

THE ROMANTIC LANGUAGE OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MUSIC IN RELATION TO THE DIVINITY OF JESUS

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Introduction

Through out the history of the Christian church, there has been serious controversy over church music as it relates to worship. The main questions usually asked have to do with forms and styles with which songs were played. This probably was as a result of the fact that the early Christians did not have problem with the lyrics used in expressing their feelings about God, or professing what they believed to their listeners. It was mainly in the area of what should be the form or what instruments should be employed for church music, that there were problems.

However, there later emerged another problem which is very sensitive, even more than the previous one, and that is the problem of expression in lyrics which automatically informed expression in form and style making it to be more complex.¹ This as we shall examine carefully, was as a result of secular influence particularly during the romantic age. Artistry, which was well emphasized at this period, is the only means by which men and women can understand and respond to the commandment of God, to cultivate the earth, and to praise his name.

Art is neither more nor less than that. But it must be clarified that artists are not creators like God is. Art is not mysterious or

supernatural. The activities of the romantic period as relating to Christian music have influenced the beliefs of the religion.² For example, the words of the songs are not properly studied from the religion's perspective any longer to know whether they are appropriate or not. Examples of such songs are:

Falling in love with Jesus/ 3ce
Was the best thing I've ever done.
In his arms I feel protected
In his arms never disconnected
In his arms I feel protected
There's no place I will rather be.

Kirk Whalum

... When I was lonely and I needed someone
to hold me
You were beside me, when my nights were
cold and lonely
You never let me down. When (no one else)
no one else could be found
I always count on you...

- Kirk Franklin/Mary Mary

The first stanza of Samuel Francis' "O the Deep, Deep love of Jesus", if keenly looked at, sounds erotic particularly with the statement "underneath me, all around me, is the current of thy love".

Some may be considered relatively good having close look at their context. They include Donnie McClurkin "I love Jesus" which gives a context of the saving work of Christ on the cross; The Commodores' "Jesus is love" is also considered good because it

expresses the true nature of Jesus which can be deduced from His works or deeds.

It is very unfortunate that the contemporary church has derailed from singing of the excellent, ever increasing, faithful, constant, covenant love of God to man, to singing about the most corrupt, inconsistent, gullible and worthless of human emotions which is usually tagged romantic love.³ Worship of the church today is full of professing that we are "in love" with Jesus. Songs that contain and express human lustful spirit are what we appreciate more in the church. For instance a common Yoruba song: "olufe okan mi ma korin ma gbe o ga", interpreted as "lover of my soul, I will sing, I will lift you up" (which can mean the one I love or the one that loves me), does not express what actually necessitated the love and does not describe the nature of love the composer means in the first place. This is also applicable to Kirk Whalum's "falling in love with Jesus".

Once again the researcher notes that the problem is not simply music, but the feelings at the background initiated by the composer. Imagine the erupted feeling of "God is my girlfriend" of modern praise and worship in the Christian church. Others include "My Lover, My God," "Touch Me All Over," "Naked Before You," "I'll Do Anything You Want," "Deeper" and "You Make Me Hot with Desire". Spencer observed that

Some very sharp culture watchers have traced the influence of romanticism and romantic language on evangelical piety over the last two centuries. A hymn like Samuel Francis's "In The Garden" could be interpreted in several ways, but the romantic

interpretation is the most obvious. Such a hymn could only be accepted and become popular in an evangelicalism that had already been considerably influenced by femininization and romantic imagery.⁴

The fact that there are more lyrics talking about "my love" for Jesus, which are acceptable, does not mean there are no words of devotion among lyricists of every age to Christ in his role as Savior, Redeemer, Lord and King. In fact, Wesley's "Jesus, Lover of My Soul" abandons romantic imagery after the initial Phrase, and quickly celebrates the more traditional work of Christ as a refuge, Source of forgiveness and hope of eternal life.

The Meaning of Romanticism and Expressionism

Romanticism is the artistic, literary and intellectual movement from England and Germany between 1770 and 1870. There are different terms which are gotten from what is displayed and used in describing Romanticism. One of the terms is Symbolism. Symbols are the human aesthetic correlatives of nature's emblematic language. This suggests that Romanticism is all about imagination and not reality as such. In fact, one could say that it is the replacement of reason with imagination for primary place among the human faculties. The emphasis is on intuition, instincts and feelings. It initially affected literature, but later affected other arts such as Music, Painting, Sculpture and Architecture.⁵

The attitude of most of Romantics towards everyday affairs and the social world around them was complex because of the sense of imagination which has so much pervaded their thoughts. It is true there was development in the literary works and arts, but

social realism was usually subordinate to imaginative suggestions.⁶

Another term is Individualism. This was coined by the French Political commentator Alexis de Tocqueville who described it as a kind of moderate selfishness. All values are man-centered. In this case man is allowed a maximum freedom and responsibility from choosing his objectives and the means of obtaining them and he is the only and best judge of his own interests. This suggests that in music, anyone can come up with a song for selfish reasons not minding the beliefs of the religion or the beliefs of the society he belongs.⁷ It must be stressed here that romanticism has very little to do with things popularly thought as romantic, that is, expression of love, the way it is generally perceived.

Expressionism is a term that was first used in connection with painting. In all aspects, it is the direct opposite of impressionism. Its goals were not to create passive impressions and moods, but to strongly express- just as the name reads- intense feelings and emotions.⁸ Expression is actually very difficult to describe. It could be likened to romanticism because they both seek to portray the composer's emotions. The main difference is that expressionism puts the emotional expression above everything else. While romantics also show emotion in their music, they do this even as they follow the traditional methods of writing music of the age they belong. But expressionists would out rightly ignore tradition and focus on expressing emotions at all costs. For this reason, expressionistic music is often dissonant, fragmented and densely written.

To compare expressionism with impressionism, one could

describe that an impressionist work gives a picture of what is in the world around the composer. In other words it creates an impression of what is perceived with the eye.⁹ But the work of an expressionist give a picture of what goes on inside the composer's mind; 'it is an expression of what is being felt'. It is because Romanticism embraces the meaning of both impressionism and expressionism that the researcher employs the term, since the focus of the paper is closely related to the church's spirituality. The idea of falling in love with Jesus in songs is a spiritual matter and not simply an aspect of church music.

Romantic imagery is common, and the proclamation that the worshiper is "in love" with Jesus is a common practice among Christians. Romanticism has moved into a prominent place in the church's spirituality, especially among youths. Worship is no longer a declaration and adoration of the range of God's attributes; it is now the language of a high school romantic encounter. This is mostly expressed in purposeless musical concerts organized nowadays.

Because the Bible contains some romantic letters, as some claim, our generation believes that romance is the secret to a happy life and that is why Christianity is now packaged as romance. But it must be balanced here that a lot of people have actually found and encountered the love of Jesus and not the love of sin and self which is implied in the romantic world. If one claims to have found the love of Jesus and the results are positive in terms of living a godly life, living to please Jesus, it is fine, and is reasonable. However where the expression of love is considered more important than thinking correctly about the theology of love, then it is totally out of the biblical sense of the word.

One may agree with Spencer who said:

The advocates of romanticism are convinced that the experience of "being in love" captures exactly what the Christian life is to be about. In this, I am sure they are very, very wrong. The proliferation of romanticism as the dominant way of thinking about the Christian life undermines many of the most important biblical teachings about Christian experience, and as a result, I think we should be more than mildly concerned that we have millions "in love" with Jesus.¹⁰

The Biblical Idea of Romanticism

We shall examine the three main ways in which the Bible gives this idea. In the Old Testament, God often compares His relationship with His chosen nation to a marriage, although a less than happy one. This is abundantly expressed in the books of the prophets, like Hosea (1:1-4), Jeremiah (31:1-4) and Ezekiel (43:7-9). In these books, God's love for His people is constantly described through the concept of marriage, while their unfaithfulness is depicted as adultery.

The problem with the idea of romanticism here is the nature of marriage in the biblical world. The Bible's emphasis is always on the faithful love of a husband, both in selecting a wife, and in staying faithful to an unfaithful spouse as can be seen in the case of Prophet Hosea. By using this imagery, the covenant love of God is implied; meaning that God chose His people and remained faithful to them despite their unfaithfulness.¹¹

The second biblical source is the Song of Solomon. This, to many Christians, is not even expected to be part of the scriptures.¹² It is a poetic book and said to be the best of all songs. The most egregious errors in the interpretation of this book emerge because of a failure to recognize its proper poetic quality.¹³ Most Christians believe the Song to be best understood as an allegory of the love of God lavished on his people. Therefore, the romantic and sexual imagery of the Song applies to the relationship of God and Israel, or Christ and the church. A lot of interpreters have made a mistake of applying this allegorical approach to the study of the book so that it suggests the unity of the message of the Old Testament, they claim.

For Spencer the literary method is the best approach that honors the text and what it means.¹⁴ An attempt to say that the literary method may be used to teach the expression of love among couples; an expression of human experience, but beyond is the divine message of God's love for his people which pervades the whole of the Old Testament would be a serious mistake. There is no plot, narrative and historical characters except they are involved by allusion as in 3:7; 8:10-12. This Song preserves a level of mystery and appeals to more than the mind; it appeals to the whole person. In Spencer's study of the Song, he found out that the New Testament does not read the song allegorically but also agrees that there may have been early church references to Christ that use the language of the song. He asserts that "there are no references to being 'in love' with Christ that use the Song as their foundation"¹⁵ in the New Testament. Other love stories in the Bible are: Adam and Eve (Gen. 2:19-25), Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 16), Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 24), Jacob and Rachel (Gen. 29:15-28), Esther and the King (Esther 2), Ruth and Boaz (Ruth 2-4), Mary

and Joseph (Matt.1:18-25). But only two of them are full-fledged love stories- Ruth and Boaz, and Solomon and the Shulamite bride.

Greek words for love in pre-biblical Greek are *eros*, *αγαπω* and *φιλω*. *eros* gives sense of passionate desire. It is intoxication and ecstasy, and is sometimes perceived with horror. *Αγαπω* carries a sense of sympathy, it is the love of a higher to the lower, it is not self seeking. *Φιλω* connotes a desire or concern for a god or friend. It embraces all humanity. Unlike *αγαπω* it can be used for acts of affection e.g fondling and kissing. In the New Testament, especially in Paul, it is taught that the Church is the "Bride of Christ." This image is clearly understood to describe marital love as a model for understanding how Christ relates to his church, and how she relates to Him. Another book of the New Testament that uses the imagery is the Book of Revelation. This image is used as part of the culmination of all of history, as the City of God descends to earth as a bride adorned for her husband. In the gospel of John, a typical statement of Jesus that expresses love- *αγαπω* and *φιλω* - in John 21:15, where he asked Peter three times whether he loved him or not. In this context, it must be noted that the sense of love here suggests a response of Peter to the first love of Jesus which he could not deny. That Jesus used *φιλεις* the third time as in verse 17 should not be interpreted to mean the reason why Peter was grieved. The words are synonymously used in John. Peter's response is a responsibility which the Master was delegating to him.

It is pertinent to note that the use of the image under study does not result in romantic language on the part of Christians as they express their faith in prayer and worship both in Acts and the

Epistles. "The prayers and expressions of worship in the New Testament are free of romanticism, even while there is great appreciation for the idea of Christ as the bridegroom."¹⁶

Romanticism and the Divinity of Christ in Christian experience

In the contemporary Christian worship it is so obvious that the romantic emphasis is not even centered on Christ but on the Christian. This is contrary to what older writers used to emphasize, that is the person of Christ, and the various dimensions of His person, work and character. The current romantic trend would not follow this direction. Take for example the common chorus:

I love Thee, I love Thee, I love Thee, my Lord;
I love Thee, my Savior, I love Thee, my God;
I love Thee, I love Thee, and that Thou dost
know; But how much I love Thee my actions
will show.

This is away from appraising the love of Christ to passionately focusing on the love of the Christian for Christ which is a characteristic of romanticism. A romantic goes extra miles to expend his energy and concern to express his love for his lover. He loves even when the lover rejects him. And here the one who loves is the Christian. This nature of a romantic does not in any way apply to biblical relationship between Christ and his own. "Christ first loved us". Berkouwer asserts that "God acted only because man in rebellion had acted first. Therefore God's action in the incarnation does not sovereignly precede all human action, but follow it."¹⁷ So man acted in hatred and God acted in love which implies that the expression of love was first made by him and man

is to respond in obedience.

Therefore, an attempt to impose our love on Jesus would imply that he is like us; he needs our love to exist, and so on. In the book of Revelation Jesus told the Ephesians that they had abandoned the love they had at first, "and every Christian understands that the emotions of love are fickle, with romance being the most changeable feeling of all."¹⁸ My devotion, commitment and love to Jesus must be seen as significantly secondary. It is the love of Jesus that must be focused in worship since it feeds a Christian's obedience and service. To be the bride of Christ does not give us permission to make God into the husband/lover we've always wanted. The contemporary church trusts the human mind and imagination more than it should be trusted, and this has given birth to romanticism. We should trust our imaginations less, and sanctify the God of the Bible in the words of scripture.

A Balance

Considering all that have been discussed above, do we outrightly condemn romanticism? If not, what role does it play in our knowledge of Jesus?

Romantic sentiment is a large topic, a pan- historical phenomenon. The advocates of this concept might respond to any criticism pointing out that the criticism misrepresents the concept. But what this paper focuses on is what romanticism means today as it relates to worship. Romanticism, to many people particularly in modern culture is a religious experience- a rediscovery of the self and a heightened commitment to the personal over the material. Something so inspiring about the romantics is that it is in the one they love they find the meaning of their lives. Even if the

language expresses their experience we should try to define what their experience is before we decide to employ the word into spiritual matters. John Stott opines that the great need in today's church is a sensitive awareness of the world around us. But this should not suggest that the world sets the agenda of ideas and beliefs for the church in every respect.¹⁹

As Romanticism has a lot of positive characteristics to be celebrated, we should also bear in mind that being in love is a flawed state; romantic experience lacks substance and permanence to be true love. It is irrational. It is the sense of selfishness that makes the experience because a romantic only loves the feeling he receives from getting the attention from the object of his affection.²⁰

It is noteworthy therefore that to love God means to delight in him, and this is not best expressed in the words of romanticism-in love. The scriptures as it were, direct the attention of people to God's love and how they could respond to that love of God and not romanticism. Romanticism is not a significant Biblical expression of praise, certainly not worthy of becoming a regular part of our worship, prayer and communication of the Gospel. As understood and experienced today, romanticism is a flawed metaphor for delighting in and loving God. It is not the language used in the Bible. In other words, it is not significantly represented in the scriptures.²¹ Imagine the implication of the invitation to come and "fall in love with Jesus", not an invitation to faith. The Bible only directs us to faithfulness, obedience, worship, service and sacrifice, not to romanticism and emotionalism.

The presence of "romantic" expressions in worship does not

mean that it is completely irrelevant, but the relevance should not lead to thinking of a “needy God”, who desires our expression of love. And our understanding of God is shallow when we think that our relationship with God is best expressed through emotional and romantic music. The mental image of Christianity is Christ on the cross, and the result it brings should be a happening in the heart of a sinner saved by grace thereby producing a holy life.

Conclusion

What we term to be true worship is so relative in meaning today because it is a spiritual thing. The spiritual nature of it makes it more sensitive, and a careful examination must be made so that the biblical definition and experience of worship are maintained. The way to understanding the true worship particularly through music is by studying the scriptures; when we read the Word we must read to discover God and not any other thing.²² This then leads us into making music in “a language” of the Bible which is the love of God for the sinful world and not the erotic love of man for his pleasure.

The church can mutter some unworshipful feelings by carefully checking all lyrics for grammar, poetical meter, rhyme and stress, meanings, singability and biblical content²³ for every song. Worship in music can only be expressed in human language,²⁴ but meaning of the song text must be stressed because it gives the basis for which the music is played and the effects it produces at the long run.

To correct the mistakes our Christian composers make today, it will be of great importance not to be reticent on the works of the

older Christian composers of 'great hymns'.²⁵ Composers like Isaac Watts, a puritan, who composed many scriptural hymns and also showed the Christian application of old Testament scripture, making David to sing like a Christian. It is on this foundation of Watt that John and Charles Wesley built so that their hymns centered on the redeeming love of God and not the partial and indulgent love of small gods. Their hymns do not turn the thought of the worshippers away from God and his saving works to their fleeting feelings.²⁶ Other Great Composers include Fanny J. Crosby, William Cowper, Ira D. Sanky, Robert Robinson, Nicolaus L. Zinzendorf, St. Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, Augustine of Hippo etc. Even if their styles and forms of music are perceived to be archaic the text remains relevant to this generation and generations to come since it is drawn from the bible which is the eternal word of God to all generations of the world. In this respect, it is necessary and better for contemporary Christian composers to learn from the works of the older Christian composers than to learn from the secular composers the weaving of text.

Notes and References

1. Roland H. Bainton, *The Church of our Fathers* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1950), 110. It must be noted here that to the conservatives, any music that does not contain religious text which is acceptable in Christianity, whether it teaches morals or not is ungodly and worldly. Realistically Gospel music as it were, is simply a superimposition of Christian texts over existing vocal and instrumental characteristics of pop music such as Raggae, Jazz, Calypso, Highlife, etc. What we dance and clap to as Gospel music today in the Church is either of the ones listed above.

- Apart from this, is the personality of the composer. He may use the same Christian lyrics but with different intention. His personality would determine his audience, hence the meaning of the song. See Ovaborhene Idamoyibo, *Impressionistic Views on the Study of Music and Musician, Music in Africa: Facts and Allusions*, Edited by Emurobome Idolor (Oyo: Stirling-Horden Publishers, 2002), 12-23.
2. Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for the Fallen World* (Toronto: Tuppence Press, 1980), 20.
 3. Eric E. Wright, Seeking Balance in Worship, Restoring True Worship Part Two. *A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership*. Vol.9, Number 3. Summer 2000.
 4. Michael Spencer, *In Love with Jesus?* Michael@internetmonk.com
 5. *en.wikipedia.Org/wiki/Romanticism*.
 6. *Ibid*.
 7. *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, sv individualism Vol.6, 1926. 295.
 8. I. T. Mensah, *Understanding Music Book 3* (Onitsha: Africana-FEP Publishers Limited, 1990), 69. Expressionism is a movement that was away from Romanticism and tonality. Also see Arnold Schoenberg, *Much Like Expressionism online*.
 9. *Ibid*. Impressionism was started in France and began with painters who gave a general impression of what could be seen at quick glance without noting all details of it. Also see Ovaborhene Idamoyibo, *Impressionistic Views on the Study of Music and Musician, Music in Africa: Facts and Allusions*, Edited by Emurobome Idolor. 16.
 10. Michael Spencer, *In Love with Jesus?* Michael@internetmonk.com; Also see Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Ed), "ἀγαπᾶω, φιλεῶ, ερῶς" in *Theological Dictionary*

- of the New Testament. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985)
11. Leland Ryken et al "Love story" in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 518
 12. This is attested to in the initial problem faced by the early scribes while analyzing the books to be accepted to form the scriptures. A crucial problem with this book is that there no mention of God relating with man. It is full of human natural erotic feelings for the opposite sex.
 13. Leland Ryken et al "Song of Songs" in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 806.
 14. Michael Spencer, *In Love with Jesus?* Michael@internetmonk.com. Also see Daniel Grossberg, Nature, Humanity, and Love in Song of Songs, *Interpretation, A Journal of Bible and Theology*. Vol. 59, No. 3. July, 2005, 230. He opines that the cosmic triadic construct, nature/ humanity/ God, is alien and inapplicable to the song and that the only cosmic triad that is applicable to this song is nature/ humanity/love, which finds clear expression in song of songs and defines its world. And Carol L. Schnabl Schweitzer, Song of Songs: A Metaphorical Vision for Pastoral Care *Interpretation, A Journal of Bible and Theology*. Vol. 59, No. 3. July, 2005, 278, refers to the story as the transforming power of love between equals, but inconsistently goes ahead to say that it may be read as an allegorical description. Man and God are not equals and so is not relevant in God-man relationship.
 15. *Ibid*
 16. Lamar Boschman, *The Rebirth of Music* (Shippensburg: Destiny Image Publisher, 1980), 33

17. G.C. Berkouwer, *The Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), 25.
18. Michael Spencer.
19. John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1992),
20. Paul Munson, *Christian Worldview and Music: Shaping a Christian Worldview*, Edited by David S. Dockery et al (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2002), 220
21. Michael Spencer.
22. Kevin J. Navarro, *The Complete Worship Leader* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 2001), 28.
23. Steve Sywulka, The Making of a Hymnal, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Vol. 30 No.1. January 1994, 49.
24. Nancy Van Deusen, "Music, Rhythm" in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, Editor, Allan D Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1999), 573; here Augustine suggests that music provides a vocabulary of concepts and analogies to bring the elusive anima to discussion.
25. By great hymns we mean scriptural hymns made by skillfully weaving together texts from different parts of the Bible into metrical verse and are more poetical and singable. These hymns contain the eternal truth of the word of God. It is God-centered.
26. John Lawson, *A Thousand Tongues: The Wesley Hymns as a Guide to Scriptural Teaching* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press), p. 13.