar and connected the role, work, and function of singing and preaching are.

The study of music is as complicated as it sounds. For the purposes of this article, “musicologist” will serve as an umbrella term for all of the progeny subfields or specific approaches to the study of music, including ethnomusicology, comparative musicology, and ethnodoxology. Music scholars or musicologists study the presence, role, and function of music within specific contexts and cultures over time. From the songs of the New Testament to the most contemporary praise song, the purpose of Christian singing remains to bridge hearts and minds together in collective thanksgiving, lament, prayer, and of course, praise to God. Songs have other purposes as well, such as to agitate, to aggravate, to mock, to refute, to boast, or to incite emotion (whether positive or negative). This is why the Apostle Paul was specific about when and what to sing (hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs). Paul’s writing and teaching on music was as prescriptive as the songs transcribed in the New Testament in order to distinguish what Augustine, Luther, and others were attempting to convey in their writings and songs. The musicologist has a principal role in analyzing the values, morals, knowledge, and beliefs within

the songs to assess whether they align with implied goals of the use of the music. In moments when the sonic texture of a song does not align with the textual narrative, there is a great potential for confusion and misinterpretation on the part of the listener. A text about the delight and awe of being in God's presence that is set to dark, spooky minor-key music creates such a conflict. So does a song about the gentle, compassionate, and felt presence of God that is performed as a loud, angry cacophony of sound. Both examples are deemed ineffective and reveal a misalignment in role, function, and purpose.

The musicologist has the tools to empower Christian singing toward success, yet there is another missing piece that comes from the homiletician that must not be minimized. The homiletician studies the composition and delivery of sermons, homilies, and catechetical training with a keen eye toward theological formation, exegesis, spirit-led discernment, and the development of a hermeneutic that aids in maintaining a clear, Bible-focused approach to the craft. The preaching of Jesus and his disciples was grounded in the Holy Scriptures and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The preaching of the Gospel is a ferociously challenging task, as the responsibility of interpreting biblically based and theologically sound approaches to values, morals, knowledge, and beliefs is a slippery slope. The homilist is charged with teaching and training the congregation with the theological praxis for which they are both formed and informed. Theological alignment within denominations is imperative to the transference of values, morals, knowledge, and beliefs, and thus becomes the bedrock of what the preacher preaches. All Gospel preachers preach the Gospel. What makes this simple statement complicated are numerous manners of interpretation and contextual challenges that arise from one's theological, ontological, and exegetical formation. Thus, the homilist, and by extension the homiletician, has the challenge of proclaiming the biblical truths as revealed through the biblical text inspired by the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus, Paul, Augustine, Luther, and many others did before. For both singer and preacher, performance practice and delivery play a huge role in the efficacy of this interaction. A preacher preaching on the power of love while offering examples based in hate will be ineffective. Similarly, preaching that aims to inspire while operating in a mode of antagonizing, belittling, and inciting anger is counterproductive and equally ineffective.

Within Christianity, theological alignment or misalignment has been the source of great confusion, chaos, and even liturgical war. Theologically trained musicologists who can compose and analyze songs with theological alignment to denominational or local church settings are as important as musically trained homileticians who can compose and analyze sermons with attention to the tonality and orality of the sermon. There should be no mystery that throughout the history of Christianity some of the most effective and powerful preachers were equally potent songwriters and vice versa. Both song and sermon are based in the oral tradition of telling a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. To be more exact, the beginning is often the preparation for the climax that provokes the life-transforming moment typically illuminated through a pedagogical examination or explanation of what God did, is doing, or will do. The singer understands this as both effective songwriting and captivating performance practice. The preacher understands this as a well-exegeted pericope that is captivating and moving and inspires

action. It is in moments like this that the musicologists' terminology empowers the homilist's practice and the homileticians' methodology inspires potent songwriting.

This meeting of disciplines enhances our understanding of how musicality reinforces the spoken truth and how well-grounded preaching sounds. It is possible, then, that a well-crafted hymn composed of biblical text and grounded in a theological perspective can serve as a sermon. Some of the best homiletical moments in the history of Christianity may remain unexamined due to their existence as hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs, rather than as transcribed sermons delivered from a pulpit. Perhaps Jesus's best sermon was a hymn that he improvised but was never chronicled. Is it possible that Paul's greatest sermon was in the form of a hymn, psalm, or spiritual song that was sung during one of his traumatic experiences at the hands of Roman officials? Might the songs of Augustine—or, better yet, Luther—serve as sermons, whether in whole or in fragment? For the singer who understands the power of the Gospel, and for the preacher who understands the power of musicality, there is no mystery why Paul, Augustine, Luther, and many others spent time wrestling with both music and preaching, singing and sermonizing, for there is an inherent power that is unleashed when the two are combined and connected to share the good news of the Gospel.

Singing and Preaching in the Black Christian Experience: Two Case Studies

Within the Black Christian Experience, singing has always served as the bloodline while preaching offered the heartbeat.²⁵ During the seventeenth century, displaced children of God, robbed from their ancestral homelands, sang spiritual moans, sanctified groans, charismatic shouts, and jubilant hollers. From the African continent through South America, Central America, and the Caribbean, the sounds of trauma, oppression, and heartache were met with a temporal hope that, although not immediate, was eternal. The singing and preaching of these enslaved Black folk not only saved their lives but activated an “invisible institution” that would save the lives of many generations to come.²⁶ From the “invisible institution” came forth the very visible congregations of Black Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, and numerous other denominational expressions of the Black Christian Experience. Within all of these expressions arose a unique approach to congregational singing and biblical preaching. The passionate and captivating singing, matched with the fiery and robust preaching within the context of shared experiences and the desire for communal and individual liberation, served as the foundation for what has emerged as the bedrock of the Black Christian Experience—the Black church. As W. E. B. Du Bois observed, “three things characterized this religion of the slave—the preacher, the music, and the frenzy.”²⁷ What Du Bois did not know in

²⁵ In the prelude of James Abbingdon's *Let Mt. Zion REJOICE!: Music in the African American Church* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2001), he uses this description to infer the foundational importance of singing and preaching to the Black Christian Experience.

²⁶ For more on the “invisible institution,” see Albert J. Raboteau's *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

²⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Fawcett, 1961 [1903]), 144.

1903, when these words were first published, was that over a century later his prophetic words would continue to ring true.

Using the Black Christian Experience as a case study for further examination of the critical importance of the integration of musicology and homiletics, I offer the following considerations: Both singing and preaching within the Black Christian Experience are simultaneously missional and ministerial; both singing and preaching within the Black Christian Experience are grounded in a systematic theology; and both singing and preaching within the Black Christian Experience are equally musical and biblical engagements. In this section we will explore each of these considerations in depth through the ministries of Clay Evans and Charles Albert Tindley.

Clay Evans and Liturgical Gospel Music

Over the generations of the Black Christian Experience, congregations have sung traditional and contemporary versions of hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs, whether improvised, arranged, or composed, yet the goals of the singing are the same as the goals of preaching: to stimulate a conversion experience among unbelievers (missional) and to encourage, inspire, and empower believers along their spiritual journeys (ministerial). Singing and preaching both proclaim the soul-saving, transformative grace of the Gospel while also affirming the unchanging and everlasting power of God's mercy. In effect, sinner and saint sit together at the same table to partake of the same meal. Liturgical gospel music best exemplifies this dual and spontaneous challenge. Liturgical gospel music is music that, although commodified through the music industry, remains music for congregational worship. Liturgical gospel music takes many forms over the various eras of gospel music and can include some contemporary sounds as well as the current trend of praise music.²⁸

During the 1980s and 1990s, one of the many influential creators of liturgical gospel music in the United States and abroad was Rev. Clay Evans (b. 1925). A native of Brownsville, Tennessee, Evans founded Chicago's Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church in 1958 and pastored the congregation until his retirement in 2000. Evans remains a beloved preacher who used both "whooping" and "tuning up" to seamlessly transition from his sermon into song without dropping a beat or losing the attention of his captivated congregation. Like his predecessors mentioned in the first part of this article, Evans had a powerful teaching ministry that was fueled by his scripturally based preaching and his brilliant storytelling that mesmerized not only his congregation but thousands of others who watched him from afar via televised and radio broadcasts. His 1990 recording *Reach Beyond the Break*, featuring the Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church Choir as well as the compositions and singing of Evans's colleagues, Rev. Milton Biggum and Rev. Timothy Wright, exemplifies the missional and ministerial aspect of singing and preaching within the Black Christian Experience.²⁹

²⁸ Praise music is also referred to as praise and worship, and in some contexts worship and praise.

²⁹ Rev. Clay Evans and Fellowship Baptist Church Choir. *Reach Beyond the Break*. © 1990 by Malaco/ Savoy Gospel. Savoy Gospel LP 14802.

The title track, “Reach Beyond the Break,” is offered in two parts as the producers found it necessary to edit the “live” experience of the recording session due to unscheduled charismatic praise during the recording of the selection. Owing to the time limitations of commercial recordings, the producers were forced to make difficult decisions as to how much of the audience response to the missional and ministerial liturgical moment to capture. Part 1 begins with Evans sharing a little story he had heard, a characteristic expression that signals that the preacher is transitioning to the next part of the sermon, most often to the end. As Evans tells his story, the musical backdrop intensifies, the congregational response grows, and the timbre of Evans’s voice transitions from talking to preaching to “whooping,” all in perfect harmony with the musicians’ punctuation of his phrasing. At one point while preaching and transitioning to his “whoop,” Evans engages the congregation by calling out, “Reach beyond the break . . . and hold on,” and they respond verbatim. As the dialogue continues, the song intensifies and the choir enters with a prearranged refrain, with Evans now singing improvised phrases while sharing the responsibility of singing the verses with the song’s composer, Biggiam.

Clearly conceived for a “live” recording, the selection and its reprise (part 2) are examples of liturgical gospel music that serves the dual missional and ministerial goals. To the person participating in the “live” experience or listening to the recorded track, the story told about a boy who almost drowned but was saved by reaching beyond the break of a tethered rope that his father (unable to swim) threw in his direction resonates due to its pragmatic response to a realistic situation. To the unbeliever, Evans’s story aids in creating a connection to reality in plain language with a problem/ solution analogy. To the believer, Evans’s clever analysis—“Your rope of hope is almost broke, your rope of faith is almost broke, your rope of patience is almost broke, but reach, beyond the break, hold on, hold on, hold on...”—is conveyed in language that easily translates and offers inspiration, encouragement, and empowerment to navigate his or her spiritual journey. Evans’s use of the rope metaphor to offer two different messages to two different audiences at the same time through the same words is a tool used in both singing and preaching within the Black Christian Experience.

“Reach Beyond the Break” offers an illuminating example of the seamless transition from preaching to singing, where the listener gets the best of both mediums as the preacher “sings the sermon.” Comprehensive analysis of what takes place in such a recording is difficult without the use of musicological and homiletical tools. Equally important is a clear understanding of how singing and preaching in these situations work together as a unit. Evans is not alone, as this occurs on a weekly basis within local congregations of all sizes across the United States and abroad. Other recordings that offer similar examples include Shirley Caesar’s *Hold My Mule*, Rev. Jasper Williams’s *Prayer*, Dorothy Norwood’s *The Denied Mother*, The Mighty Clouds of Joy’s *A Bright Side*, Robert Blair and The Fantastic Violinaires’ *I’ve Come Too Far to Turn Around*, and the Swan Silvertones’ *I Love the Lord (I’m Going on with Jesus)*.³⁰

³⁰ For more information on the tracks listed, see Shirley Caesar with Rev. Milton Brunson and the Thompson Community Singers, *Shirley Caesar LIVE . . . in Chicago*, © 1988 Rejoice Records, WR 8385; National Baptist Convention Mass Choir, *Let’s Go to Church*, © 1997 A&M Records; Dorothy Norwood and the Combined Choir of Atlanta, *The Denied Mother*, © 1966 Savoy Records, MG 14140; The Mighty Clouds of Joy, *A Bright Side*, © 1960

Both singing and preaching within the Black Christian Experience are grounded in a systematic theology. When they are working together effectively, what is sung and what is preached are in perfect alignment with each other and with the systematic theology of the congregation. Theological, and by extension denominational, formation is often evident in the singing and the preaching. Within the Black Christian Experience, one can discern the theological formation of a song or a sermon by simply listening to the content, context, and in some cases the metaphors, colloquialisms, and characteristic pithy expressions used in the song or sermon.

Charles Albert Tindley, “Prince of Preachers”

Within the Black Christian Experience there is no more inspiring story than that of Charles Albert Tindley (1851–1933). Born in Berlin, Maryland, to a former slave and a free Black woman, Tindley would emerge as one of the early Black hymnists and the revered “Prince of Preachers.”³¹ An autodidact, Tindley evolved into one of the most respected Black pastors in Philadelphia at the John Wesley Methodist Episcopal Church, where he once served as sexton. As a result of his successful tenure as pastor, the historic church is now called Tindley Temple United Methodist Church. By 1930, Tindley had composed and published 42 hymns, including such well-known treasures as *I’ll Overcome Someday* (1901), *We’ll Understand It Better By and By* (1905), and *Stand By Me* (1905). Of greatest significance, though, are his legendary sermon and song of the same title, *Heaven’s Christmas Tree*.

Tindley preached the same sermon every Christmas (with some variation) from 1913 until at least 1930.³² According to Rev. Marion O. Ballard, pastor of Tindley Temple United Methodist Church from 1965 to 1976,

There is one sermon that I recall he preached each year at Christmas time and that was “Heaven’s Christmas Tree.” That to me is a remarkable feat because as I think of preaching, to preach the same sermon to the same people year after year and for it to be acceptable to those people, that’s something. That’s doing something.³³

The editors of *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* concur. Their introduction to Tindley’s famed sermon reads:

Though well known for his music, an overflowing crowd of thousands came to hear Tindley preach each Sunday. With a booming voice and a six-foot-five-inch stature, Tindley preached profound messages of

Universal Special Products LP; various artists, *AMEN: Gospel Greats*, © 1997 Malaco Records, MCD 2001; Swan Silvertones, *Only Believe*, © 1964 HOB Records, HOB-282.

³¹ “Prince of Preachers” is an honorary title of admiration and deference identifying a unique and widely influential preacher who is overwhelmingly respected.

³² Tindley’s biographer Ralph H. Jones records 1930 as the last mentioned presentation of his beloved Christmas sermon. See *Charles Albert Tindley: Prince of Preachers* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1982), 135.

³³ Jones, *Charles Albert Tindley*, 43.

God's love and grace. One of Tindley's best-known sermons, "Heaven's Christmas Tree," depicts the fruits of the Holy Spirit as ornaments. Thousands looked forward to this sermon each year.³⁴

The crux of Tindley's sermon lies in his articulation of the six packages under the Christmas tree. Although there may be slight alterations based on what year it was preached, Ralph H. Jones's transcription proposes these six gifts:

- (1) Hope for the Hopeless
- (2) Forgiveness for the Guilty
- (3) Help for the Weak
- (4) Friendship for the Friendless
- (5) Peace for the Troubled Soul
- (6) Home for the Homeless³⁵

Born into a family of Black Methodists, Tindley remained consistent in his formation throughout his life and ministry. His sermon and the accompanying song reflect his Methodist theological perspectives: both focus on social justice for Blacks who were severely oppressed in Philadelphia during his time, and on God's healing, grace, and mercy for those in need. Tindley uses the Bible as his primary source while preaching and singing a hopeful message that speaks specifically to the congregation's situations and circumstances without compromising the Methodist perspectives on sin, salvation, and sanctification. In his sermon he poignantly addresses his theological perspective on sin:

Nobody can say that they have never sinned against God; nobody has had their sins canceled by their own deeds or deserving. Everybody, therefore, who is not now guilty of sin has been forgiven through the merits of Jesus Christ. It was the gift of God, for the sake of Jesus. Just as others have been forgiven, so everyone present and everybody in this whole world can, and may be, forgiven of all their sins. It can be done now, this very night.³⁶

Similarly, in verse 2 of the *Heaven's Christmas Tree* hymn, Tindley addresses his theological perspective on salvation. He writes,

There is one I behold in letters of gold,
It hangs on a limb near to me,
'Tis labeled "salvation," and Jesus, I'm told,
Has bought that package for me.

Chorus

There is a package for me on that tree;
A precious token that some one loves me,
O yes. I can see, on Calvary's Tree,
That there is a package for me.³⁷

³⁴ Simmons and Thomas, *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, 468.

³⁵ Jones, *Charles Albert Tindley*, 145–56.

³⁶ Jones, *Charles Albert Tindley*, 149–50.

³⁷ The sheet music of *Heaven's Christmas Tree* is reprinted in Bernice Johnson Reagon, ed., *We'll Understand It Better By and By: Pioneering African American Gospel Composers* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 50.

Tindley's focus on Christ as the Christmas tree and the gifts that come as a reflection of God's love, the passion of Christ, and the presence of the Holy Spirit is certainly in alignment with his Methodist formation. His articulation of sanctification through the grace of God as a process of cleansing from the human sin is also included in this sermon:

It is this man, Christ Jesus, who promises help to everyone who wants to live for God. My belief is that there are hundreds who are in sin and on the way to hell who don't want to be there. They wish that in some way they could change their lives, but are too weak to do so. I want you to see the mighty arm that reaches down over this package of which I am speaking, out to every helpless soul who wants to leave the devil. It is that mighty strong arm which upholds the world, weighs the hills and measures the waters. It is that great arm that destroyed Egypt; leveled the walls of Jericho; flung Babylon's glory in the dust, and plucked the Caesars from their thrones.³⁸

Tindley's alignment to the systematic theology of the United Methodist Church is reflected in both song and sermon. It allowed him to effectively transition back and forth between the two mediums, particularly in those moments when he "sang the sermon." The use of musicological and homiletical tools greatly aids in the analysis, understanding, and ability to conceive of such alignment across the mediums. Tindley is not the only exemplar of theological alignment via song and sermon; others include: Bishop G(ilbert) E(arl) Patterson (Church of God in Christ), Rev. James Cleveland (Baptist), Andrae and Sandra Crouch (Church of God in Christ), and Wintley Phipps (Seventh Day Adventist).

Conclusion

Both singing and preaching within the Black Christian Experience are equally musical and biblical engagements. Singing, whether heterophonic or in unison, is always message-focused. No matter how ornate and textured the singing, the most important aspect of the song is the message, yet the presentation is equally important. Gospel singing, whether liturgical or nonliturgical, is always melodic, rhythmic, and full of genre-oriented harmonic progressions. Gospel music has a sound, a feel, and a musical *lingua franca* that make it phenotypically gospel. Gospel music is based on the good news of the Bible as revealed through the Holy Spirit and shared in Old Testament prophecy, through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, and through the preaching of Jesus's disciples. Gospel music that is not biblical is not gospel music. Similarly, preaching in the Black Christian Experience is full of rhetorical devices that are as tonally driven as they are rhythmical, yet they are always focused on conveying the biblical text. Preaching in this tradition is an embodied engagement that is melodic, rhythmic, and always God-focused. In order for gospel singing and preaching to be missional and ministerial and to be grounded in a systematic theology, it must be biblical. Yet again, the merging of musicological and homiletical tools aids greatly in the analysis and understanding of how the singing and preaching work together.

³⁸ Jones, *Charles Albert Tindley*, 150–51.

Underlying these considerations is the reality that there is so much more that we can learn about singing and preaching, not just within the Black Christian Experience but within Christianity in general, if we expand our tool box to include additional methodological approaches to the creation process, the analytical phase, and also instruction. Musicology has much to share that may be useful to homiletics. Likewise, homiletics has much to share with musicology. As scholars continue to delve into the inextricable links between singing and preaching, it is possible that we will find ourselves back in the Old Testament wrestling with hidden signs of things to come. Perhaps the anonymous composer of the beloved psalm found in Book IV of the Psalter already knew of what we now search for when he wrote:

Sing a new song to the LORD!
Let the whole earth sing to the LORD!
Sing to the LORD; bless his name.
Each day proclaim the good news that he saves.³⁹

³⁹ Psalm 96:1–4 (NLT).