

# The Case For Real Honesty

BY BOB BENNETT

In his wonderful book *The Wounded Healer*, author Henri J.M. Nouwen writes: "No minister can save anyone. He can only offer himself as a guide to fearful people. Yet, paradoxically, it is precisely in this guidance that the first signs of hope become visible. This is so because a shared pain is no longer paralyzing but mobilizing, when understood as a way to liberation. When we become aware that we do not have to escape our pains, but that we can mobilize them into a common search for life, those very pains are transformed from expressions of despair into signs of hope." I take great comfort from these knowing remarks.

At the close of last year, Urgent Records released my latest album *Songs From Bright Avenue*. Some of the songs

Because reportage is a thoroughly human task, it will not be perfectly objective or thorough. But, hopefully all the facts will be weighed and considered.

Sometimes in Christian media, we are guilty of creating works that only tell the "positive" side of the truth of our lives. We do this to "put our best foot forward," to "be a good witness," etc. But, what makes the gospel message so vital and wonderful (and relevant to those who wish to consider it) is the real-life context in which it applies and is lived out. We must tell the "negative" side of the truth as well: our struggles, our pains, our failures, our doubts.

To illustrate the importance of context, let's consider the meaning of a single word. The word is "strike." What does it mean? Is a strike "good" or "bad?" How does it apply to certain people's lives? Let's ask the baseball player, the bowler, the fighter pilot, the union member, the battered child, the stage crew of a Broadway play on closing night, a court reporter, a fisherman, a coin collector, a prospector, a pyromaniac, etc. As with any illustration, this

isn't perfect.

And I do not mean to suggest that the worth of the gospel message can be measured by context alone. But, what I do mean to suggest is that it is important to be mindful of not only what we say of Christ, but how it gets heard and understood. Our message (both our spoken message and our lived-out message) is not meant to exist or function in some theological vacuum. Our books, songs, films, lectures cannot merely proclaim "strike" and be done with it.

Sometimes we are so intent on transcending the sinful nature of our humanity that we make the crucial mistake of forgetting that being "human" is precisely what God created us to be. If we airbrush the flaws of our humanity out

of our artistic works, we'll have a nice set of "perfect prints" that don't bear any resemblance to the complicated and unpredictable lives that most of us lead. I like to look at the perfect clothes on the

perfect models in the perfect fashion magazines, but these are people that exist only in some art director's mind somewhere. They may serve to symbolize something (wealth, success, coolness, etc.), but not anything that intersects with my life.

As "heretical" as it might seem to some, in my work I do not try to "minister" to people. What I try to do is honestly communicate with no holds barred. If I can get

close to that first, then the "ministry" will happen as a natural (or maybe more correctly, Spirit-directed) outgrowth of that. This is more than just a semantics game that I play for my own amusement. I believe that it is essential to never put the "ministry goal" cart before the "artistic/communicative" horse. Why? Because we've all been exposed to ministry efforts that seemingly covered all the bases, but still left us empty. It's akin to those nutritional scientists who can create "perfect" foods in the laboratory. The nutritional "dogma" is satisfied, but who eats that stuff? What I long to hear (and try to write) are songs that are not predigested.

To put it another way (and to switch metaphors), *Songs From Bright Avenue* is an album of musical snapshots. Some might argue that we should always wait to snap the photograph until the scene is perfect. But, it is this fear of the candid that will ultimately undermine the good we hope to do. We must render our lives to one another as honestly as we can. □

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\*Nouwen, Henri J.M. *The Wounded Healer*, New York: Doubleday/Image, 1979.



deal quite openly with my reluctant participation in a painful divorce and my struggle to find a worthwhile life in its aftermath.

Not all the songs deal with those particular issues, but they seem to be the ones that make the most impact. This is understandable, although I hope that the subtext of hopefulness throughout the album is not lost in the bargain.

In the same way that tabloid TV shows pretend to be real news, so it is that many times, especially in Christian-oriented media, we portray an "honesty" that is not "real honesty." (I know that honesty, by definition, is real but I trust you'll get the point). My favorite parallel for the work of the artist is the work of the journalist. Ostensibly, a journalist is duty-bound to present the news in as fair and balanced a manner as possible.