

MINISTERS THROUGH MUSIC

The only times many people in our congregations ever see those of us involved in music ministry is when we're on a stage "doing our thing." Frankly, whether we're singing in the choir or praise team, playing an instrument, or waving our arms to direct a hymn, it's not that difficult to make a good impression from that elevation. But being a true minister involves much more than what we do on stage. It's who we are when we walk off the platform.

I once heard Charles Stanley say, "We may impress people from a distance, but we'll only impact them as they see our lives up close." This week we will turn our attention to the men and women behind the titles, beyond the lights and cameras and exciting services. What can we learn from the people God handpicked in 2 Chronicles 20? What qualified them to be ministers? Throughout the next five days we'll examine those and other people in God's Word. They exemplified certain qualities we must all have in order to be the ministers and leaders God has called us to be.

First, please stop and ask God to give you understanding, alertness, and "stick-to-itiveness" as you read and absorb these studies. I'd like to begin by asking you to carefully consider how you view yourself. During my first semester in college, a music professor posed a question to our class that I had never considered. He said, "How do you see yourself as a musician who happens to be a Christian, or as a Christian who happens to be a musician?" To me the answer was ridiculously obvious: "Of course, I'm a Christian first!" The professor went on to explain that the way we answer that question will determine how we approach music throughout our lives. Since then I've come to realize just how right he was. If we view ourselves as musicians first, then we'll tend to sing and play music for its own sake. We may even have an agenda with our music and expect people to learn to appreciate it "for what it is." Unfortunately, this approach could cause us to overlook the very reasons God created music in the first place: to praise him and to minister to other people. I have observed four levels of effectiveness among those who are involved with music in churches. I believe that how we view ourselves and our music has a lot to do with where we eventually land on this ascending scale. As we explore them, ask yourself from which level you most often operate. The lowest level is what I call the song leader level. These are the people who show up and help with a few songs. They put no thought into planning or purpose. They often arrive just in time to throw their music pages together. They prefer to simply play and leave. They avoid rehearsals and planning sessions. They just want to sing or play—nothing more. I frankly believe God has little use for people who are content to stay at this level, which at best produces mediocrity. These people are "lukewarm" (and you

know what Jesus said he would do with those who are lukewarm; see Revelation 3:16). No matter how talented they may be, if they cannot be passionate about their role in worship services, there are plenty of other ministries that could use their involvement. It's better to have 10 people who are sold on music ministry than 100 who are just showing up.

The next level is the music director. These are people who want to have input in making the music the best it can be. They are not content with just showing up. They like to be prepared, and they want to know that the music is planned. Their focus on excellence and organization is commendable. They struggle at times, however, with seeing past the music and getting everything just right. They know what and how to sing and play, but sometimes they forget why they're doing it. As Jack Hayford explains, they "become preoccupied with style rather than substance, with how things look and feel rather than with what truths they communicate:" Ministry often takes a back seat to excellence and appropriateness. If they were to be honest, their actions and attitudes are probably based on a belief that they are first of all musicians.

The third level is the minister of music. God can greatly use folks at this effectiveness level because they understand that music praises God and ministers to others. They want their music to change those who are listening, just as David's harp soothed Saul (1 Samuel 16:23). While they appreciate and even strive for excellence (and often achieve it), they are also committed to pleasing and blessing God. The Levite musicians were mostly Level 3 ministers of music because their priority and their goal were to use their music to minister to God. Please read 1 Chronicles 6:31-32. Notice what ministry or service they were to perform. Now read 1 Chronicles 16:1. Notice specifically where some of the Levites were to minister. Interestingly, Strong's Concordance defines the Hebrew word translated ministry as "service." As faithful as the Levite musicians were to carry out their duties, their effectiveness as ministers was somewhat hindered. They were actually limited in reaching their ministries' fullest potential by two significant factors: First, these particular Levites primarily ministered when they performed their music. Once they had performed their songs of praise, they were finished with ministry until they sang or played again. Second, their service rarely extended beyond the Temple walls. Their assigned place of ministry was before the ark, which was inside the tabernacle or Temple. Therefore, they were not particularly obligated to carry their ministry out into the real world. You might say that by nature of their appointment they were "plateaued" at Level 3.

Of course, we as Christians are God's temple now. The Holy Spirit lives in us. Our ministries are no longer confined within a building. We aren't limited as the Levites were. The fact is, to fulfill the high calling God has placed on our lives as his ministers, we cannot settle for Level 3. We must press on to Level 4.

The fourth and highest level for church musicians (and technical assistants) is to be a minister through music. People on Level 4 still desire the excellence of Level 2. Like those on Level 3, they see the great blessing musical praise can be to God and other

people. However, Level 4 people realize that our music is not the minister; we are the ministers. God didn't ordain the music to bless him and others, but he ordained us to serve him. And we are responsible to serve whether we're making music or not. Ministry is more about who we are than about something we do. Church staff music leaders are often called ministers of music. I much prefer this description: ministers through music. That subtle change quickly and clearly reminds me of my role as God's minister. Peter said, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others" (1 Peter 4: 10a). My gift of music or production is merely a tool through which I can better serve God and show his love to others. Level 4 ministers not only view themselves as ministers, they also understand that their ministry extends far beyond the music they assist with during weekend worship services. They want to be involved in people's lives as God gives them the opportunity. Ministers with the greatest effectiveness in God's kingdom will seek to help people grow in their faith.

If we believe that our music does the ministering, once the songs stop, so do our responsibilities to the listeners. We are not obligated to minister to them beyond the "show" from the platform. This approach can foster a personality driven ministry. Musicians who see themselves as personalities tend to view their ministries as mostly what they do onstage. But true ministers are available and want to be used by God even when they're offstage. The singers that Jehoshaphat appointed in 2 Chronicles 20:21 certainly qualified as Level 4 ministers. Many of them were probably Levite musicians, so their "job" was to sing in the Temple. Yet they willingly went way beyond the call of duty as they marched in the opposite direction from the ark and the Temple. They weren't just ministering before the Lord; they were now waging war. Talk about stretching themselves! A minister through music is first and foremost a servant. When I think of people who model servitude through music I immediately think of my friend Kevin Derryberry. Kevin has an amazing stage presence and is one of the most talented vocalists and musicians I have ever heard. He truly has the makings of a superstar. Even so, I caught a glimpse of the "real Kevin" one night during a festival in Knoxville, Tennessee, where I was leading worship. He was a "personality" during the festival and had his picture on posters throughout the city. One night after he'd finished his song set, he came off the platform and began talking to a young mother and her children at the back of the stadium. She wanted to stay to hear Scott Dawson preach but couldn't because she was a single mom with no one to watch her little ones. Right then Kevin the music personality became Kevin the baby sitter. He volunteered to entertain her kids so she could stay for the worship service. She accepted Christ that night, and Kevin led her oldest child to the Lord.

God must smile when we see ourselves as his servants-nothing more, nothing less. Blessing others with a servant like heart will keep on blessing God long after the music fades.