BALANCE — A DIFFICULT BUT NEEDED PERSPECTIVE FOR CHURCH MUSIC LEADERSHIP

By Dr. Ronald L. Sprunger*

As an introduction to the above topic, several pages will be devoted to the tracing of my pilgrimage as a church musician. During the past years I have experienced a gradual growth in my understanding of the purpose of church music ministry. To a great extent this growth has been the result of dealing with polarities such as: art music vs. functional church music, thought vs. feeling, structure vs. freedom, new wine and old wineskins, transcendence vs. immanence, and habit vs. meaningful tradition. With regard to these polarities truth seems to be held in tension between what often appear as extreme opposites. A dialectical approach does not result in "pat answers," but rather in a deeper appreciation of the need for a concept of truth as balance (tension) between extreme opposites. Those ideas which seem dialectically opposed to each other have the potential to nurture each other.

In terms of human development, this struggle was in accordance with the stage theories of Erik Erikson and Daniel Levinson. The transition from early adulthood to middle adulthood is characteristically a time of evaluation, reflection, and tension. With a firmer hold on things, and a clear vision, the days ahead should be most rewarding.

The tension began to build during my early 30's, reaching a climax at age 37 when I removed myself from church music leadership for a period of two years in order to reflect on and evaluate what I had been doing. During this time of searching for meaning, I began to question my concept of music ministry which was based on stretching people so that they would learn to appreciate the kinds of music that I valued. Two experiences that occurred during my freshman year of college set the stage for this later struggle.

At this time I became aware of the disdain that some educated musicians have for gospel songs. During a chapel service, another student and I sang a Rodeheaver gospel song as a musical offering. Our voice teacher commended us for the quality of our rendition, then proceeded to discredit our choice of song. Against this backdrop, I share an experience that followed a few weeks later. My roommate invited me to sing in a performance of Handel's *Messiah*, presented by his home church. The director, who holds a doctorate in music, had established a fine choral tradition at the church. However, to my surprise, this gentleman's musical offering at the Sunday morning service was his singing and playing of a Rodeheaver gospel song. This experience of observing a well-trained musician performing two contrasting styles of music made a lasting impression. The effect of this experience was probably nullified for a period of time by my transfer to a conservatory of music where the lines

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between "art music" and "other music" were even more sharply drawn. Yet, even in this environment, I met a person who embraced both worlds of music. My organ professor, who was an excellent performer, served as organist in an evangelical church where neither the quality of organ nor repertory of songs reflected the high standards of the conservatory of music. To him, a fine musical tradition and pipe organ were not as important as were his personal commitment to the Lord, and the preaching of the infallible word.

During the time of my search for meaning in church music, we began attending Sunday evening services at a local church. Sunday evening services were an important part of my Christian nurture during childhood and youth, and I felt a need for this again. In these services, we experienced a new dimension in congregational singing. I can identify with Charles Wesley and G. Campbell Morgan who were moved by the worship of the Moravians and Welsh revivalists, respectively. I had encountered people for whom singing was a heart response, and for me it was like water on parched ground. The song service, which lasted about 45 minutes, consisted of scripture songs and some hymns. There was also a style of singing known in Pentecostal services as "singing in the Spirit." For a period of about five years we attended this Assemblies of God church in the evening and First Baptist Church in the morning. Except for the scripture songs that we introduced during the Sunday School hour, the repertory of song at the Baptist Church consisted of hymns and anthems. I often described the experience of attending two churches as "the best of two worlds."

At age 40, I accepted an invitation to minister through music in the Assemblies of God denomination. One of my goals was to effect a balance between scripture songs and choruses on one hand, and traditional hymns on the other. Except for Sunday evening services, gospel hymns were used less frequently than traditional hymns such as: "All Creatures of Our God and King" (LASST UNS ERFREUEN), "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name" (DIADEM), "Crown Him with Many Crowns" (DIADEMATA), "Holy, Holy, Holy" (NICAEA), "Like a River Glorious" (WYE VALLEY), "Now Thank We All Our God" (NUN DANKET), "Rejoice, the Lord is King" (DARWALL'S 148TH), "This is My Father's World" (TERRA BEATA), and "When Peace Like a River" (VILLE DU HARVE). Although a reasonable balance was achieved in congregational song repertory, in anthem and solo repertory standard classics were not as well represented as were the songs that were currently well-known. Solos such as the following were presented and rather well-received: "Rejoice Greatly" and "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth" (Handel); "Ye People, Rend Your Hearts" and "If with All Your Hearts" (Mendelssohn) and "The Lord is My Light" (Allitsen). Toward the end of my tenure I became more concerned about teaching that which has lasting value.

During transition to middle adult life, it is customary to give thought to the legacy that one passes on to the next generation. I wanted the people to have

in their hearts and minds a legacy of song that would serve as vehicles for praise and worship for the next generation. Children need some songs to grow on, as well as songs that are soon to be out-grown. During the 1984 Christmas season, the children memorized the following traditional hymns and carols: "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing," "Joy to the World," "Angels We Have Heard on High," and "O Holy Night." There is a need to be concerned about the transmitting of our spiritual and cultural heritage of song. An acquaintance of mine, who teaches in a Christian university, has conducted an annual survey of the students in his classes to determine how familiar they are with standard hymnody. On the basis of his research over a ten-year period, he reports that there has been a decline in the use of traditional hymns. Many of the students who were surveyed were from charismatic churches, many of which emphasize scripture songs and choruses, sometimes to the exclusion of hymns. On the basis of my experiences, I am convinced that these same people could be led to apply their great enthusiasm for singing to the great hymns of our faith. Some of the most enthusiastic hymn singing that I have heard has been in Pentecostal churches. If the tradition of vibrant hymn singing is lost by Pentecostals and other evangelicals, it is due to the failure of the pastors and ministers of music to provide a balance.

From the vantage point of having served in several denominations, I sense a need for church musicians to consider what might be gained by opening one's self to new worship experiences. Although I have described the profound influence that Pentecostal worship has had on me personally, I also have a great appreciation for my Mennonite heritage, and for the many years that I have spent in liturgical churches and in free churches. Paul Anderson, writing in *Leadership* magazine, made a statement that expresses my sentiments well. He writes:

> The issue is not structure or freedom, but Spirit. God has no preference for formless spiritualism or Spiritless formalism — he rejects both. Spontaneity offers no innate advantage over liturgy. Liberty is where the Spirit is, not where the preacher has thrown away his notes.[1]

Anderson discusses the failure of some leaders to recognize the importance of worship. In his words, "Pastors may spend fifteen hours on sermon preparation and fifteen minutes throwing the service together."[2] Every church has an agenda, a liturgy, whether it is planned in advance or on the spot. Anderson, who is Lutheran, is cognizant of the fact that forms have liabilities.

> Rite easily moves into rote. Those active participants may learn the forms and stay disengaged throughout the whole process. The prophets denounced the priests who made rite more important than righteousness. Jesus said of the scribes, "In vain they worship me." While their lips honored God, their hearts were far from him.[3]

The out-pouring of the Holy Spirit in these latter days has brought forth an abundance of new songs. Old forms have at times been stretched and

perhaps even been broken by the new wine poured into them. Although new songs and new forms reflect health in the body of Christ, those who write and use the new expressions ought to consider seriously the words of Canon Demant before readily condoning the current trends in contemporary Christian music:

> When the Church undertakes to proclaim the Gospel in secular idiom she must beware lest she end up proclaiming secularism in a Christian idiom . . .''[4]

Richard Dinwiddie, writing in *Christianity Today*, also offers words of caution:

> Christian musicians must keep in mind John the Baptist's dictum, 'He must become greater; I must become less' (John 3:30, NIV). This can be difficult for an artist, for, to quote Donald Hustad, 'The essence of art is self-expression; the essence of ministry is self-crucificion.' Performers need to be willing not to be in the spotlight. They must make sure that people see Jesus in them. They need to control the ''hype'' that an overly zealous management team may employ to boost their careers, egos, and income.[5]

Another issue with which I have grappled is that of utilitarianism versus beauty. The first of these views, sometimes called pragmatism, may be expressed as follows: If the music works, or achieves results, it must be good. An attitude that is related to this is that of complacency which may be expressed as — Why change it, if it has worked so well for so long? Harold Best views this as ''being at ease in Zion.''[6] In his words,

> Not only is creational theology contradicted and true creativity forced into secular arenas, but a more dangerous, idolatrous thing happens. The longer something is repeated in the same circumstances, the more it becomes equal to the circumstance itself.[7]

The opposite of the utilitarian view is that of idealism which affirms that — if the music is good, it has to work. There is an inherent danger in this view. That danger is to make art an object of veneration. Concerning this view Best states that it ''. . . speaks of quality for its own sake and often leads to a confusion between aesthetic ecstacy and worship.''[8] The biblical record indicates that God commanded the building of works of art. On the basis of scripture we know that God was concerned about beauty as well as utility.

Consider the following: ''Out of the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food'' (Gen. 2:9). God's plan for the building of the sanctuary was given to Moses, and included were detailed instructions for the works of art (Ex. 25). The plan for the temple, to be built by Solomon, calls for artistic work, using the finest of materials (II Chr. 2-4). Some of the art seems to have been created for beauty alone. For example, free-standing pillars were placed in front of the temple, decorated with chains and pomegranates (II Chr. 3:15-16). Also, pomegranates were to be made upon the skirts of priest's garments, including the colors blue, purple

and scarlet (Ex. 28:33-35). And yet, when a work of art becomes an object of veneration, God acts. The fiery serpent that Moses was commanded to make and place on a standard was broken by Hezekiah, "for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it" (II Ki. 18:4). Martin Luther used the concept of "the mask of God" in dealing with this tendency of man not to see beyond creation. According to Luther, "the whole creation is a face or mask of God."[9] Without wisdom and the discernment of the Spirit, we see, admire, and adore only the mask. In view of this recurring concept in Luther's theology, the singing of "Beautiful Savior" by Lutheran college choirs seems particularly fitting. In this hymn one's thoughts are directed beyond the beauty of creation to the Source of creation.

On the basis of what God reveals of himself through creation, it seems right to conclude that God delights not only in beauty, but also in complexity. To those who would opt for a steady diet of tunes that are sequential in nature, I would pose these questions — Does God look with favor on our creative activity when only a small portion of our potential is used? Having been made in the image of God, and commanded to participate in the continuing work of creation, should we not create works of music that challenge both us and those who listen? The questions are obviously rhetorical, but my next question is not. How many musicians who prefer fine art truly delight in the One who has given us our creative potential? There is a glow of satisfaction as the artist steps back from the canvas or the score, and this seems right. To lay a guilt trip on someone for enjoying artistic endeavor would show a lack of charity. However, to direct that person's attention to the One who enables him or her to create is a responsibility that is mine as a Christian educator and pastor-musician.

When artist-musicians lose the simplicity of devotion to Christ and the motive becomes "art for art's sake," it is not surprising that many turn to simpler forms of art that are offered with motive that is pure. In I Cor. 1:26-27 we are reminded that "God has chosen the weak things . . . to shame the things that are strong . . . that no man should boast before God." Motive is of utmost importance in leading others to an appreciation of fine art. Those who observe us are concerned whether we view art as an object of veneration or as a God-given vehicle used for the glory of God and the edification of humankind. The following statement by R. C. Sproul challenges me to temper "love of beauty" by directing my mind and heart to the One who is Beauty.

> Ultimately, the supreme norm of Beauty is . . . located in the character of God. It is what stirs delight in the mind of God. When our souls are stirred to delight in the things that God delights in, we are in touch with Beauty.[10]

Anyone who has seriously tried to embrace both art music and functional church music knows that it is not an easy road. Those who are committed to the use of art music tend to see a professional musician's use of simpler forms as a lack of integrity. As a pastoral musician. I see it as an integrity that goes beyond the pursuit of musical goals. Effective music ministry, as I see it, in-

volves identifying with people whose musical tastes are different from mine, joining with them in the songs that God uses to touch their lives in a special way. It is exciting to see how they, in turn, open their hearts and minds to the music that I have learned to love and value. I challenge people to give their ears to God when they are confronted by that which is unfamiliar to them. This is articulately stated by Harold Best in the following:

> While the musicians are offering their music making, the congregation, instead of waiting for something to turn them on, are offering their hearing. This is where faith becomes crucial. If the music is new and disturbingly unfamiliar, then faith equips us to encounter it without having to understand it or be cuddled by its familiarities.[11]

Anyone who has attempted to maintain some semblance of balance in music ministry has likely experienced some difficulty. Within a given congregation there are people who say "we know what we like." The truth of the matter is better expressed by the phrase — "They like what they know." It is likely that a positive response to a particular style of music could serve to influence one in leadership to use that style more frequently, particularly if the person responding is a significant person. In the case of congregational worship, vibrant singing of certain hymns or scripture songs could influence one to choose these in preference to songs that are not sung heartily.

A friend of mine became minister of music in a church that had experienced a decline in the use of good repertory. He told me that he would like to use some of the recent choral arrangements for the purpose of communicating to a larger spectrum of the congregation. However, he had been told by some of his gifted choir members that they would not remain in the choir if they had to sing this style of music on a regular basis. In an academic community, it is even more difficult to maintain a balance between art music and functional church music. A way to imagine vividly the perils of this perspective is to imagine driving your car down the middle of a busy highway. In so doing, you would have to contend both with the traffic going your way *and* with the opposing traffic. In some situations one is expected to choose a side and stay with it. In an institution that prepares leaders for ministry, it is important to provide some experience in working with both art music and functional church music. A school that I attended offered no training in marching band techniques for students preparing for a teaching career in instrumental music. To send a music graduate into some evangelical churches without some training in contemporary Christian music would be akin to sending a missionary to a foreign land without helping him or her to know the culture of the people to whom the ministry is directed. Yet, a word of caution is in order. In the name of contemporaneity one cannot afford to neglect solid classical training that equips one to work with music that transcends this generation and the next. Here, too, balance is necessary.

Engaging in this time of reflection has been stimulating for me. If I have seemed presumptuous at times, please forgive me. I am still learning, for there

is effective much to learn. Of two things I am sure. First, growing is both difficult and rewarding. Second, the enabling power of the Holdy Spirit is integral to music ministry. We must heed Paul's admonition to the church at Ephesus:

> Let the Spirit stimulate your souls. Express your joy in singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, making music in your hearts for the ears of God! Thank God at all times for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. And "fit in with" one another, because of your common reverence for Christ. (Eph. 5:18b-19, *Phillips*)

ENDNOTES

[1]Paul Anderson, "Balancing Form and Freedom," *Leadership* (Spring Quarter 1986): 25.

[2]*Ibid.*

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 27.

[4]Paul Waitman Hoon, *The Integrity of Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 9.

[5]Richard D. Dinwiddie, "Moneychangers in the Church: Making the Sounds of Music," *Christianity Today* (June 26, 1981): 20.

[6]Harold Best, "What Music Best Communicates God?" *Wheaton Alumni* (June/July, 1981): 3.

[7]*Ibid.*

[8]*Ibid.*

[9]Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works: Lectures on Galations*, vol. 26 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 95.

[10]R. C. Sproul, "The Soul's Hunger for Beauty," *Tabletalk* (February, 1984): 3.

[11]Best, "What Music Communicates," 4.