

Perspectives on Church Music 1

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REGAINING OUR BALANCE

The historic rites of the church, developed over the centuries, present a marvelous balance between two important aspects of human experience: *continuity and stability* and *variety*. The regular repetition of certain elements of worship from week to week establishes a basic continuity. In the richness, diversity, and variation of the seasons of the church year, times of the day, the appointed pericopes, and other elements of the rites which change on a regular basis, we find richness, diversity, and variety in the tapestry of worship in which faith is nourished and deepened.

At the time of the Lutheran Reformation, when momentous change was in the wind in both church and the society, Martin Luther, unlike many other reformers, received the historic tradition of the church's worship as God's good and gracious gift, altering it only where it was in conflict with his understanding of the Gospel. Refusing to wipe the slate clean and begin anew, Luther enthusiastically embraced the historical tradition of worship. This enabled Lutheran churches to maintain that balance between continuity and stability on the one hand and richness and variety on the other.

It is when those two elements—continuity and variety—get out of balance that trouble arises. A generation or two ago, much of Lutheran worship—not unlike that of many other churches—was characterized by a rigidity in which nothing changed from week to week. Everything was set in concrete, and those elements of the historic liturgy of the church which could provide variety and richness were ignored.

Today, in many churches, the problem is the opposite. The pendulum has swung to the other extreme. Most everything is up for grabs. Pastors, musicians, and worship committees vie for who can be the most "creative," who is "pushing the envelope" the farthest, or who can lay claim to be first on the "cutting edge."

What is going on? I'm not so sure that congregations are clamoring for a tidal wave of change. Congregations generally tend to prefer things pretty much the way they are, whatever the situation. Could it be that those of us who are closest and most involved with leading worship, church musicians, pastors, and other worship leaders are the unwitting culprits?

Any list of the musical attempts over recent decades to "renew," "revitalize," or "re-energize" the music of worship and make it more "interesting" and "exciting" would be a long one. All were well-intended. Each one was heralded as a needed and helpful tool to re-engage worship. Some of these attempts were largely dead on arrival. Some are still in hospice care. Others have yet to run their course. None, I would argue, have made much of a lasting impression.

The answer, I believe lies in a return to basics, in regaining a balance. That will occur when congregations begin to *reclaim*—if they are not already doing so— the tradition of the church's worship and the church's song in all its glorious richness, variety, and ultimate simplicity.

Real re-energizing or re-vitalizing worship will not come from "amusing ourselves to death."

Stay tuned.