

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Memory, Meaning & Life

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

2-8-2012

2012 Seminary Scholarship Symposium: "A Theology of Music Among Sabbatarian Adventists, 1849-1863"

Angelika Kaiser

Andrews University, angelika@andrews.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/mml>

Recommended Citation

Kaiser, Angelika, "2012 Seminary Scholarship Symposium: "A Theology of Music Among Sabbatarian Adventists, 1849-1863"" (2012). *Memory, Meaning & Life*. 104.

<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/mml/104>

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Memory, Meaning & Life by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

Memory, Meaning & Faith

[Main](#)

[About](#)

[Archives](#)

February 08, 2012

2012 Seminary Scholarship Symposium: "A Theology of Music Among Sabbatarian Adventists, 1849-1863"



Presentation

Professional musician David Williams, Ph.D. student in Church History at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Berrien Springs, MI presented his research paper with the title: "A Theology of Music Among Sabbatarian Adventists, 1849-1863".

Methodology

Williams examined the writings and hymnbook publications of the Sabbatarian Adventists from 1849-1863 to derive their theology of music. In order to demonstrate their theology of music, he sought to a) demonstrate the value of music among Sabbatarian Adventists through their prolific hymn publication, b) show from their writings theologies of true and false music, and c) present their belief about music and its role in the Christian life.

Leaning on Quentin Skinner's (*1940-) teaching, that historians must begin by seeing things *their way*, Williams studied the development of the Sabbatarian Adventist theology of music without placing the music within the known categories of systematic theology. Neither did he want to disregard the notion of a theology of music altogether. Starting to see things *their way*, his purpose was not to classify music according to our modern theological systems, but rather to describe the meaning of music in terms in which these early Adventists understood it.

They did not use the phrase *theology of music*, but they however did discuss music in highly theological terms. Williams' thesis is that music was not ancillary among Sabbatarian Adventists, but rather, they demonstrated a theology of music that was central to their life and eschatological hope.

The Importance of Musical Publishings

From 1849 until 1863 the early Adventists experienced a significant expansion within their hymn-repertoire. Within 15 years the *little flock* utilized nine hymn book publications. The number of pages of hymns grew from almost 50 pages to 450. These numbers of hymns give strong indicators to the value of music among these Adventists. The early Adventists desired their hymnody to serve as unifiers among their brothers and sisters gathering together under one faith, one present truth. However, these hymns were not only devotional and doctrinal poetic texts. It was obvious: they were intended to be sung.

In the latter half of the period, from 1855 and following, more tunes were published. The hymnal of 1855 was the first hymnal with music. Following that, in periodicals, in supplements and additions, much more music was put out. It seems, that their desire was not only to promote liturgical unity among their believers when they gathered for worship, but also to furnish a source of joy as they proclaimed their faith in song.

So it seems that the hymn-book publication gives strong indicators to the meaning and importance of music among Sabbatarian Adventists, although the theology of music cannot be clearly derived from these developments.

This chronology, so Williams, sets the stage for more explicit theology of music done in the writings on music at which we will look now.

Theology of Music

Two Prominent themes arised in the books, letters, and periodicals. Sabbatarian Adventists contrast true music, the music of heaven, God's creation and the Second coming with the false music made manifested in the churches of Babylon, secular society and spiritualism. Thus, they had a theology of both: true and false music. Now the theology of true music begins in heaven.

A) True Music

A study of the Sabbatarian Adventist theology of music must begin with their conception of heavenly music. All the other writings about music in this period seem to have been written with this frame in mind.

To speak of earthly music is to contrast it with the music of heaven. To speak of the *true* music for the Christian's life and worship is to strive for that heavenly harmony, even on this earth. The Adventist hope has ever been the hope of an eternal reality. The descriptions of heavenly realities, even when cast in theological terms, point to the fact that the elements of those descriptions are theological as well. Thus, if music is a part of heaven, then it could be qualified as a theological term.

For Sabbatarian Adventists, so Williams, the hope of heaven was filled with the presence of music, nothing better captured the essence of this hope than singing about singing in heaven.

"Beautiful heaven where all is light,
Beautiful angels clothed in white,
Beautiful songs that never tire,
Beautiful harps through all the choir." [1]

In a poem entitled, "The Exhibition," the heavenly choir is described as being directed by the great I AM.

"The music is most charming, the song is ever new, the choir will all be able to sound the notes most true; the whole will be directed by nature's great I AM - it is a sacred drama, the Marriage of the Lamb." [2]

If not a theology of music, at least music is part of the theology of God. God will be in the very middle of the music making when the redeemed enter heaven for the marriage of the Lamb. Through this poem, music becomes an attribute of God. According to this description, in order to do a theology, that is, a study of God, one must consider God's musicianship.

God is not limited to directing music. He is also described as the creator of musical composition. M. F. Maxson, a reader of

the *Review and Herald* wrote to the editors, wishing to share his hope of his Father's music-filled house:

„Music's surpassing harmony will fill the arches of heaven. Methinks angels will listen with rapture to its glorious, and lofty strains. Not one that overcometh will remain silent. Our voices will be tuned by the great Author of harmony." [3]

As a theological term, early Adventists did not think of music as an end in itself. Rather, music was viewed as an attitude and instrument for the glory and praise of the Lord Jesus Christ.

While music fills the experience of all the hosts of heaven, music is not the highest object.

“HEAVEN. Did you ever hear of a name more sweet? . . . And there is the city with its brilliant walls, golden streets, shady walks, fragrant flowers, luscious fruit, and pleasant music. But the sinner's Friend is the crowning attraction of the place. In him we behold all that is lovely, all that is pure, all that is good.”[4]

Besides music's central role in the reality of heaven, music is not the heart of a theology of heaven. Jesus Christ receives the attention of the entire heavenly host. It is for Christ's glory that music is made.

Within the context of a theology of music in heaven, the use of music as a metaphor links the expression with heavenly language. “Eternal life! O, there is music in the words.” [5]

“The cries of saints are like vocal music joined with the instrumental of prayer; they make heavenly melody in the ears of God.” [6]

It seems, looking forward, these metaphors sound like rich antecedents for which Ellen White would write later, saying:

“Singing, as a part of the religious service, is as much an act of worship as is prayer.”[7]

B) False Music

Sabbatarian Adventists contrasted the false music of their day with the true music made in heaven. They believed false music to be a manifestation of the moral decline and doctrinal errors found in the churches of Babylon. False music was also made apparent in the vile sounds coming from their contemporary society. The deception of false music was to be especially found in spiritualism.

As the time approached the coming of Christ in 1844, the Millerite Adventists began to interpret the numerous Christian denominations as Babylon. Thus, they fulfilled the prophetic Second Angel's Message that “Babylon was fallen” (Rev 14:8), and to “Come out of her my people” (18:4). This same theological critique of the churches continued into the Sabbatarian Adventist movement of the 1850s. Every aspect of the daughters of Babylon was scrutinized, especially the worship and music practices. The appraisal of the other churches' use of music is given in theological terms.

The first half of the nineteenth century had served as a period of intense change and development in the music of the Christian churches. Many churches of the day were beginning to introduce instrumental music into their worship services, such as the organ. For the past half-century, instruments in church had been strongly battled in the Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches. However, by 1850, the major Christian denominations used choirs and organs in their worship services.[8]

In their critique of the churches, Adventists appear to have adhered to the Calvinist conception of music, believing that the only suitable instrument for the praise of God in Christian worship is the only God-created instrument, the human voice.

“Never until since the proclamation of the near coming of our Saviour have the Protestant churches depended on instrumental music to assist in their formal worship as at the present day. Some societies have almost an entire band. Is this singing with the spirit and understanding, making melody in their hearts? The Spirit of God has left them, and nothing remains but an empty sound, as lifeless as the funeral knell of the departed dead.”[9]

Adventists viewed the extravagant instruments like church bells and organs as indicators of the churches' economic wealth and moral bankruptcy. They believed it would be better to sing with the heart, and give to the poor, than to spend on earthly instruments.

These critiques of the contemporary churches of the Sabbatarian Adventists are very pointed. It appears, however, not all Sabbatarian Adventists held these convictions about instruments in worship. In retrospect, James White was not opposed to the organ:

"When SDAs were a humble people, in the earlier days of their brief history, most of the old hands, those who have been pillars in the church, were opposed to instrumental music. They even objected to the pure and solemn tones of the organ to accompany vocal music in the house of God. We respect conscientious men and women wherever they may be found, and while we may think that their consciences are unnecessarily tender upon the matter of introducing the organ into church worship, we would treat them with great respect, and would be very careful not to wound them unnecessarily." [10]

Williams asked, how it can be that so many opposing views to the organ could have been published under James White's editorial oversight, if he wasn't opposed to it? Didn't also White publish against the organ? It could be that White wanted to promote a forum where Sabbatarian voices were heard. White might have agreed with his contemporaries' critique of the churches, but that does not mean he agreed with their solution—abandon all instruments and styles of music associated with the other churches. Indeed, as he compiled hymns for his numerous hymnbook publications, many hymns came from other Christian churches. In the end, the real critique against the modern churches was their attitude in worship. It appears the other churches had fallen to extravagant music as a facade in order to cover up their erroneous doctrines and moral emptiness.

Music and Secular Society

For Sabbatarian Adventists, culture and music went hand-in-hand. Music seemed to be patterned after a sinful or a righteous culture.

Uriah Smith wrote back, citing the opinion of John N. Andrews, suggesting that the personal experience and cultural context be examined in each circumstance:

"Bro. Andrews suggests that the different circumstances and temperaments of different individuals greatly affect this question. Thus, there are those who are not acquainted with the above pieces of music in their secular character, and to such they would of course bring up no evil associations, while the music is in many instances very agreeable. But with those who are carried away with music, and with whom their associations have been such as to poison them for religious use, the case is very different. Such should deal sparingly with them or forego their use altogether." [11]

Sabbatarian Adventists believed there was danger in the false music of their secular society. While not every tune or harmony was necessarily evil, Adventists sought to only associate with music that would draw their minds heavenward. The vile music of their day, gone unchecked, was destined for God's judgment.

Music and Spiritualism

David Williams pointed to the abundance of passages which he found, in which the *Review* recorded instances of spiritualism and the [evil] spirits using instruments, showing that spiritualism and its use of music was a real deception in their day. Something for us to ponder today, so Williams.

In the writings of Sabbatarian Adventists, two general theological distinctions are made regarding music. I have chosen to classify these two veins as true music and false music. These distinctions do not fit classical theological categories. Neither does music. Nevertheless, the writings of these early Adventists reveal rich theological concepts regarding music.

Conclusion

Sabbatarian Adventist concepts of music do not fit into systematic classifications, though music is discussed in close connection with theological themes: God, Jesus, Holy Spirit, Creation, Sabbath, Law, Cross, Pentecost, Sanctuary, Judgment, Sealing, Second Coming, Christian life, Sin, Temptation, Deception, Evangelism, Worship, and Heaven. This list stands as

some of the most significant theologies within Adventism and each of these theological themes is also discussed in the Sabbatarian Adventist writings in relation to music. By extension, music is treated as a theological concept. Therefore, it may be safe to conclude from these sources, that these early Adventists possessed a profound theology of music.

Implications for the Church Today

The apprehension of these important theologies of music does have serious implications for the church today:

- Do Seventh-day Adventists critically evaluate the music in their life and worship?
- Does their music ascribe to the secular or the heavenly?
- Is their goal music, or is Jesus the goal of their music?

This study has established that the Sabbatarian Adventists held deep-rooted theological understandings about music, which was not merely seen as notes on page, but had ministry as a function, worship as a purpose, and heaven as a goal. Seventh-day Adventists have much to learn from their early Adventist pioneers. Williams concluded with the wish that the church today may sing with as much spirit and understanding as her predecessors. May she bring glory to God through the music of both heart and lips.

Footnotes

[1] Uriah Smith, "Beautiful Zion," *Review and Herald*, November 24, 1859, 4.

[2] James White, "The Exhibition," *Review and Herald*, March 20, 1855, 198.

[3] M. F. Maxson, "In My Father's House Are Many Mansions," *Review and Herald*, August 18, 1863, 94.

[4] Uriah Smith, "Heaven," *Review and Herald*, July 10, 1860, 64.

[5] T. L. Waters, "Letters: From Brother Waters," *Review and Herald*, January 6, 1859, 55.

[6] Lee, "Secret Prayer Successfully Managed," *Review and Herald*, July 10, 1860, 58.

[7] Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets or the Great Conflict between Good and Evil as Illustrated in the Lives of Holy Men of Old* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1890), 594.

[8] The details of this development are too extensive to describe here. For more information, see my paper, "The Theology of Music in Worship of the Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist Churches from 1800-1850," a research paper presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the course CHIS 664, History of American Religious Thought.

[9] E. R. Seaman, "Have Any of the Rulers and Pharisees Believed on Him?," *Review and Herald*, September 8, 1853, 72.

[10] James White, "Leadership," *Review and Herald*, June 17, 1880, 392.

[11] Ibid.

Posted by [Angelika Kaiser](#) on February 08, 2012 in [2012 Seminary Scholarship Symposium](#), [Adventist Studies](#), [Church and Society](#), [Church History](#) | [Permalink](#)

[Save to del.icio.us](#) | [The Way...](#)

Comments

 You can follow this conversation by subscribing to the [comment feed](#) for this post.

Interesting findings, David. I especially like James White's words on how to handle the differences: "We respect conscientious men and women wherever they may be found, and while we may think that their consciences are unnecessarily tender upon the matter of introducing the organ into church worship, we would treat them with great respect, and would be very careful not to wound them

unnecessarily."

Wisdom for today!

Posted by: [Kessia Reyne Bennett](#) | [February 08, 2012 at 02:47 PM](#)

Verify your Comment

Previewing your Comment

Posted by: |

This is only a preview. Your comment has not yet been posted.



Your comment could not be posted. Error type:

Your comment has been posted. [Post another comment](#)

The letters and numbers you entered did not match the image. Please try again.

As a final step before posting your comment, enter the letters and numbers you see in the image below. This prevents automated programs from posting comments.

Having trouble reading this image? [View an alternate.](#)



[Contact](#)

[Archives](#)

[Feeds](#)

[Powered by TypePad](#)

Copyright © 2010 Andrews University