

Institute for Christian Teaching
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**THE TEACHER'S VOICE:
CONVEING CHRIST'S PRESENCE IN THE CLASSROOM**

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Introduction

There is little teaching without voice. And there is no voice without spoken words and sounds. But it is impossible to say a single word that would be totally neutral, that is, without any effect on those who carefully hear it. By these three statements I want to emphasize that the teacher's voice is a powerful instrument that creates a certain academic and spiritual climate in which the students not only gain knowledge, but shape their attitudes, accept values, define priorities, etc.

In the process of teaching, the human voice is much more than just a means to articulate the speaker's thoughts. Indeed, it is one's portrait, where others can see and feel the inner being of the speaker. Even more, our voice reflects the image of the God we believe in, even if we do not make any explicit statements about our beliefs. If we are talking about Christian teaching where the highest aim is not to deliver certain information and knowledge as such, but to shape students according to the divine pattern revealed in Jesus, then the teacher's voice is one of the crucial factors in this process.

So, what do our students see when they hear our voice? How can the teacher's voice be of help to make One who is hidden inside of our being—Jesus in the heart of the teacher—visible, audible, and palpable to our students?

Though it is true that body language as a whole includes mimics, gestures, eye contact, etc., in the following essay I propose to consider only the role of the teacher's *voice* in the teaching process. To do that, we will consecutively look at the parts of the whole picture as (1) the phenomenon of the human voice, (2) the nature of Jesus' voice as a paradigm for the teacher's voice today, and (3) in practical terms we will try to outline "a theology of the teacher's voice" and apply the results of our study to our activity as Adventist teachers and educators.

The Phenomenon of Human Voice

General observations

From the very first days of existence in the mother's womb, every human being hears the voices of parents and other people. The mother's voice is a specially rich source of information for a child about the outward environment. In fact, this is a complete world, just as rich as what a child will see after being born. The rhythm and intonation of her voice, the depth of feelings she has towards the child, echo in his/her forming consciousness either as trust and love, or distrust and anxiety. A child "decodes" not only the mother's internal speech, but also her *outward* speech, articulated by sounds.

In spite of the fact that such communication takes place on nonrational level, a child "understands" his/her mother quite clearly. Although during the later development the child's perception of the world will gradually change toward a more rational basis, *voice of other* (the voice of the sender of information) will play almost the key role in carrying the fullness of information from the sender to the receiver. With some reservations I may say that in the communication process intonation is even more important than information. Such is the nature of the word:

Any word has two meanings. The first one—a word as a symbol, signifying an object or process, the second one—a word as a set of sounds which by itself causes reaction. Since the mind of an adult is engaged in perception of the first level of meaning, the second one—reaction to the word as a set of sounds—takes place subconsciously and is experienced as a certain emotional context¹.

It is helpful to remember that "perception of intonation usually takes the lead over the perception of meaning", and if this is so, then "wrong modulating may cause a breach of communication".²

¹ Ilya Rasskazov. *A Theory of Computer Phono-Semantic Analysis*. See: <http://www.analizfamilii.ru/theory.shtml>

² N. V. Cheremisina-Enikolopova. *Laws and Rules of Russian Intonation*. Moscow: "Flinta", "Science", 1999. P. 4.

The human voice reflects the whole spectrum of feelings, the diversity of his/her internal life, not to mention objective facets of a person, such as age, sex, and in some cases, place of birth. The way a person speaks, how distinct the words are, how he/she pauses, what the speed and rhythm of the speech are—all these features clearly testify about his/her education, social status, temperament, state of mind, values, and attitude to the subject of speech and to the audience in general, to name but a few.³

The voice is like a mirror where the spiritual life of a person is reflected. It is a kind of *second self*. Or, as one of the well known writers on the subject, Paul Soper, has put it, “the voice is we and our thoughts.” And as there are no two people who would think in the same way, there are no two voices that would be perfectly identical. Therefore, our voice is like our visiting-card, which tells others more than our autobiography printed on the paper. Let us look at it closer.

The Main Components of Intonation and Their Function

Intonation is a complicated phenomenon consisting of three main components: *stress* (power of sound), *melodics* (voice tone contour), and *timbre* (“sounding colour”).

Stress is determined by the power of sound with which a given word in the sentence is pronounced, and it is expressed “either by just one acoustic parameter (intensity, or duration, or the rise/lowering of the main tone frequency), or by a distinct combination of these parameters”.⁴

Particularly significant are *semantic stresses*—*phrasal* and *logical*. The first one is to highlight a more informative word, the second one, being accentuated the most, has the function of communicating what is *new* in a given message. Often the semantic stresses have an emotional and expressive nature, and with the help of pitch and timbre modulations the speaker expresses feelings and, at the same time, attitude towards the topic.

³ N. V. Cheremisina-Enikolopova, p. 24.

⁴ *Ibid.* P. 13.

The *melodics* of the voice, or its tone countour, is “the modulation of the main pitch tone when parts of the sentence, the sentence and...the whole series of sentences highly connected by the semantic and syntax...Tone contour is to express different logical, syntactical, and emotional-expressive meanings”.⁵ A change in the pitch is reached by smoothly sliding from one pitch to the other. It is interesting to note that the voice range or oscillation frequency of vocal cords as a phenomenon of physical nature corresponds to the musical scale. Each teacher should know his/her scale. And if one has musical pitch, by singing the scale he/she can find out his/her natural pitch. This is important for the sake of expanding the scale and for a more skillful use of voice possibilities.

It is also important to point out that speech melodics is determined by national/cultural peculiarities:

Just as in national music exists a certain musico-intonational “dictionary”—a set of generally significant, most widely used intonations, a kind of original “intonational formulae”, by which penetration into the meaning takes place—in a similar way there is an intonational-melodical “dictionary” in [any] *national language (italics by—N. V. Ch.)*.⁶

Timbre is the voice’s “sounding colour” which adds more nuances. It is accepted to distinguish between *metallic* timbre (head resonator in use) and *velvety* timbre (chest resonator in use). The first kind of timbre usually communicates so-called “slogan” texts, the second one is more suitable to communicate innermost feelings, the intimate world of thoughts and emotions. With other voice parameters, timbre creates “a particular contour of emotional, expressive and valuative overtones that function on a metasemantic level.”⁷

⁵ *Ibid.* P. 15.

⁶ N. V. Cheremisina-Enikolopova, pp. 16, 33.

⁷ Marklen Konurbayev. *Linguopoetics and Timbre of King James Bible*. Ph. D. Dissertation. Moscow State University. See: <http://www.analizfamilii.ru/theory.shtml>

Thinking of voice timbre, Paul Soper says:

[it] changes according to whether we are talking about something strong or soft, heavy or light, rough or smooth, sharp or blunt, dry or wet, slow or fast, light or dark, sweet or bitter, hot or cold, big or small, thin or thick, clumsy or graceful, clean or dirty, tight or loose, solid or fragile.⁸

All the main functions of intonation clearly point out how much depends on the ability of the speaker to master his/her voice. Figuratively speaking, if the voice of the teacher is an “orchestra of various instruments”, “an orchestra [which is] harmonious, powerful, dignified, lively, slender, the only one able to pass the least movements of one’s inner life”⁹, then the teacher is a conductor.

If we look at the picture from a theological point of view, then we may say that our voice is responsible for the image of God which by the power of the Spirit we are to “produce” in the minds and souls of students. Indeed, “our thoughts produce our words and our words react upon our thoughts”¹⁰, and “if our words act upon ourselves they act more powerfully upon others”.¹¹

I am glad to see that as Adventist teachers and educators we become increasingly aware of this:

Language reveals the state of the soul. It carries emotions and hidden feelings. The vocabulary, the tone of voice, and even the syntax tell us much about the speaker¹².

Oh, our students do want to know how to parse Greek, and they do want to understand the chronology of the kings of Israel, and they do want to deepen their understanding of world views and philosophies, and they do want to become effective in giving Bible studies, and they do want to know how to reach the youth, and they do want to preach God’s word with power. And they need to know all these things. But what our students want and need more than anything else is to see a living example of a man of God, a man of Christ...Can they see God in you, in me?...Can they hear it in *your tone of voice?* (*italics added—Y. D.*)¹³

⁸ P. L. Soper. *Basics in the Art of Speech*. Moscow: Foreign Literature Press, 1958. P. 216.

⁹ Z. V. Savkova. *Art of the Speaker*. Saint-Petersburg: “Knowledge”, 2000. P. 11.

¹⁰ TMK 137. See: <http://www.nisbett.com/reference2/vss/vss25.htm> [.]

¹¹ E. White. TMK 137. Cited according to: <http://www.nisbett.com/reference2/vss/vss25.htm> [.]

¹² Valdimir Negreli and Jose Iran Miguel. *Verbal and Non-verbal Teacher Communication in Seventh-Day Adventist Education*. 1988. CC. 1991. V. 2. P. 13.

¹³ Ron E. M. Clouzet. *The Spiritual Objective of Theological Education*. A Paper presented at European Theological Education Symposium. Bogenhofen Seminary, Austria, April 11-14, 2003. Unedited Draft. PP. 17-18.

Values are communicated even when not verbalised...You do not teach what you think you are teaching.¹⁴

Therefore, if our students hear in our voices kindness, compassion, spiritual and not fleshly charm, deep and not superficial understanding of man's drama due to the sinful existence, we may be confident in saying that after a few years of our teaching students will be spiritually influenced and, perhaps, will even open their souls to God Himself. On the other hand, how repulsive is the dry, lifeless, and cold voice of a teacher, who may be unintentionally spreading indifference or scepticism. So, it is worth asking, what kind of God our students gradually start to believe in after a few years of such teaching?

As we can see, much depends on our voice. But what does our voice depend on? Jesus once said: "The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him" (Mt 12:35; *unless otherwise stated all quotations are from NIV*).

So, here we come right to the point: what is really "stored up" in you and me? What sorts of things have we been gathering during the last 5, 10, or more years? If the books we read, the movies we saw, conversations we engaged in, things we touched, music we heard, have helped us to contemplate the "ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18), then our voice will reflect this glory. As a consequence our students will "take note that these men had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13).

And it should be done naturally:

The physical properties of speech—its rhythm, pitch, volume, and inflection—are a kind of music that makes the imagination dance...Music comes naturally!

¹⁴ Dr. V. Baily Gillespie. A statement made during the presentation on the 31st International Seminar on Integration of Faith and Learning. Friedensau University, July 17, 2003).

If you started to drown and called for help, no one would have to give you elocution lessons about how to shout for help. It would come naturally! If you are falling in love, and you say to that special person “I love you,” no one would have to teach you to say that. If the thought is genuinely there, it will be expressed with a particular music to it¹⁵.

Now the questions arise: What else can be done to master our voice, to conduct this “harmonious, powerful, dignified, lively” orchestra? What really does determine our “performance”? Is it really possible for our voices to somehow reflect Jesus’ voice, since nobody would deny that he was the Teacher of all teachers and “no man ever spoke like this man” (Jn 7:46)?

Before going on, I believe it is necessary to make a statement everybody would agree with: *it is practically impossible to reach the ideal if the ideal either is not seen or heard*. What I mean here is this: unless we hear the intonation by which Jesus spoke, our students will scarcely recognise His voice in our own voice. But here we should deal with yet another question, the most intriguing one: what was *His* voice like?

The Nature of Jesus’ Voice as a Paradigm for the Teacher’s Voice Today

What can we know about Jesus’ voice from the Gospels?

The Gospels do not tell us much about Jesus’ voice, especially if by voice we first mean intonation. With a few exceptions¹⁶ there is nothing said about it. Though the Gospel writers are quite clear that by His ability to speak Jesus attracted multitudes (Mk 6:33, 34), and the influence of His words was extremely powerful (Mk 1:22; 12:17b, 34b; Lk 4:20, 22; etc.), it goes without saying that He would never be able to have such an effect unless something special in his voice was present. But what was that? Can it be known? If yes, how?

¹⁵ “The use of imagination in preaching. An interview with Thomas H. Troeger”. *Ministry*, July, 2002. P. 17.

¹⁶ See: Mk 7:34; 8:12; 15:37; Mt 25:30; Lk 8:8, 54; Jn 7:28, 37; 12:44.

Yes, it is true that “the intonation feature is of no use to us when we are attempting to understand written sentences rather than spoken utterances, since we are rarely told anything about the intonation of the written word.”¹⁷ But Jesus did not write anything (with one exception—see Jn 8:8, though we are not quite sure about what he wrote in the sand), whereas he had spoken about many things. Therefore it would be helpful to know more not just about *what* he said, but *how* he said it.

Ellen White About Jesus' Voice

The Writings of E.G. White are perhaps the richest source of our knowledge about this hidden side of Jesus' unsurpassed ability to speak the words of life as his voice intonations, since she was one who was given the rare supernatural experience—to *hear the voice of Jesus*. This is what she said about this experience: “*Then Christ was presented before me, and His manner of talking... (italics added—Y.D.) and there was a sweet melody in His voice*”.¹⁸ So, no wonder why there are so many—literally hundreds—of descriptions of his voice throughout E. G. White's writings. And they are very enlightening if one takes them seriously.

Here are just some quotations:

Jesus is our example. His voice was musical, and was never raised in high, strained notes while He was speaking to the people. He did not speak so rapidly that His words were crowded one upon another in such a way that it made it difficult to understand Him. He distinctly enunciated every word, and those that heard His voice bore the testimony that “never man spake like this man”.¹⁹

By loving words... Christ bore down old traditions and man-made commandments, and presented the love of the Father in its exhaustless fullness. His calm, earnest, musical voice fell like balm on the wounded spirit.²⁰

The beauty of His countenance, the loveliness of His character, above all, the love expressed in look *and tone* (*italics added—Y. D.*), drew to Him all who were not hardened in unbelief. Had it

¹⁷ Petter Cotterell & Max Turner. *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation*. Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1989. P. 23.

¹⁸ Ev 670.

¹⁹ RH March 5, 1895.

²⁰ RH March 5, 1901.

not been for the sweet, sympathetic spirit that shone out in every look and word, He would not have attracted the large congregations that He did.²¹

The Saviour's voice was as music to the ears of those who had been accustomed to the monotonous, spiritless preaching of the scribes and Pharisees. He spoke slowly and impressively, emphasizing those words to which He wished His hearers to give special heed. Old and young, ignorant and learned, could catch the full meaning of His words. This would have been impossible had He spoken in a hurried way, and rushed sentence upon sentence without a pause. The people were very attentive to Him, and it was said of Him that He spoke not as the scribes and Pharisees, for His word was as of one who had authority.²²

Had He raised His voice to an unnatural key . . . the pathos and melody of the human voice would have been lost, and much of the force of the truth destroyed.²³

If the voice is toned right, if it has solemnity, and is so modulated as to be even pathetic, it will produce a much better impression. This was the tone in which Christ taught His disciples. He impressed them with solemnity; He spoke in a pathetic [with pathos] manner.²⁴

So, we see that Jesus' voice was as rich and colourful as was his message. Jesus' voice reflected the depth and many-sidedness of his internal life, countless nuances of his love toward God the Father and fellow human beings. But first of all by his unique voice Jesus served people, and each of them could hear in it the answer to his/her innermost aspirations.

Being far from any attempt to belittle the significance of Jesus' redemptive sufferings, his death and resurrection, I think that Jesus penetrated human hearts not just because of the newness of his theological ideas about the nature of the Kingdom of God, but also, I believe, thanks to his voice and its intonations which *continued to sound and echo in the hearts of the hearers long after they first had heard him*. It means that at the source of Christian faith as such was a living voice of Jesus rather than scholastic texts.

And today true teaching is not possible if it does not help our students to hear Jesus' voice and bring forth living faith in him as the Creator and Redeemer. And the deeper we understand this the more successful our teaching will be and the more distinct divine-human melody will be heard from our lips—the eternal gospel of Jesus Christ.

²¹ DA 254.

²² CT 240.

²³ Ev 56.

²⁴ 2T 615.

Thus, having in mind what E. White wrote about Jesus' voice²⁵, we may outline “a theology of the teacher's voice.”

Toward a Theology of the Teacher's Voice

As Adventist teachers we are responsible for the way we carry out our mission of salvation and educating those who have been entrusted to our care. And since the human voice is such a powerful instrument that can be creatively used for the purpose of building up our students in faith, then we are under the obligation to constantly tune it according to the divine pattern we have in Jesus. This cultivating is only possible in our living union with Jesus, in our daily walk with him, and the Bible plays a key role in the process if we read it “formationally, rather than informationally.”²⁶

So, what are the main values that can be transmitted by our voice through teaching? Following Paul I would like to mention: “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love.” (1 Cor 13:13a).

Faith

I think nobody would question the fact that faith lays at the heart of the whole value system we try to build up in our students. But how is it “produced?” Yes, faith is a gift from God (Rom 12:3), but would you not agree that it is *our* responsibility to exercise it in ourselves and nurture it in others? So, how can it be done?

As a starting point for this last section let us take the famous statement made by Paul: “faith comes from hearing the message” (Rom 10:17). What is this “hearing”? Yes, information, but

²⁵ For further reading see: <http://www.nisbett.com/reference2/vss/vss25.htm> [.]

²⁶ David Tasker. *Integrating Faith, Learning, and Life in Teaching Religion Courses*. A paper presented during the International Conference on Religious and Theological Education, July, 7-10, 2003. P. 5. For further reading on the subject, see Carol Tasker, ‘Spiritual Formation. Unexpected Surprises for Pastors,’ Ph. D. Dissertation, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, 2002. P. 169.

also *intonation*, because intonation transmits information and is part of it, although it is not always cognitive and rational. It means that faith comes from intonation just as from information (knowledge).

In my view, it is the Holy Spirit who “produces” the right voice intonation. The whole experience that occurred with the disciples on the day of Pentecost seems to be pointing in that direction. People from different places of the Mediterranean world were saying: “we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” (Acts 2:11). Would they have recognized their tongues and believed in the message unless the right intonation was there? Otherwise it would not be *their* tongue! So, our voice intonation, formed and guided by the Holy Spirit is very significant in the whole process of conveying such an important virtue as faith.

Hope

Despite the fact that more and more people in our society strive to increase their material goods they do not get richer in terms of certainty for the future. It is God only who can give us “hope and a future” (Jer 29:11). And our students need something more than just a good high tech infrastructure on our campus, something more than a high academic level in our institution and high degrees among the honored and outstanding professors.

Again and again in our Seminary (Zaokski Theological Seminary, Russia) I see the students who have come from broken families (more than 50%), who have tried all kinds of godless things, including heavy drinking, drugs, sexual misbehaviour, etc. before they actually found God. And continuing their struggle for a better way of life, designed after the divine pattern, they come to the Seminary.

So, what do they see there? Do they see in me a man of hope? Does the way I preach, teach and talk to them “betray” that I am a man of hope? Or do my lectures and presentations give them just “pure” knowledge? What do they hear as they listen to me speaking about the six main consequences of the European Enlightenment or about the four hermeneutical presuppositions accepted by the Seventh-day Adventist Church? And how about your students?

Love

“But the greatest of these is love,” says Paul (1 Cor 13:13b). Why is love the greatest among the gifts? Isn’t it because “God is love” (1 Jn 4:16) and there is nothing greater than God? But we would never understand and appreciate this, if it were not for Jesus who made the love of his Father so powerfully audible and visible to us.

The topic of this paper is “The Teacher’s Voice: Conveying Christ’s Presence in the Classroom.” Isn’t this a mystery—conveying Christ’s presence in the classroom? Yes, indeed: a “mystery, which is Christ in you” (Col 1:27). On the other hand, if our voice is “an orchestra... the only one able to pass the least movements of one’s inner life [Christ in you]”, why not let Jesus and his Spirit conduct this orchestra in such a way as to express his love to those who have been entrusted to us to teach and educate?

Conclusion

The human voice is a gift of God. It is just as powerful as a gift of thinking. For an Adventist teacher, speech culture should be just as important as thought culture. And we have the One who can master both. Thought culture and voice culture are two inseparable things coming from the same source, that is, the Word of God, i.e. the voice of Jesus. In other words, if we are in true and daily union with Jesus, he will teach us what seems to be an impossible thing to do – to teach and to speak as he did. The task is very ambitious and not easy to achieve, but let us try

remembering our Master, for it was He who said: “A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained *will be like his teacher*” (Lk 6:40).

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