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IN CONCERT

People have different tastes in music. Even those that have a common liking of a particular style of music have different tastes. I know a young lady who celebrated her high school graduation with a cello recital. It was quite good, and I am a fan of classical music, but my taste is more toward opera and symphonies. I like the interplay between large groups of instruments or voices. Solos, such as operatic arias, are good, but they play best in the context of the larger group. Maybe God shares my taste, as well as liking the smaller groups. Maybe that is why he expects Christians to assemble together.

Worship is certainly an individual thing. Each of us must worship God "in spirit and in truth." (Jn 4:24) We can, and must, worship God individually and consistently. "Pray without ceasing." (1 Thes 5:17) "By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name." (Heb 13:15) Since we are not continually in concert with others, God clearly expects our individual and private worship.

We are like God in that. Most of our conversations in life are between two people. We appreciate the virtuoso pianist or the solo cello. But people are also fond of parties. Even the most independent of us likes to mingle with others. There are probably three reasons that people attend cocktail parties. Some go for the liquor. Some go to be seen by others. The appeal of a good cocktail party, however, is the conversation. A good guest can move easily from one conversation to another. Even the wallflower, if he or she is enjoying him(her)self, likes observing the constantly shifting interplay. If conversation is the solo instrument, this shifting of themes and variations between groups is the symphony orchestra. God likes the chamber music (or, to use the term in one translation of Matthew, "closet" music). But he also likes the symphony.

What we often call the church is more properly the assembly. It is a group of people called for a common purpose. While that common purpose includes worship, it also includes encouraging one another (Heb 10:24). In a proper congregation there should be melody and countermelody, theme and variation. It is this interplay of voices and motifs that makes the assembly interesting, and valuable. There may even be an occasional solo or aria in

the assembly (most notably a preacher), but the congregational relationship requires receipt and response.

That this communal interaction is pleasing to God is evidenced by Christ's prayer for unity.

That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me." (Jn 17:21-23)

Unity is not necessarily unison in the musical sense. It is not everyone singing the same note; it is everyone playing the correct note to create a pleasing whole. Whenever someone breaks this unity by demanding his own way rather than the prescribed score, the unity is broken and the congregation presents discord. "For God is not the author [or composer] of confusion." (1 Cor 14:33) He expects us to follow his score and not our own.

Unlike some of us, God has varying tastes. He enjoys the trumpet solo of our individual prayers. He also enjoys the orchestration of communal worship. Some people ask why they have to "go to church," since they can worship God by themselves. That would be like Wynton Marsalis choosing only to play trumpet by himself. The performance would be outstanding, but eventually people would long to hear him with a combo or an orchestra. I suspect he would do so as well. God wants to hear from us individually, but he also enjoys the collective worship and fellowship.

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UNDERGOING THE CHANGE

This past week, as I am writing this, the congregation I attend held a youth event they call Spiritual Explosion. The weekend held a number of activities and lessons for young people from New Mexico and beyond. One of the events on the schedule was a concert by a singing group from my alma mater, Lubbock Christian University. The group, known as “Best Friends”, consisted of eight young men and women (four of each) who sang a number of songs *a cappella*. (Their music is available for download on iTunes.) One of the songs they sang especially caught my attention. The song (*The Change*, by Steven Curtis Chapman and James Isaac Elliot) was talking about the changes we make as a result of following God, and they frequently sang the phrase, “I’m undergoing the change.” Maybe it is because I am an older person, but I kept wondering if these young ladies understood the common meaning of that phrase, especially when used by middle-aged or older women. It usually refers to a physical change that comes with age, something these young ladies will not worry about for a number of years.

Although I noted this double meaning of the song, it did make me think about the intended meaning. Those

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who come to Christ from a life of sin, as we all do, must undergo some changes. These changes may begin at a specific time, but most of the time they are part of a process. Rarely do we achieve perfection in any area overnight, just like you rarely find someone who quit smoking “cold turkey,” and never wanted a cigarette again.

New life

Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: Knowing this, that our old man is

crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin. (Rom 6:3-7)

As soon as we are immersed to begin our walk with God, we begin a new life. We begin a process of change. We are all familiar with that process in our physical lives. If you are able to read this, you are not the same as when you came into this world. Birth is a wonderful thing, but it is only the beginning of a life. Although my eldest son was growing physically, we began worrying when he was late learning to walk, and especially in learning to talk. We loved him as a baby, but we did not want him to remain a baby. Fortunately in our case the mental and physical retardation was not as severe as it is in some families. Nevertheless, we expected growth. We expected change. Everybody changes, so we expected that of our son.

Most people who begin a new life in Christ continue to develop. Some do not. Jesus told a parable about just this thing. After telling the parable of the sower (Matt 13:3-9), he explained it to his disciples.

When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side. But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended. He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful. But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. (Matt 13:19-23)

When we begin a new life we have to continue in it. Otherwise we die. Some die because of persecution. Others fail to change because of the cares of this world. Some have made a change, but have stopped undergoing the change. “For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat.” (Heb 5:12) Many people continue to sit in the pews but never get up and walk the walk. They have made the change, but are not undergoing the change. They gave up at being a baby.

A change of attitude and action

When Paul spoke of a new life after being immersed and raised, he spoke in the context of new action. When we begin a new life we are changed from the man of sin to the man of the spirit. That change is mostly evidenced by our changes in attitude and in action.

Paul addresses the attitude directly. “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?” (Rom 6:1-2) “Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God.” (Rom 6:13) A new life requires a new attitude. While a Christian may sin, his attitude is one of despising sin.

Paul says we are all and always slaves. The only thing that changes is whose slave we are. We can be enslaved by the devil, and choose to want to sin. We can choose to be enslaved by God, and be free from sin and the love of it.

Abram lived in Ur, and probably accepted that as his lot in life. (Not to be confused with Lot, his nephew, who was his Lot in life.) Then God changed Abraham. Ur was no longer home. “By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” (Heb 11:9-10) He could have looked to return to his home, with its idols. Instead, his attitude was that of a pilgrim in search of a better city.

Along with a change in attitude comes a change in action. An essential doctrine of method acting is that the feeling gives birth to the action. Do you have to play a role in which the character kills another? Most people have never committed murder, and so find it incomprehensible to act. For such a person to commit murder on stage would not be convincing. But take that same actor and have him think of a time when he was bothered by a fly buzzing in the room. The more he concentrated the more this fly broke his concentration. Soon he wants nothing more than to kill the fly. His body reacts in a certain way, and if he transfers that to the stage, the murder becomes convincing. The attitude (wanting to kill) became parent to the physical manifestation; the attitude was parent to the act (or to the acting). So it is when we undergo the change wrought by Christ. Our actions are borne of our new attitude.

And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another. Be ye

angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: Neither give place to the devil. Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth. Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers. And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you. (Eph 4:24-32)

The goal change

We are undergoing the change. But there will be a time when the change is complete. The process will be finished. The work will be done. Now we have to fight to keep changing; stagnation is regression. Then we will be

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fully changed, not by anything we do but by “the Lord Jesus Christ, Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.” (Php 3:20-21)

Why are we undergoing the change? Because we want to be like the one who created us in his image. We realize that a painting or sculpture, which is what we are, has no life. It is a representation of someone or something, but unless you are Dorian Gray the picture is but a dead representation caught in a moment in time. God gives us the opportunity to be more than the sculpture. Now we are clay, but Pinocchio can become a real boy.

Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. (1 Cor 15:51-53)

POOR RUTH

The holiday of Shavuot/Pentecost falls on May 29 in 2009. Pentecost marks the giving of the Law of Moses on Mount Sinai. But Shavuot was also a day for people to give, too. On that day the Jewish people were to bring an offering of first fruits to the Lord. Along with the command for the offering, the Bible lists a seemingly unrelated command.

And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not make clean riddance of the corners of thy field when thou reapest, neither shalt thou gather any gleaning of thy harvest: thou shalt leave them unto the poor, and to the stranger: I am the LORD your God. (Lev 24:21-22)

The command to leave part of the harvest in the field seems out of place here. Yet, it is appropriate because this is a holiday of giving. God gives to man. Man gives to God. And, because of this command, man gives to man. It is because of this latter command that the book of Ruth is read in synagogues on Shavuot.

Tradition says Ruth was a princess of Moab. She left her family, her wealth, her gods in order to care for an elderly mother-in-law who was going home to Bethlehem. She could have pointed out that in Moab Naomi would have all the luxuries afforded to the mother-in-law of a daughter of the king. And yet, with apparently no second thoughts, she leaves a life of security for the unknown of a life of two widows at a time when widowhood without family was almost a death sentence.

At harvest-time, gleaning in the fields was the ancient equivalent of the modern soup kitchen or homeless shelter. Boaz, in whose fields Ruth begged, knew of her poor condition. His generosity (and

possibly her beauty) caused him to order his reapers to leave her a little extra. On the first day she brought home an ephah of barley. Naomi greeted this with wonder. This was a treasure for women as poor as they.

If Ruth was indeed a Moabite princess, how often as she stooped to pick up a stray stalk of barley she must have thought about what she had given up. Did she remember dainties in the palace? Did she remember more than one meal a day? Did she, perhaps even once, wonder why she had married an Israelite instead of one of the Moabite lords? If such thoughts went through her mind it would only be natural. Ruth was virtually homeless, in an even greater sense than many who are homeless today. She had no income in a land that was not her home. She was certainly, in the words of the law, “the poor, and the stranger.”

Why is *Megillat Rus* read on Shavuot? There has to be more than a mere coincidence of her occupation and the law of Pentecost. The book is read not as an oddity, but as encouragement. Ruth does not remain poor. She marries a rich man. She becomes the great-grandmother of the greatest king of Israel. The book then becomes an encouragement to the poor, but also an encouragement to help the poor. Just as Boaz made sure to help the helpless, and especially the foreigner who was poor, so we should help those who are less fortunate. Most of us do not have fields, and those that do usually don't harvest by hand anymore. But there are many other ways to help the homeless and helpless. After all, God gives to us when we are helpless. Can we not think of ways to give to others this Shavuot?

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