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The Church Musician as Persuader

Our senior pastor is a member of the board of regents for Valparaiso University. Last July he had a committee meeting at O'Hare. During the first break he was chatting with a pastor from Ohio. That pastor told him of his flight in that morning and his sitting next to a young woman. During the flight the conversation eased into a gentle witness. As the plane landed, she said "You know, I think I would like a copy of the Bible." So he offered her a pocket edition of the New Testament that he had on him but then he apologized, "I'm sorry but the only thing I have is the King James Version." Her eyes brightened and her jaw dropped— "You mean he wrote the Bible too!" She was referring to LeBron James.

I'll come back to her in a few minutes…

One of the great blessings we enjoy as church musicians is that we have the opportunity to hear Holy Scriptures read publicly probably as much as anyone. It's fascinating to me that, even after all these years and the familiarity of the lections, there still are times when a word or a turn of phrase catches my ear.

That happened recently when I heard Acts 18:4: "Every Sabbath he (St. Paul) reasoned in the synagogues, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks." It was that verb "persuade" that got my attention, not "sharing", "proclaiming" or "witnessing", but "persuading." In our culture of safe zones and trigger warnings, it almost sounds aggressive. Actually the Greek verb *peitho* appears several times in Acts and it always means "trying to change the heart of someone" (not merely the mind). It implies a systematic, convincing argument and the use of rhetorical devices. It suggests further that the viewpoint being expressed might be a "hard sell." Corinth was a very diverse and pluralistic society, a very difficult place for Paul to sow the seeds of the Gospel, to persuade.

A couple of questions come to mind…

1) Did Paul know rhetoric— the formal art of discourse?

Rhetoric had its beginnings in 5th century BC Greece; Aristotle developed it considerably as a discipline. Certainly the Romans of Paul's day (and he was a Roman citizen) were trained in rhetoric. From the apostle's other writings we surely know he had a drive for organizing Christian teaching. (One contemporary Christian writer has envisioned meeting Peter and Paul in heaven— Peter has a fishing pole and invites you to go out on a lake in his boat; Paul, on the other hand, has a *PowerPoint* presentation he wants to show you.)

2) And, as church musicians, we naturally wonder, if Paul were trained in rhetoric, did he consider song one of his tools? For us Paul is definitely our "go to" guy in the New Testament. We know the passages by heart:

[Colossians 3:16] "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."

[Ephesians 5:19] "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord."

[And then there's Acts 16:25] "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them." We know what happened to their jailer the next morning—he was baptized along with his entire family.

It's probably safe to say that Paul was not only an apostle, but also a persuader, a rhetorician for the Gospel. It's also safe to conclude that he knew something of music's power in that witnessing.

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One of the reasons that verb in Acts 18:4 caught my ear was that "persuade" has also been showing up in the public conversation about worship and church music.

One instance was in the May 2015 issue of the journal, *Reformed Worship,* where Zac Hicks pleads for a more emotionally persuasive liturgy. He uses Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, and his work on the *Book of Common Prayer* as his source material. Hicks notes the influence of Luther and Melanchthon on Cranmer and their synthesis of Augustinian thought with humanism and Erasmus and how he also came to see justification by faith alone as the root of all change in people. (Hicks fails to mention that Cranmer's second wife was a very important Lutheran—the niece of Andreas Osiander—nor does he muse about what influence pillow talk might have had. ☺) But the influence of rhetoric on Cranmer is unmistakable in his own revision of the Mass:

- the use of flowery, sensory language, emotionally-charged words, couplets, triplets, carefully using a succession of words to chip away at the human heart.
    - "meet, right, and salutary"
    - "we have erred and strayed"
    - "pass our time in rest and quietness"
    - "…we acknowledge and bewail…sins and wickedness….by thought, word and deed…provoking thy wrath and indignation…."

For Cranmer persuasive liturgy was about saying the right words, at the right time, said in just the right way.

Another instance came this summer when I was reading Chris Ahlman's essay—"The Church Musician and the World"—in the festschrift *Charles Ore: An American Original* (pp. 157ff). Ahlman is an LCMS career missionary in Europe, stationed in a church plant in Leipzig. (And a former student of Charles Ore, I might add.) Ahlman talks about the church musician as prophet, herald, and persuader. For him this is not a theoretical or historical question; it's real life. The culture of Leipzig today is like most of Europe. Less than 12% of people identify as Christians. It's not all that different from first century Corinth. As Ahlman says, being a church musician is not about "showing up to play". Rather it is a "call to arms."

The connection between the art of rhetoric and the art of church music is quite developed.

In the early Church when Arius wanted to spread his heresy as far as possible, he wrote a hymn called "Thalia." We still have a copy today.[i] It powerfully lays out Arius' teaching about Jesus—not co-equal with the Father, not co-eternal, not with an equal glory. But the songs of the followers of Athanasius proved stronger. We still sing many of those especially the ones by St. Ambrose, like "Savior of the Nations, Come."

In the middle ages, interestingly, both congregational song and rhetoric fade from favor.

But in the Reformation Era both make a significant comeback…

In the last twenty years or so, much study has been focused on the use of rhetoric by both Luther and Melanchthon. For Luther some of the attention has been on his sermons. [ii] As for music as a rhetorical tool, no one here needs to be reminded of Luther's promoting of congregational song for the purpose of teaching and persuading. And it was effective. The Jesuits in the Counter Reformation complained that "Luther damned more people with his hymns than all his sermons and books combined."

But more study has been done on rhetoric and Melanchthon. Knowing how Melancthon carefully set up the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*, how he used the outline steps—*exordium, narratio, propositio, confirmatio*, and *peroratio*—doesn't change our understanding of the Lutheran Confessions themselves, but it does shed much light on how he constructed his argument against the Roman Catholic authorities.

More important are Melancthon's later education reforms. In the Latin schools (where virtually all church musicians were trained) the art of rhetoric was taught along side the art of music. (At this time rhetoric was moving from the mathematically-based *quadrivium* [arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy] to the linguistic *trivium* [grammar, logic, rhetoric].

(We use the same flow in Christian education today—Bible stories are grammar-→Christian doctrine is logic-→ being able to explain and defend the faith is rhetoric.)

And the return of congregational song brought interest in how to best convey Word persuasively in song.

All Lutheran church musicians were schooled in rhetoric and began applying it to music for the next 200 years, all the way into the Baroque era, seeing a full flowering in the compositions of Johann Gottfried Walther and others.

Dietrich Bartel—a Mennonite teaching at the University of Manitoba—lays this out in great detail in his book *Musica Poetica: Musical-Rhetorical Figures in German Baroque Music*.[iii]

The use of faux bourdon, diminution, silence, quick harsh dissonances, ground bass, and all those ornaments we struggled to learn in college were there not to bring attention to the performer but rather to convey the texts more meaningfully, more persuasively.

This linking of church music and rhetoric has continued into our own era. Erik Routley, the great British hymnologist and thinker about church music once mused about what happens when theologians DO NOT try to engage music and the arts. This was in 1984—

> "What might our 'new theologians' have achieved in our generation if they had had an artist among them! What may the best of them yet achieve if they can interest a musician in what they are trying to say? It is hardly too much to say that if it won't sing, it isn't good theology." [iv]

That brings us to 2016.

Most of you know the name of Fr. Michael Joncas, who wrote "On Eagles' Wings" and many other important hymns; he's a part of the triumvirate of Haugen, Haas and Joncas and I would venture a guess has been a part of your own music ministries for some time. What you might not know is that he studied liturgy at Notre Dame and in Rome; he currently teaches at the University of St. Thomas, in St. Paul MN, at Notre Dame and St. John's, Collegeville.

In the preface to his recent collection of his new hymns—*Within Our Hearts Be Born*[v]—Fr. Joncas lays out a startling proposal, namely that the Roman Catholic church develop a Hymn of the Day for every Sunday and solemnity in the lectionary cycle. In paragraph three he goes to Edward W. Klammer (my predecessor at CPH) for his basic definition of

the Hymn of the Day. In the following paragraph he quotes Carl Schalk in explaining the purpose of the hymn of the day. He admits that the Hymn of the Day is a Protestant "thing", but then suggests that other traditions may sometimes be found useful for our own time and place. In the concluding pages of the preface he shows how a Hymn of the Day practice would be consistent with the principles of the *Constitution on Sacred Liturgy*. But more poignant were Fr. Joncas' comments about the collection at the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians (ALCM) national gathering in Atlanta in the summer of 2015. In his workshop he explained his rationale for this series of hymns based on the lectionary in more fervent terms. He said, "The truth is that the state of preaching in Roman Catholic churches in America has gotten so bad, that the Hymn of the Day may be our only remaining hope."

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Back to the young woman on the plane…

Like 1st-century Corinth, like the times of the Arian controversy, like the era of the Reformation, like…well, most of human history, we live in a difficult culture in which to plant the seed of the Gospel, but from time to time, there are some openings.

Rev. Matt Popovits is an LCMS pastor and church planter with Our Savior New York, a family of parishes in Manhattan and Queens. He was dean this summer for a week at Camp Arcadia and included this amazing statistic: the average attendance these days for Christian churches in the five boroughs of NYC—36!

Rev. Jedidiah Maschke, (you may know his father, Rev. Tim Maschke author of *Gathered Guests: A Guide to Worship in the Lutheran Church*, professor at Concordia University Wisconsin) is a pastor and church planter in the Bay Area of San Francisco. Last year he spent a couple of days at our congregation in the Indianapolis area. At the concluding lunch he said, "This is all well and good but it has nothing to do with my ministry. In San Francisco we are not even on anyone's radar. There are few Christians, fewer "lapsed" believers, and no seekers."

And as the Rev. Dr. John Nunes – installed yesterday as the fifth President of Concordia New York—has over the years often reminded us, in the United States, what happens on the coasts almost always eventually makes its way to the center of the country.

Even as keen and seasoned an observer as Martin Marty noted in the July 1st issue of the *Journal of Lutheran Ethics,* [vi]the biggest problem that the Church is now facing is not atheism or antagonism from the government, it's indifference. "

What on earth is the Church to do?

The answer is probably NOT, as Sally Morgenthaler said already ten years ago, to "shrink Christian worship down to three sermon points and four songs in the key of perpetually happy." [vii]

The answer is going to be to do as the Church has always done…

- Rely on the Word of God and its unique power
- Rely on the Holy Spirit and all the tools with which he equips us.

One of those tools and a part of the answer to our challenges, at least, lies in the roots of our Lutheran heritage.

Martin Luther not only rediscovered the Gospel, but he also, alone among the reformers, identified music as a gift from God, rather than a human invention. He went so far as to describe congregational song in rhetorical terms as a *predicatio sonora*— "a resounding sermon". In so doing he gave the Church, for its first five hundred years, and its next five hundred years, a powerful tool, a tool which 21st century neuroscience has repeatedly affirmed.

In so doing Luther forged a strong, enduring bond between Lutheran preachers and Lutheran church musicians.

The task of both is the essence of rhetoric – to find just the right word, placed at just the right time in the liturgy, expressed in just the right way.

To be sure…

it is the Holy Spirit who "calls, gathers, enlightens".

Years ago Paul Manz would always chide (after enchanting us with the possibilities of improvisation) "The music will woo them, but the Word will win them."

Only the Holy Spirit creates faith, brings a real change of heart, through his means….not by guilt and the threat of punishment, not by the promise of reward, not even by the art of persuasion but by the Word of the Gospel—the divine truth of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ Jesus.

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One of my favorite TV shows these days is "Big Bang Theory." In one episode Sheldon, the theoretical physicist, desperately wants Howard, the engineer, to show Stephen Hawking his paper. Howard uses this to extract from Sheldon numerous onerous tasks. The last one is simple: "Pay me a compliment. Tell me that I'm good at what I do." Sheldon replies, "Of course, you're good at what you; in fact you're great at what you do. It's just that what you do isn't worth doing."

In a later episode Sheldon has his own existential crisis wondering if he should really be devoting his life to string theory.

In these latter days perhaps you occasionally too have doubts about life as a church musician. Is this really worth doing?

My friends,

What you do…

- taking time out for continuing education,
- studying, practicing, rehearsing, listening, teaching, praying, recruiting
- all those things you do as instruments of Christ's Spirit…

what you do is an awesome and wonderful work….a holy calling from God.

And it has never been more important than it is right now.

The Church thanks each of you for your tireless efforts in the classroom, in the balcony, on the organ bench, wherever… as <u>persuaders of the Gospel</u>.

Barry L. Bobb
Carmel IN
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[i] Daniel Liderbach. *Christ in the Early Christian Hymns*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), pp. 39-40.
[ii] Neil R. Leroux. *Luther's Rhetoric: Strategies and Style from the Invocavit Sermons*. (St. Louis: Concordia Academic Press, 2002).
[iii] *Musica Poetica: Musical-Rhetorical Figures in German Baroque Music* (Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).
[iv] Erik Routley. *Music Leadership in the Church* (Carol Stream, IL: Agape, division of Hope Publishing Company, 1984), 112.
[v] Michael Joncas. *Within Our Hearts Be Born: The Michael Joncas Hymnary for Advent and Christmas* (Portland OR: Oregon Catholic Press, 2013). A second volume, *We Contemplate the Mystery: Lent and Triduum* appeared in 2015.
[vi] Martin Marty with James M. Childs, Jr. in "A Conversation with Martin Marty about His New Book."
[vii] Sally Morgenthaler, "A Foreword" in Dan Kimball, *Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations* (El Cajon, CA: EmergentYS, 2004), vi.

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Refections on Barry Bobb's "The Church Musician as Persuader"

Barry Bobb has pinpointed an important and timely issue for us. It deserves further reflections. Here are a few…

1) Bobb's comments about persuasion grow out of the Bible's message of God's deep respect for us in law and gospel, the Word made flesh in Jesus, forgiveness and grace, and the whole story of creation through rescue, prophets, Christ's cross and resurrection, and the church poured out into and for the sake of the world. It becomes clear that those who know about this grace are called to treat others as God treat us—with our various gifts deployed in love, justice, and care "for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7).

That is, all people deserve to know about this amazing grace of God, and all people are to be told about it with the respect it implies. So, of course there will be persuasion because all people are worthy of conversation, discussion, and dialogue. Since we are finite and sinful though redeemed, we are to engage in such persuasion with humility.

2) When this gracious message comes into the world, it elicits responses. The state's response provides the context in which we live out our individual vocations. One response of the state, on realizing the message means that Jesus and not the state is Lord, is to clamp down on the church and seek to eradicate it or to persecute it into silence. Another response is to seek to co-opt the church and use it to the state's advantage. The church in turn is tempted to be silent, to collapse into the control of the state for a misplaced advantage of worldly power, or to deny the temptation and speak the Word of God with the "right word" at the "right time" in the "right way." The letter to Diognetus in the second or third century reflects this last option and recognizes that members of a faithful church are sojourners in every culture.

3) The church's temptation to collapse into the state's control means that persuasion can be subtly or not so subtly turned into manipulation by using music as a sales technique. This is our temptation when selling things drives us as selling in turn is driven by individual likes, private opinions, polls, statistics as truth (or "post-truth"), winning, and amassing money. In such a time the ephemeral sectarian jingles of Arius and "songs in the key of perpetually happy" are particularly tempting models because they treat people the way the culture does, as statistical tabulations who are not worthy of persuasion. Simultaneously the church catholic as sojourner struggles against these tempting lures. The hymns and music of Ambrose, Luther, Palestrina, and Bach then become ever clearer models of the church as sojourner.

4) Since among us church musicians are often treated badly, they have the privilege of the poor which allows them to see this dilemma. That does not lessen their difficulty, however, in choosing whom they will serve (Joshua 24:15). Many church musicians who will read this have chosen to serve the Lord. With Barry Bobb I want to thank you "for your tireless efforts." In the midst of intense pressures to succumb to numbers of bodies and dollars as the only criteria for our actions, coupled with a disregard for what is faithful, you need to know what faithful servants you are. Thank you in *ripieno* proportions even if numbers are *concertino*—which is perfectly fine in God's economy of grace and probably to be expected in our culture's economy.

Paul Westermeyer