

String theory: Guilty of work-righteousness

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [May 18, 2004](#) issue

The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.” So spake Jesus (Luke 16:8) in a parable that preachers do not like or understand, and wish they never had to preach. But whatever that pericope means, it is a tip that the children of light should pay attention to the shrewdies—this month to the Beethovenorchester of Bonn, Germany.

These B. and B. musicians are making a fuss that could end in litigation. The violinists in the group claim that they do more playing than those in other parts of the orchestra and should be paid more. Thwart them. After all, all the instrumentalists have to put in the same hours in rehearsal and on stage. And playing the violin does not create wear and tear on the body the way puffing at tubas, pounding on tympani, or blowing through oboes does.

The violinists resent that during performances the brass players sometimes get to sit out a whole movement, while they saw away on their strings. Stephen Pollard, reporting on the fuss, showed most sympathy for the brass, the most “exposed” part of the orchestra (*Wall Street Journal*, April 1). One mistake and everyone knows. Violinists can disguise their faults, and thus play at lower risk.

Pollard does not even consider the B. from B. people shrewd. His advice: don’t make waves. Yours is not the top orchestra. “If you are so great, why aren’t you playing in the Berlin Philharmonic?” That’s risky, Mr. Pollard: *Ich bin kein Berliner*, but I know enough about human nature to picture the Bonn idea spreading and messing up intraorchestra relations in Berlin and elsewhere.

Let’s follow Jesus’ advice and carry these observations over into the life of faith. Think, for example, of how unfair worship life is. The organist plays through much of the service. The liturgical assistants are usually unpaid lay parishioners. Meanwhile, the preacher speaks for 12 to 20 minutes and—am I not right?—gets paid more than anyone else.

Think of small-church pastors. Now, I know that large-church pastors, despite their large staffs, often work terribly long and stressful hours. But from the performance angle, their constituency is aware of them for about one hour a week, and sees them disappear for generous vacations plus sabbaticals. Meanwhile, the small-church pastor preaches 50 Sundays and at least ten mid-week services a year, does all weddings and rehearsals—rehearsing being the most dreaded work in Christendom—along with all baptisms and funerals. And she has to be seen at Little League games. Yet she draws a low(er) salary.

Those of us who teach theology on the graduate level meet small, specialized groups of students who already know a lot, and spend only a few hours a week with these groups. At the same institutions professors on the undergraduate level teach more hours, see more students—who do not yet know a lot—grade more papers, are expected to have longer office hours, get less sabbatical time—and are almost always paid less.

Oh-oh! Now I've carried the implications too far and started meddling in a world too close to home. So let me back off and shrug off the accounting methods of the B. and B. strings, who, in theological terms, are guilty of work-righteousness. They in the world of music and we in the world of religion all work hard and are probably underpaid. But deep down as well as up front, we know that what we get to do is, finally, a grace.