

## TEAMWORK

(A Tribute to the Gaithers)

In my essay “Prepare the Way” there is a section devoted to teamwork in God’s kingdom. In it I emphasize the truth that the Lord’s servants are interconnected and never really work alone. As I have been musing on this subject, delightful partnerships have come to mind, one so striking that I need to write about it. Paul says in Romans 13:7:

*Give to everyone what you owe: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.*

I want to honor a husband and wife team that I have never met or even seen in person, because I feel I owe them honor and respect. They are Bill and Gloria Gaither, well-known musicians and a songwriting team that has been prominent in Christian circles for years. Certainly I knew about them. In fact, during the time I served as pastor of the Community Church of Yorktown in the 1990s, we chose as our new hymnal Worship His Majesty, published by the Gaither Music Company. I enjoyed that hymnal very much and used Gaither songs and writings in many worship services and special programs. In a true sense, therefore, I was partnering with the Gaithers all through those years, although I didn’t think of it as teamwork until now. But only since I moved into Sky View can I say that I have gotten to know them, and that through videos, DVDs and television. How I came to have the videos and DVDs is another story of interconnectedness that I will tell. The Master Weaver surely knows how to bring his people together!

The first Gaither song that I recall hearing repeatedly was “He Touched Me.” I had no idea who wrote it, for I usually didn’t pay attention to details like that. Sometime around 1970 our family attended the annual Ziegler reunion, taking our musical instruments with us to provide entertainment. After we had finished playing, one of Dad’s cousins came to me and asked if I knew “He Touched Me.” I was so glad to answer yes! She then sang the song for the gathered family, while I accompanied her on my accordion. As I listened to the words, I realized that she was giving a personal testimony through this new music: Jesus had touched her and she was not the same anymore. She wanted us to know that and the Gaithers and I helped her express her faith. That’s teamwork!

Shortly before I retired from being pastor of the Community Church of Yorktown, I gave a Bible overview session at the request of others, mainly Luanne Caskey, a former Bible student of mine. To that session Luanne brought seven members of her church, the United Methodist Church at Shrub Oak, one of whom was Cliff Cullum, my eventual link to the Gaithers. After retirement I was anxious to see what God was doing in other places of worship in our area, and so I began a program of visitation, starting with churches where I had some ministry connection in the past. Besides Luanne, I knew Fran Davies and Sue Mapes from UMCSO. They, too, had attended my Bible seminars; in addition, they were a mime team who performed to Christian music, several times in my congregation. Not only did I visit their church, but eventually I decided to remain there.

During the couple years I was there before becoming handicapped, the Gaithers held concerts in places the congregation considered to be reachable. Each time Cliff bought a block of tickets which he had no problem reselling to congregants, who then carpooled to the concert and had a wonderful experience. And each time Cliff asked me if I wanted to go, but consistently I said no. My reason? I simply was not interested. I reasoned that my awe of God had long ago taken away my awe of celebrities and I didn’t need music as a stimulus for truly worshipping my Lord. So I stayed home. (Ah, how much I have yet to learn!) Then came the time when I could no longer attend church services, much less concerts; that closed the subject, or so I thought!

I must mention here an unusual gift that I received while I was living at Drum Hill. It was a DVD entitled “A Tribute to Howard & Vestal Goodman with Bill & Gloria Gaither and their Homecoming Friends.” I had

never heard of the Goodmans and, not being very curious, actually waited a couple months before playing it. But I could not ignore the gift completely because of the gift giver. A year or two before I became handicapped, my husband and I attended the wedding of our Egyptian friends' son. At the reception, because I had spent time in Egypt, our friends had us seated at a table with people from Egypt. What a wonderful few hours we had together! I felt right at home! In particular, one woman and I bonded to the extent that we exchanged addresses. But we did not keep in touch. Then, several years later, obviously having gotten my new address from our friends, the gift arrived. I enjoyed the DVD very much when I took the time to watch and listen.

After I moved to Sky View, Cliff began visiting me once a week to chat and to pray. He brought me news of the congregation and we had stimulating discussions about God and the Bible. Then one day he brought me something else: video tapes of Gaither concerts! He said he had an extensive collection at home (more than 70!) and would be glad to loan me two a week, if I wished. What could I say? I hadn't told him what I have already divulged to you! (Apparently God was trying to teach me something that I could learn best by getting to know the Gaithers!) So I said yes, little guessing what a change that would make in my life.

Most of the tapes and DVDs were of the homecoming concerts, where many gospel soloists and groups came together with instrumental musicians to form one group under the direction of Bill Gaither. While there was a core of singers that appeared in most of the concerts, the group for each gathering was different, ranging in number from perhaps 30 to over 200, or so it seemed to me. There were few names that I recognized at first and, while I knew most of the standard hymn and some of the newer songs, the style of singing, including repeatedly starting up the song again instead of letting it end, was basically new to me. I decided to listen to each tape twice (they are at least an hour and a half in length) and to try to keep an open mind. In so doing, my borders were enlarged, a process that may include pain, but feels so good when it's over! And now I will record some of what I learned from this remarkable project.

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— This is an amazing example of teamwork in God's kingdom. The group was mixed in many ways: racially, by gender, by age, denominationally, by presentation style, and even included at times people in wheelchairs or with other physical problems. For them to come together and blend their voices into one choir, they had to humbly submit to one another and to the director. How Biblical! I wondered how it felt to those sitting in the background while some other soloist or small group was singing a song they could have sung just as well, though differently. This too required submission and humility, qualities that were abundantly evident as the artists genuinely appreciated, loved and encouraged each other.

Right here I want to insert my favorite definition of humility, which I read years ago and still enjoy: "Humility is not thinking any more or any less of yourself than what is true." I would say, more than anything else, this is what characterizes Bill and Gloria Gaither. Both of them are tremendously gifted in words and music, and both of them seem comfortable with and appreciative of their gifts. They work together and separately as teammates, not as competitors. In all their interactions shown on the tapes, they always honor each other; their love and respect for one another is clearly evident and admirable.

The same is true of their relationship with the other artists. After watching over 70 concerts, plus the bonus material that is on the DVDs, I can say that the Gaithers fulfill the following Scriptures, first from Romans 12:9-13 and then Philippians 2:3,4:

*Love must be sincere ... Be devoted to one another with mutual affection. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.*

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

At one concert a singer mentioned that Bill spends his time making others look good. That he does! On the tapes and DVDs the Gaithers are mostly in the background, while others are being featured. How well I know that a huge amount of work has to go on prior to the concert, with Bill very much in the foreground, in order for the concerts to run so smoothly! He has tremendous leadership skills and both of them have magnetic personalities that draw people into their lives to stay. The Gaithers are not afraid of tears; their tapes show the kind that flow because of the human condition and those that fall due to contemplation of our awesome God. On the other hand, they also invite laughter, sometimes by having a comedy routine as part of a concert and sometimes by allowing spontaneous banter and joking among the artists, often at Bill's expense. Bill says they must have these kinds of laughter because of the intensity and serious nature of their work.

The Gaithers and their team are working together on another project by holding the homecoming concerts, and that is preserving the history of gospel music. Bill had the foresight to make video-taped interviews of individuals and groups while he could. Obviously, he could not do this alone. All sorts of technical personnel are needed record the proceedings and preserve them until the time comes to insert them into a concert tape. These people, too, are part of the Gaithers' team, doing their part to promote the kingdom of God. A good sense of our history is important for God's workers. A knowledge of the past lets us know we are part of a chain that will continue on earth after we have moved to Heaven. I was enriched by exposure to a segment of Christian history that I did not know before. Thank you, Bill and Gloria and your whole team!

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– I was both surprised and pleased to see that a large percentage of their songs had to do with Heaven and life after death. Somehow I had gotten the idea that singing about Heaven was a thing of the past; not so among these singers! They sang both old hymns and new songs about Heaven. But did the Gaithers and their homecoming friends actually believe what they wrote and sang? Yes, they did! I can say that because of how they reacted when confronting death. This group was tested in so many ways, and through it all, their faith held firm, to the glory of God.

Many of the artists were already old at the start of the homecoming series, having been gospel singers for fifty years or more. As the series progressed, of course some people from prior concerts died. Rather than ignore the artists who died, they were mentioned and honored in the next program, sometimes through tears, always fondly. One memorable incident for me concerned two couples who were core members of the group. In the time period between two taped concerts, both men died. Yet at the next concert, there were the two widows, talking about their husbands, receiving loving support from the others, and ready to sing! God's lavish grace was evident not only in this case, but in all the incidents of death and terminal illness among the musicians.

Near the end of a concert in London, England, Bill Gaither mentioned that he was missing Rex Nelon. "He was supposed to be sitting right there," he said, pointing to an empty chair, "but he died last night." Obviously Bill was speaking to the audience. In that moment it became shockingly clear that the musicians had given the whole concert with the shared knowledge that one of their number had died. Then one of them said they just had to sing a certain song in Rex's honor, and the group was able – by God's grace – to do so. It was a deeply inspirational moment for me!

Could death get any closer than that? Yes, it could! In 2006 the Gaithers hosted a cruise which was attended by several of my friends from the United Methodist Church at Shrub Oak. Serving as pianist for the daily concerts was Anthony Burger, an extremely gifted man in his mid-40s, whom I had seen on many tapes. Just after he finished playing one of his pieces in a program, Anthony collapsed – and died! Naturally, there was no more concert on the ship that night, but, as I understand it, the music resumed the next day. One homecoming song talks about a time when all of God's singers get Home. Knowing that we will meet again in a place where there is no more pain, death or parting certainly makes the harsh realities of this life more bearable.

P.S. I believe that in Heaven all of God's children will be singers, even those of us who could not carry a tune on earth. Won't that be wonderful?!

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– Through playing the programs in my room, I became part of the Gaithers' team in promoting the kingdom of God. Judging from the reaction of the Sky View staff, I was one of few who did not know the Gaithers and their homecoming friends. The response to them was overwhelmingly positive! This brings me to another point: If we want to influence people toward God, it really does matter how we live our private and public lives. Through the interviews interspersed among the songs on the concert videos and DVDs, I learned much about the individual singers and groups. Some mentioned making deliberate decisions to live for God in every area of their lives. The end result was an integrity that enhanced the message of the songs.

Equally important, it matters how I live my life here in the nursing home. Since my mind has not been affected by disease, I can – and do! – choose to live in a way consistent with the message I long to promote. And it works so well! When I am playing a tape and staff members come into my room, they often comment on the songs or sing along, letting me know that they are familiar with such music. Some workers, who are uncomfortable speaking English, gesture toward the TV in such a way that I know they are deliberately connecting with me and with God. I point upward; so do they. We nod and smile, and I believe that God smiles too.

A particularly poignant incident happened a few weeks ago on a Sunday morning. I was sitting in my powerchair near the TV set, on which a Gaither tape was playing, when my aide came in, bringing another aide with her. As they stood there listening with me, my spirit responded to the song, "I'd Rather Have Jesus," and I began to cry. My aide caught on to my gestures immediately and said to her colleague, "Verna's saying she'd rather have Jesus than to walk or talk." I nodded. Then something interesting happened: my aide began to use the music as a way of influencing her friend toward God! They stayed for at least two numbers and then left. I can sense the kingdom of God advancing at times like that, and it involves teamwork. I'm glad to be part of the team!

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– I was stimulated artistically by what I observed in the concerts. I have not written a song since I lost the ability to write them down, at least three years ago. My creativity now has outlets in the essays I write and in the monthly worship programs I plan for the nursing home in which I live. It was on the tapes that I first heard of the Gaither Vocal Band, a male quartet that Bill organized, directs, and in which he sings. I pondered the intriguing thought of a band with no instruments except human voices. If that is possible, I mused, I wonder if I could write musical numbers that are spoken, rather than sung? Why not? For several years I had been using people with contrasting voices in my services, because I liked the variety. For example, when my son George was reading my sermons, Cliff would read the Scripture passages that came up within the sermon. Now new possibilities came to my mind, resulting in a duet and a trio that I want to share with you. I will tell you about them first and then print them in this essay, hoping they will be used for the glory of God.

Cliff usually moderates the monthly meetings here. In addition, my husband Leo and Frank Hetzer take part in each service in several ways, including with responsive readings, only instead of a leader and the congregation alternating parts, Leo and Frank alternate the readings. Both have strong voices that contrast pleasantly. This summer I noticed a connection between Psalm 95:1-7 and Psalm 100 and thought that together they would make a wonderful call to worship. Indeed they did! I wrote it so that #1 (Leo) would be reading Psalm 95 and #2 (Frank) would be reading Psalm 100. Then I thought that section could serve as the verse of my spoken duet with Psalm 150 as the chorus. It worked so well! I can think of many variations on this theme, as no doubt you can, too.

**AN INVITATION TO PRAISE FROM THE PSALMS – A duet for two readers.**  
(Alternating Psalm 95:1-7 with Psalm 100 as the verse, ending with Psalm 150 as the chorus.)

1 – Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.

2 – Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.

1 – For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.

2 – Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

1 – Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

2 – Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good and his love endures forever, his faithfulness continues through all generations.

1 – Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens.

2 – Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness.

1 – Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet; praise him with the harp and lyre.

2 – Praise him with tambourine and dancing; praise him with the strings and flute.

1 – Praise him with the clash of cymbals; praise him with resounding cymbals.

1 and 2 – Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.

The Shepherd Trio was a pleasure to compose. I like mixing Scriptures from both the Old and New Testaments and the large amount of material on this subject allowed me to craft a much more complex piece, using three voices instead of two. As I wrote, I heard in my head Leo's voice and Frank's as #1 and #2, but the third voice was female. In our performance, Barbara Devir read this part. Because of its length, I wanted to involve the congregation part way through the piece by having them recite Psalm 23 with the readers. The same principle is often used in a Gaither concert: several singers would sing their designated lines and then the entire gathering, functioning as a choir, would join the soloists for the refrain. I imagine my subconscious mind has stored away many more ideas from the Gaither project that will influence my future writings. Creativity is contagious!

## THE SHEPHERD TRIO

(A Scripture reading for three people with audience participation.)

1 – Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. \*(1)

2 – You my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, are people, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign Lord. \*(2)

3 – He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. \*(3)

1 – We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. \*(4)

2 – When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. \*(5)

3 – I myself will tend my sheep and make them lie down, declares the sovereign Lord. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak ... I will shepherd the flock with justice. \*(6)

2 – “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says,

1 – ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’

2 – I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.” \*(7)

3 – “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.” \*(8)

1 – Now please join us in the reading Psalm 23, written by David, the shepherd who became king:

1, 2, and 3 – The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:

for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. \*(9)

3 – Jesus said, “I am the gate for the sheep; all who enter through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture.” \*(10)

2 – My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. \*(11)

1 – When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. \*(12)

3 – To the elders among you, I appeal as an elder myself, a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flocks. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. \*(13)

1 – May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. \*(14)

3 – Then one of the elders asked me,

2 – “These in white robes – who are they, and where did they come from?”

3 – I answered, “Sir, you know.” And he said,

2 – “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” \*(15)

1 – Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care. \*(16)

1, 2, and 3 – Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God forever and ever. Amen! \*(17)

\*(1) – Psalm 100:3; \*(2) – Ezekiel 34:31; \*(3) – Isaiah 40:11; \*(4) – Isaiah 53:6,7; \*(5) – 1 Peter 2:23-25; \*(6) – Ezekiel 34:15,16; \*(7) – Luke 15:4-7; \*(8) – John 10:14-16; \*(9) – Psalm 23; \*(10) – John 10:9; \*(11) – John 10:27,28; \*(12) – Matthew 9:36; \*(13) – 1 Peter 5:1-4; \*(14) – Hebrews 13:20,21; \*(15) – Revelation 7:13-17; \*(16) – Psalm 95:6,7; \*(17) – Revelation 7:12.

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I don’t know if the Gaithers will see this essay (I wish they would), but at least I feel I have honored them as I should. Thank you, Bill and Gloria. God bless you!