

both sides now

Pastors and Musicians: Co-Conspirators for Christ

by Nancy Raabe

the literal meaning of the word “conspirator,” from the Latin root *conspirare*, is “to breathe together” (*com* [con-], “with,” and *spirare*, “to breathe”). Somewhere through the ages the word acquired the dark sense of “one who plots or acts on evil or unlawful designs.” Let’s forget that meaning for now. What if musicians and pastors were to return to the original intent of this word in our work together? Wouldn’t that give our shared ministry more urgency than if we were to merely call ourselves “colleagues”? Why can’t we become, instead, co-conspirators for Christ?

Yet this seems rarely to be the case. Too often we hear of musicians suffering vocational abuse at the hands of pastors just as we hear of pastors who are berated, belittled, and even bushwhacked by over-zealous congregation members intent on solidifying their base of power.

Watch out: whenever the word “power” comes into play in the life of the church, we are entering the danger zone.

The so-called seven deadly sins—lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, pride—are not scriptural, but they do serve a useful purpose. If you reflect on these qualities, it becomes clear that pride is the umbrella under which the others fall. When power is employed to serve pride, when people elevate themselves at the expense of others because they

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want things to go their way, disaster is not far off. These destructive behaviors in the life of the church can sink ships. Most often it’s not a sudden capsizing but a slow, painful listing in which the rudder gradually disintegrates and people jump ship to keep themselves from drowning. Ultimately the vessel is swallowed up in a swamp of cultural ambivalence, liturgical indifference, and, of course, lack of revenue.

Instead, what if musicians and pastors could become co-captains, or co-conspirators, for the sake of the gospel? Where can we find the tools to enable the call of discipleship to propel our ship forward instead of passively allowing it to drift into a deadly iceberg while those in charge (the congregational council) are preoccupied with turf wars?

All the tools we need are right under our noses, in the pages of God’s living word. Being a Christian is a challenging proposition to begin with, but the call to follow Christ is more urgent today than ever. We are called to reject pride, become counter-cultural, and dare to love even in the face of hate (Luke 6:27). We are called



to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), even in the face of lies that take root in twisted imaginations as reality. We dare to pray for peace, even in the face of a grossly unjust war in which the aggressor shows no signs of relenting (Matthew 5:44). It’s a dangerous and tricky world out there: “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8; NIV).

In the choppy waters of church life, what’s to be done when the leaders of worship committees are heavy handed, stifling the musicians’ creativity, ignoring their expertise, and undermining their authority? What’s to be done when pastors become jealous because they covet the applause the musician receives while lips are routinely sealed on the quality of the sermon? (Personally, I think people are reluctant to say “Nice sermon” because it might produce the dreaded follow-up question: “Oh? And what did you like about it?”) What’s to be done when deep fissures emerge, lava flows, and staff are even forced to flee over such issues as masking or not?

Your calling is a high and holy one that cannot be fulfilled if you are about to be devoured by that roaring lion.

When you find yourself in a situation in which pride is running rampant, consider asking yourself these questions:

Is my own pride getting in the way of an amicable solution that will allow us to move forward together?

If the answer is no, can I take a deep breath, let go of the issue and get back to work, trusting that this will not affect my ability to lead worship effectively and serve the church?

If that answer is no, how can I make clear, in love, to the person or persons involved that these patterns of behavior are compromising my ministry? How can we

lay a path forward in which we can learn to “breathe together” in the proclamation of the gospel?

If all efforts at dialogue and cooperation prove fruitless, take plenty of time to pray and reflect while exercising the very best self-care you can muster. Your calling is a high and holy one that cannot be fulfilled if you are about to be devoured by that roaring lion. As the psalmist cries, “What profit is there in my death if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?” (Psalm 30:9; NRSV)

I pray that things never come to this point for you. As we emerge from the pandemic mindset and

return cautiously to in-person worship, let us hope that the joy of being able to worship and make music together will drown old patterns of pride and that we can grow into living, breathing co-conspirators for Christ.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.





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