



Gospel Poetry as Evangelism in Contemporary Contexts in Zimbabwe: The Case of Spoken Word Tribe

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Abstract

The Christian faith is an ideal ground for the arts to grow in, irrespective of typology. God can only be known metaphorically speaking and the Holy Scriptures are clear about this aspect. Consequently, the Holy Bible is full of metaphors which are in poetic form poems. Poetry that is religiously oriented enthuses an audience about religious knowledge and even practices, and mostly elevate human understanding on what constitutes a spiritual life. Spoken Word Tribe (SWT), a group of young Christians desiring to put their poetic talent in the advancement of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, has recently been in the forefront of Gospel poetry in Bulawayo, a phenomenon that is worthy of research. These young Christians deploy poetic skills to the service of the Gospel and seek to remain 'creative/ artistic' and at the same time 'sound' in reaching out to people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ especially the young people in urban contexts. This paper examines the phenomenon of using poetry to advance the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It uses the case study of "Spoken Word Tribe", a group of young people in Bulawayo in Zimbabwe who are deploying their poetic skills in the service of the Gospel. The group is doing poetry as a way of advancing the Gospel of Jesus Christ both within and outside Church settings. The researcher argues that this kind of approach is at the intersection of Art and the Gospel resulting in art being in service of the Gospel, a means to an end rather than an end in itself. This, the researcher observes, has a potential of making young Christians reach out to more of their peers with the Gospel in a way that is relevant to their contexts. It is a demonstration of adapting ministry strategies without changing the unchanging message of the Gospel. The researcher also observes that there are however some sections of Christians that see such an approach to the Gospel as too relaxed and thus begrudge it.

Keywords: Gospel poetry, Spoken Word Tribe, art and society, evangelism, Bulawayo

Introduction

It is on a Sunday afternoon. The venue is Praise and Worship Centre auditorium along Lobengula Street in Bulawayo. From the front a young man is churning out words like a machine. He uses his hands to gesture, he moves around for effect and emphasis. The audience consists of a sizable group of mainly young people. They are clicking their fingers to urge the speaker on, to show solidarity, to show approval and appreciation. No doubt, they are enjoying being here. The young man in the front speaks with eloquence – he employs rhyme, he varies his pitch and he choreographs his movement to his words. Here and there, the speaker's words are punctuated by short phrases of agreement, approval and "wows" from the audience. A hallelujah is part of the atmosphere. The message from the young man in front is not different from the one you would hear from a sermon, his position



upfront is not different from that of a Preacher – wait a minute, who said this is not a sermon after all?

The above describes a scene from one of the events organised by Spoken Word Tribe (SWT), a group of young people who write and perform/present performance poetry in the form of Gospel poetry. The group is based in Bulawayo and has presented Gospel poetry in church services and in poetry events organised at church auditoriums like the one described above. The group also performs poetry that touch on other themes not necessarily on Gospel issues. This research however is interested in the Gospel poems. The Gospel refers to the Good News of Jesus Christ. The poems referred to as Gospel poems in this article are those that are centred on the Christian message of salvation through Jesus Christ and on teachings of the Christian life. These poems could also be defined as characteristically having a Biblical message for the hearers. What can be noted from the poems by SWT that fall within this category is that some of these poems are directed to within the Church (to Christians) and some of them are directed to those outside the Church (non-believers). When these poems are directed inside the Church the objective is usually exhortation, an encouragement to believers to continue in the faith and in well doing (Hebrews 10:25, Hebrews 3:13, Romans 12:8, Hebrews 10:24). On the other side, when these poems are directed without, they come across as evangelism, for the winning of souls to Jesus Christ and the revival of those who have backslidden in the faith. As far as these poems evangelise, they seek to contribute towards efforts to fulfil the Great Commission given by Jesus Christ in Matthew 28:19 by winning the lost to Jesus. In his article *Art from a Christian Point of View*, Beat Rink states:

A glance at the history of art and of the church reveals a truth: art produces beauty, and can thus praise God in a special way and lead us into praising God.

Spoken Word Tribe (SWT) was formed in 2012 by its three core members: Farirai Mapanzure, Buzani Dube (Poet Asa) and Keith Moyo. The group comprises of eight members who are all Christians. Some of the other members of the group include; Cynthia Chieza, UMametsi Moyo, Thaphelo Dyson Sihwa (Poet Phelo), Peter Zowa and Lisa. This researcher has also performed his poems with this group on several occasions such as youth conferences and youth services and other organised events. SWT does not only perform on platforms within the Church, the group also performs in secular platforms such as arts festivals. Intwasa Arts Festival koBulawayo is one of these platforms where some of the group's poets like Farirai and UMametsi and Asa came out outstanding in the performance poetry competitions. Farirai was the winner of the Intwasa Arts Festival koBulawayo performance poetry competition in 2015, uMametsi won the same competition in 2017 and Asa was a runner up in the same competition in 2016.

The group also organises poetry events at restaurants in Bulawayo. Notably, the group has a Church tour and tours to various schools. For the Church tour, the group responds to invitations for churches wishing to host them for a special and often unique poetry event. The group does not limit its performances to Gospel poetry only but also write and perform poems on other themes just like any poet will do. The distinguishing characteristic becomes that whatever theme or topic is touched, it is approached and looked at from a Christian perspective. In a written submission of the group's profile sent to this researcher, the group describes itself by saying 'at SWT poetry is not just a performance but a calling. We are out to touch lives, influence to the good and change mindsets. In short SWT is a movement, we break the norm and bring change'. The name of the group Spoken Word Tribe also speaks to their vision as it is anchored on the Christian basis of taking the Word of God as the primary aspect – the logos Word. The group desires to both remain anchored on the Word of God and at the same time to use creativity to convey their important messages.



Noticeably, there is a gap in terms of research that addresses Gospel poetry in the Zimbabwean context. This researcher is not aware of any research that addresses Gospel poetry in Zimbabwe. This research therefore comes as part of the efforts to fill this knowledge gap through documenting the practise of Gospel poetry in Zimbabwean contemporary contexts and seeking to understand how this poetry genre is practised. The way Gospel poetry advances the Gospel is also examined.

Methodology

Data for this research were gathered through the following: an interview, a questionnaire and participant observation. The researcher interviewed one of the leaders of the group, Farirai Mapanzure. This interview was a one on one approach in the model of a semi-structured interview. Ronald L. Jackson II, Darlene K. Drummond and Sakile Camara (2007:25) observe that 'generally, semi- or unstructured, open-ended informal interviewing is preferred to allow for more flexibility and responsiveness for emerging themes for both the interviewer and respondent'. The purpose of the interview was to get more in-depth information on SWT and its activities. Unlike a questionnaire, the interview has the advantage of allowing for follow-up questions to clarify certain issues under discussion.

The researcher also designed a questionnaire for SWT members that comprised of questions asking them about their involvement in SWT activities, their Christian background, their views on Gospel poetry and how they viewed themselves as Gospel poets. The questionnaire, which consisted of open-ended questions, was administered via the group leader, Farirai, who distributed copies to other group members. Open ended questions are those that remain open for the individual to respond in the way he wants without having to confine his or her answers to given options. According to David Wilkinson and Peter Birmingham (2003:11) 'open ended questions impose none of the restrictions of closed and multiple choice questions. They allow for the recording of any response to a question provided by the respondent'. The open ended questions were preferred so that respondents can give their opinions and views freely without being hindered by any options to choose from. Responses were then returned to the researcher directly or via the group leader based on the individual's preference. Four questionnaires were returned constituting a 50% response considering that the group has 8 members.

Participant observation was also one of the instruments used to gather data for this research. Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003:116) argue, in relation to activities being researched, that 'in order to understand fully what these activities mean to people, how they themselves perceive them and what their perspective is on them it is necessary to see those people in action, to experience what it is they do, even to wade in and have a go yourself'. Wilkinson and Birmingham go on to explain that observation allows for an in-depth understanding of phenomenon under research and it involves skills like; participating, listening, contributing, pursuing, communicating, questioning, interacting, sharing, refraining, retreating, negotiating, timing, recording and other skills. This researcher, upon invitation by SWT, has participated both in performing poetry together with SWT members and has also sat as an audience member in a number of these occasions. The researcher can recall up to six (6) occasions where he participated in the events. However, there is a need to point out that the researcher's participation in the activities of Spoken Word Tribe were not initially as a 'participant observer' for research purposes. The researcher participated as part of the Spoken Word Tribe team. It is when the necessity to write this article arose that the researcher 'adopted' the 'participant observer' status. It is therefore a status that was adopted in retrospect. The researcher has a long history of writing and presenting Gospel poetry and this contributed in arousing interest and motivation to do this research.



Art, Society and the Role of the Christian Artist

This article takes a Christian view of art. Nicholas Wolterstorff in his (1980) book *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic*, puts forward an argument for art that has a purpose in society. His standpoint comes from a predominantly Christian view of art. Wolterstorff proposes a theory of a Christian aesthetic that views art from a Christian point of view. Wolterstorff (1980:3) rejects the idea of art for art's sake and argues rather that works of art are 'objects and instruments of action' in the world. By this he sees art as serving a purpose in life. Art plays more roles in society than just for perceptual and aesthetic contemplation (See also Fisher, 1980:209). Carolyn Craft (1980:861) points out that Wolterstorff 'proposes a Christian view of the arts which is multifunctional, serves the human welfare and brings art back into daily living'. Roland Chia (2011:77) weighs in arguing that:

From a Christian perspective, however, the true purpose of art is to glorify God...like all human enterprises; the ultimate goal of art is not self glorification. Christians must therefore take exception to the popular slogan, "Art for art's sake" because it urges art to be self engaged and indulgent.

Chia goes on to quote Philip Graham Ryken who makes a point that 'art that is seen to "exist only for its own sake and not for a higher purpose" very easily becomes idolatrous' (Chia, 1980:77). The Christian artist and his role in society are therefore to be understood in the context of God's plans and His Word. Christian spirituality is also integrally concerned with social transformation issues that Gospel poetry can unpack to an extent, as it promotes spiritual practices and also values, which are very often implicit rather than explicit, directed at a more deliberate existence. There is a mystical dimension of Christian spirituality which has profound social implications (Ruffing, 2001), and this may manifest in Gospel poetry.

The role of the Christian artist stems from first understanding that his talent is from God and thus committing to glorifying God with his artistic talent (Wolterstorff, 1980; Chia, 1980; Ryken, 2006). Chia (1980:77), making an argument that art for art's sake poses a danger for the artist as this kind of art can become idolatrous, points out that 'the slide to idolatry can be averted when the artist acknowledges that his artistic ability is a gift from God, and seeks to glorify God with his art'. The Christian therefore realises that his or her art has a role in society and is not just art for art's sake. Like the expectation for the servants in the parable of talents (Matthew 25:14-30), the Christian artist therefore has to make good of his talents. Wolterstorff (1980:196) warns against misuse of art and ascribing to art more that it can accomplish by saying:

The Christian must resist the claims of ultimacy which repeatedly erupt from our institution of high art. Art does not provide us with the meaning of human existence. The gospel of Jesus Christ does that. Art is not a way of rising toward God. It is meant instead to be in service of God. Art is not man's glory. It displays man's degradation as well as dignity. The community of artists is not the new humanity. The community of Christ's disciples is that. Art is not man's liberating saviour. Jesus Christ is that.

Therefore, a Christian artist who has learnt and understood the role of his art in society is the one who is conscious that his art is a gift from God and must be used to glorify Him.

Christian art can only be in service of the Gospel and not vice versa. This applies both when that art is directed within the Church and when it is directed outside the Church. Wolterstorff (1980:185), writing on art within the context of liturgy points out that:



the works of art are there to serve the liturgy. That is the purpose behind their presence. For it is in order to perform the liturgical actions that the people are assembled. If their purpose had been to engage in aesthetic contemplation, they would have gone instead to a concert hall or to an art gallery.

The above assertion by Wolterstorff emphasises the central point of Christian art as being driven by purpose and that purpose being more important than the art itself. Wolterstorff (1980:185) points out that if art in a liturgical setting 'obscures what God is saying to the people or what it was meant that people should say to God – then the art is not serving its liturgical purpose effectively'. He goes on to argue that art, within a liturgical setting should not draw attention of people to itself instead of them engaging in the performance of the liturgical action. By drawing attention to itself, art would be distracting to the ongoing liturgical action. He proffers that art should be a humble servant of the liturgy and should not cause difficulty or awkwardness to the performance of certain liturgical actions. Wolterstorff (1980:186) sums up this aspect of his discussion by saying 'but good liturgical art is more than art which serves effectively the purposes of the liturgy. It is, beyond that, art which proves generally good and satisfying thus to use'. The views that Wolterstorff offers in regards to liturgical art also offer insight on Christian art practised in contexts outside liturgical settings. One realises that Christian art has to remain in service to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. To achieve this, Christian art has to be Biblical in orientation. Clark (2016) asserts:

...If Christian artists feel a tension between their faith and their artistic impulses, the scope of Christian art is greater than they may know. No doctrine, tenet, or precept of the faith prevents us from reflecting the whole world around us, in all of its paradoxical goodness and darkness...

Robert Hubbard (2009) in his article *Theatres for Shalom: Community-based Drama as Kingdom Work* narrates the practise of community-based drama in New Orleans among the poor and oppressed. He is of the view that this kind of theatre that addresses the issues affecting the poor, marginalized and oppressed is Kingdom work. According to Hubbard (2009:79) 'Kingdom workers, therefore are the meek who serve the weak...Kingdom work is a *commission* to all believers'. Hubbard sees Kingdom work as the act of the meek believers serving the weak. The community based-drama is seen as advocating for social justice. Hubbard sees this kind of work, by Trinity Christian Community as coming from a Christian perspective. The example being given here is from America. As observed earlier, Gospel poetry, particularly in contemporary Zimbabwean contexts still presents a research gap.

Gospel Poetry as Evangelism – Data presentation and analysis

The Spoken Word Tribe poets who responded to questionnaires generally see their engagement in Gospel poetry as ministry; a way of giving praise to God and an avenue to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with others in the society. Some responses actually included terms like 'preach/preaching' and 'soul winning' as part of the mandate that the poets are engaged in. Clearly the SWT poets see themselves as engaged in evangelism through poetry. As Chia (2011) argues, Christian art is not just art for art's sake but has a purpose. This purpose is that of glorifying God. Poets who are members of SWT seek to glorify God through giving praise to Him and also through sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with others. One of the respondents wrote 'with Gospel poetry I get to preach, rebuke and warn as according to the Word of God. I get to praise and worship God through poetry' (Respondent, 2018).



The poets also write and perform other poems with themes other than on Gospel issues. It appears that on these themes the approach is still from a Christian perspective. One respondent said that he also writes and performs poems on current issues such as love, war, politics and humanity. He added that the topics are approached from a Gospel angle, that is, from a Christian perspective. Another respondent pointed out that he also engages in poetry as a social commentator and through poetry advocates for social justice. This echoes similar sentiments to those of Hubbard (2009) whose concept of *Theatres for Shalom* speaks to similar issues. When reflecting on the SWT approach to Gospel poetry in particular and poetry in general one is reminded of the verse that says 'And whatsoever ye do, do *it* heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men' (Colossians 3:23, KJV). The SWT approach is from a Christian perspective, a Christian worldview. Steger (2012) views art forms as allowing one to experience meaning in life and promoting inter alia, Spirituality.

In regards to Spoken Word Tribe, engagement in Gospel poetry has been in two contexts; first within the Church and its settings, secondly in secular platforms and settings outside the Church. For poems presented within the Church settings, SWT members seek to glorify God, exhort believers to continue serving God and to testify about the goodness of God in their own lives. Klinghoffer Nancy (1982:99), citing Wolterstorff argues that:

He describes the Christian artist as one who is capable of assessing priorities and recognizing his responsibility to society...who seeks "to bring his artistic goals into conformity with his Christian commitment...In this way his art will not be separated from life".

Evidently, in Spoken Word Tribe the members are bringing their poetry goals in conformity with their Christian faith and commitment. Gospel poetry is therefore, in this instance deployed to serve the Gospel. The Christian poet ministers through poetry. Nancy (1982: 99), referring to Wolterstorff points out that as a Christian he has fused his Christian convictions with his views on art and aesthetics in order to advocate for art as 'man's fulfilment of his calling'. One of the respondents said that the Scripture that motivates him in doing Gospel poetry is Mark 16:15 which records Jesus's Great Commission to His disciples as thus; 'And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature' (KJV). The poets at SWT have come to submit their poetic talents towards the fulfilment of this mandate. They see themselves as engaged in preaching the Gospel through poetry. Poetry can after all, like most art forms, transform a listener into a participant, interacting with the divine (Penthcheva, 2010).

Spoken Word Tribe members have been involved in using Gospel poetry as evangelism in many different contexts. One of the members, Farirai narrated to this researcher about his involvement in an interdenominational hospital and prison ministry. Certain brethren involved in this ministry heard Farirai reciting Gospel poetry at a festival called the *Cross Concert* organised by Youth For Christ. They invited him to present Gospel poetry at prisons. He has therefore presented Gospel poetry at Bulawayo Grey Prison where through these evangelistic outreaches more than one hundred inmates gave their lives to Christ. Farirai has even met some of these former inmates in town who have assured him that they are still in the Lord. Farirai has also received invitations to present Gospel poetry at Khami Maximum Security Prison and Mlondolozhi Prison located at the outskirts of Bulawayo. Invitations to other evangelistic events have also come through. Wolterstorff (1980:198) points out that:

The Christian artist is called as an artist to share in his people's task of being witness to God's work of renewal, its task of serving all men everywhere by working to bring about righteousness and peace, its task of giving evidence in its own existence of what the renewed life is like, its task of inviting all men everywhere to join the ranks of the



people of renewal. Sharing in the task of this community is now the particular form which the artists's responsibility to God takes.

Gospel poetry has therefore been used by Spoken Word Tribe members to reach out to the lost and also to testify of the goodness of the Lord.

Spoken Word Tribe does not limit its Gospel poetry performances to Church settings only and evangelistic events organised by Christians. Spoken Word Tribe also ventures into the secular art spaces and in the process takes the Gospel to people there – at times people who would not ordinarily set a foot on Church auditoriums and spaces where Christian events take place. The poets have also been invited to feature as guest poets in secular festivals because of a realisation that they have a potential to pull crowds. Intwasa Arts Festival koBulawayo, arguably currently the biggest arts festival in Bulawayo is one of the spaces where Spoken Word Tribe poets have made a mark. In 2015 Farirai won the Intwasa pre-poetry slam competition in October and went on to win the actual Intwasa poetry slam competition in November. He presented purely Gospel poetry on a platform that had all kinds of people – an audience as diverse as one would find in such a festival. Other poets competing were not necessarily Gospel poets and interestingly Gospel poetry stood out. UMametsi Moyo of SWT won the Intwasa poetry competition in 2017 while Asa (from SWT) was a runner up during the 2016 competition. This testifies to the vast creativity in the group. The group believes that the greatest creativity in art is creativity that oozes from a God given talent. The group also performs its poetry at restaurants and other spaces. Whilst the secular spaces have at times positively responded to Gospel poetry, some respondents pointed out that there are some art spaces in the secular sphere that have exhibited some kind of hostility to Gospel poetry.

Spoken Word Tribe has seen its Gospel poetry being received positively within the Church (Mapanzure, 2018). Generally within the Church the response has been good especially with the young people. However, some, especially the elderly have sometimes expressed reservations with Gospel poetry in Church settings. Ryken (2006:8-9) observes that:

But there is another side to art – a more difficult side. It is never easy to be a painter, a poet, a musician, or any other kind of artist. While every calling has its own unique trials and tribulations, the life of the artist seems especially hard...To be an artist is often to be misunderstood...things are even more difficult for the Christian artists. Some churches do not consider art a serious way to serve God. Others deny that Christians in the arts have a legitimate calling. As a result, Christian artists often feel like they have to justify their existence. Rather than providing a community of support, some churches surround them with a climate of suspicion.

Whilst it is being noted from the quotation above that artists may face challenges in the practise of their art within the Church, it can be noted that SWT members have generally received encouraging support from family members, friends and brethren from the body of Christ.

The concept of balance is important in the practise of art within Church settings. In seeking to be creative, artists, in this case Gospel poets should remain Biblical. For any kind of poetry to be called Gospel poetry it should be Biblical. It should also be submitted to serving the Gospel and not vice versa. Actually, one of the reasons why some in the Church have viewed Christian art and Christian artists with suspicion is because there are some Christian artists who, in the practise of art, take a too relaxed stance towards the Gospel message and Gospel principles. Gospel poetry in particular and Christian art in general should be practised out of reverence to God and should handle the Gospel message and Gospel principles in a Scriptural way. Great care is needed in the practise of Gospel poetry so that



the practise of Gospel poetry is done scripturally. Sound Biblical hermeneutics is important for the Gospel poet. Devotional disciplines like Bible study and prayer are very important for any Gospel poet who seeks to produce Biblically sound poetry.

Conclusion

There is huge spiritual significance in Christian and thus Gospel poetry. This article has presented how Spoken Word Tribe has practised Gospel poetry. They have used Gospel poetry to give glory to God and to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Generally SWT Gospel poetry has had a good reception especially among the young people. In the practise of Gospel poetry, it has been noted, poetry takes the position of being in service to the Gospel and not the other way round. The goal of the Gospel poet should be to glorify God and not to seek self glory. For poetry to be called Gospel poetry it should be Biblically sound. Those involved in writing and performing Gospel poetry should take great care to see to it that the messages of their poems are Biblically sound. The delivery of poetry itself should be Scriptural and anchored on the reverence of God. Gospel poetry is thus a highly inventive effort to investigate the secret of life in Christian teachings and allows one to explore the spiritual fabric of the soul.

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