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Bach and the Divine Service: The *B Minor Mass*

Paul W. Hofreiter

Introduction

Bach gives us hope when we are afraid;
he gives us courage when we despair;
he comforts us when we are tired;
he makes us pray when we are sad;
and he makes us sing when we are full of joy.¹

This quote from Uwe Siemon-Netto's article, "J. S. Bach in Japan," aptly introduces us to the subject of Bach and the Divine Service, for indeed, many of those gifts offered humankind in the Divine Service are alluded to in this quote: hope, courage, comfort, prayer, and song. If Bach's music, particularly his cantatas, passions, masses, and other church music, has this remarkable effect on the listener in these modern times, it may be deduced that there is something more profound occurring than simply one being "moved" by a composer from the past. It is the goal of this paper to offer some explanation as to how one of Bach's final statements of faith offers one "with ears to hear" a reflection through word and music of the Divine Service. In these times of heterodoxy and questioning, Bach offers through his music a theology that Luther himself proclaimed, boldly and without apology. If one approaches the *B-Minor Mass* from this Lutheran perspective, light may be shed on the Divine Service as seen in the *B-Minor Mass*.

One must, thus, inquire, why does Bach have such a remarkable impact on theologians, musicians, laypersons, agnostics, and atheists alike? This "fifth evangelist," a term that has been applied to Bach, seems to have a universal effect on both believers and non-believers.² This universality may be understood best in connection with Bach's confessional Lutheran orthodoxy.

¹Uwe Siemon-Netto, "J. S. Bach in Japan," *First Things* 104 (June/July 2000): 17.

²Nathan Söderblom (1866-1931) referred to Bach's music as "the fifth Gospel," George B. Stauffer, *Bach – the Mass in B Minor* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 16.

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Until the recent past, musicologists believed that Johann Sebastian Bach was mainly focused on his so-called abstract works – the *Musical Offering* and the *Art of the Fugue* – during his final years. The assumption was that Bach no longer felt inclined to compose church music or other music that might have related to his Christian faith. In recent times, however, scholars have concluded that Bach was also preoccupied with the completion of his *B-Minor Mass* during and after this period of experimentation.³ Bach, or the *Thomaskantor*, today known worldwide for his cycles of cantatas for the liturgical year, appears to have devoted himself to a summary of all he believed and represented as a Lutheran and musician by completing a setting of the Latin mass he had begun in 1724.⁴ The irony is, of course, that it is now no longer possible to support the claim that the aging composer lost interest in expressions of faith as he concentrated on more “esoteric” matters of mathematical and abstract forms. The *B-Minor Mass*, BWV 232, thus became for Bach and for all of humanity his *magnum opus*, for the *B-Minor Mass* transcends the potential limitations of functional church music and is, in essence, a living, breathing proclamation of the gospel of Christ.

Why did Bach spend his final energies on a musical statement of faith that adheres solely to the Latin text of the Mass, rather than reaching into the treasure of extra-biblical poetry he had used in his earlier compositions dealing with the things of Christ?⁵ After all, his cantatas and passions abound with such texts. It is from these works that one may become intimately acquainted with Bach as an expositor and interpreter of Scripture, as one observes the manner in which he frequently utilized poetry to offer explication of Scripture. However, in the *B-Minor Mass*

³There is general agreement among specialists today that Bach assembled the *B-Minor Mass* during the last two years of his life. In the most recent scholarly assessment of his late activities, the Mass is assigned to the specific period August 1748-October 1749 . . . In [what is termed as] the ‘new’ chronology of [his] final decade, the *Art of Fugue* is moved back to the early 1740’s. The *B-Minor Mass*, by contrast, emerges as one of Bach’s final projects. It may have been his very last.” Stauffer, *Bach*, 41, 43.

⁴The first non-parody music that found its way into the final version of the *B-Minor Mass* was the *Sanctus*, composed for Christmas of 1724.

⁵It is not the purpose of this study to discuss Bach’s failing health or eyesight, nor is the historical background of the church mass relevant. The emphasis, instead, is on the fruits of his creative labor as a summative theological and musical statement connected with Christology and eschatology.

we still find Bach offering commentary and explication, but through different means. In this monumental work, the musical and compositional devices employed supplant the roles previously afforded by commentary in the "libretti" for the cantatas. The music itself offers the commentary on the word as contained in the Latin text, as Bach presents movement after movement of momentum via the various stylistic compositional idioms available to him. His genius, in an entirely unselfconscious manner, simultaneously summed up the era in which he composed while opening the doors to a new era of musical thought, as he concentrated on a solely confessional, orthodox Lutheran interpretation of the Latin text.⁶ The "high Baroque" cannot get higher than this extraordinary work with its comprehensive statement of faith. Perhaps this is one reason the impact of the *Mass* was and is still so profound; perhaps "abstract" may still be applied in describing this work in terms of the transcendental realm; and perhaps the composer's *Musical Offering* and *Art of the Fugue* were, besides being remarkable compositions unto themselves, the groundwork necessary for Bach's completion of his *Mass* as the summation of his musical art. While Bach had always used his remarkably skillful technique as a composer in his church cantatas and passions to offer musical depiction of the meaning in the text, in this last work one discovers that it is purely and solely his compositional technique that offers such clarity to the doctrinal positions he believed and confessed. Even in the dawn of the twenty-first century, there is still no doubt as to what Bach believed. If nothing had remained of his corpus of musical compositions but the *B-Minor Mass*, Bach would most likely still be perceived today as a Lutheran and a musical genius.

The *B-Minor Mass*, even in this so-called "post-Christian" era, still resonates among Christians and non-Christians alike. Our Lord is using this work as a "means of grace" – if one may be permitted to place a musical composition so wedded with the word as this in the realm of

⁶Of course, two areas in the Lutheran version of the Latin text distinguished it from the Roman Catholic version in Bach's time. In the *Domine Deus* section of the *Gloria*, the Lutheran text declares *Domine Fili unigenite Jesus Christe altissime* ("O Lord God, the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, the most high"). Rome does not include *altissime*. The other area is in the *Sanctus* where the Latin text is rendered by Lutherans as *Pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria eius* ("Heaven and earth are full of His glory"). The Roman version states *gloria tua* ("Your glory"). See John Butt, *Bach Mass in B Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 48, 57.

grace.⁷ I am not for one moment suggesting that the work itself is a sacrament. But grace there is in this *Mass*, as the composer skillfully weaves into the fabric of the work, by means of compositional techniques, the various distinctive theological emphases found in Lutheranism, such as a high Christology, justification and sanctification, law and gospel, the sacraments, *theologia crucis*, *simul iustus et peccator*, the *finitum capax infiniti*, and eschatological hope. It is Bach's emphasis on the *eschaton* that most remarkably reflects the Divine Service.

Thus the question arises, what did this work mean to Bach himself, and why does this work have such a profound effect on performers and listeners even today, including those who are not Christians? Bach scholar Christoph Wolff explains it from one viewpoint: "... as he grew older, the *Mass* in B minor must have seemed to him to be a bequest to his successors and to the future; the concern to complete and perfect it preoccupied him virtually till his dying breath."⁸

Wolff applies this statement to Bach's preoccupation with his place in history, particularly, as he states, "in the microcosm of his own family."⁹ But perhaps a more compelling case may be made theologically in discovering an emphasis on eschatological hope infused throughout the *B-Minor Mass*. Bach, in his autumn years, found solace in finishing what he had begun in 1724. Thus Bach, in his valedictory statement of faith, offers the listener the whole of the objectivity of orthodox Lutheran theology by means of the use of compositional gestures and techniques.¹⁰ As we shall see, for Bach, the *eschaton* was a central emphasis in his setting of the *Mass*, and Bach appropriates this emphasis as a component of the Divine Service, connected specifically with the *Gratias tibi* ("We give thanks to You") and the *Dona Nobis Pacem* ("Grant us peace").

⁷See discussion below in the excursus, "Music: Not as Sacrament, but Sacramental."

⁸Christoph Wolff, compact disk notes, *J. S. Bach - Mass in B Minor*, Archiv 415514-2, 12.

⁹Wolff, notes, *J. S. Bach*, 12.

¹⁰The *B Minor Mass* may or may not have been Bach's final composition, but it was, indeed, his final systematic, summative, musical explication of his theological beliefs and was most likely completed after *The Musical Offering* and *The Art of the Fugue*.

The Genesis and Chronology of the *B-Minor Mass*

The earliest music that eventually found its way into the completed *Mass* actually dated from 1714. Bach's Cantata BWV 12, *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen*, was composed for the Third Sunday after Easter while Bach was at Weimar.¹¹ While this music would be transformed into the *Crucifixus* for the *B-Minor Mass*, as reworked sometime between 1747-1749, Bach certainly did not intend, at the time of the composition of BWV 12, that this chorus would become the music utilized for a future *Missa tota*. The significance of this transformation will be discussed below in connection with Bach's use of parody as theological statement.

Thus it was not until 1724 in Leipzig that Bach created a musical setting of a portion of the Latin text that would eventually be incorporated into the *B-Minor Mass*. This *Sanctus* movement was composed for Christmas Day of that year.¹² In terms of the Ordinary of the Latin Mass, Bach was aware of the eucharistic significance and use of the text. One may surmise that the 1724 setting was intended for liturgical use.

Nine years later, in 1733, Bach composed a setting of the *Missa* (that is, the *Kyrie and Gloria* from the Ordinary) in hopes of receiving an appointment to the Dresden court.¹³ It appears that Bach was restless at Leipzig, as he poured his creative energies into a dedicatory composition for Friedrich August II. Perhaps Luther's term, *Anfechtung*, could be applied to the composition of the *Kyrie*—one can only speculate.¹⁴ But history produced what is known as the *Kyrie and Gloria* settings of the *B-Minor Mass*, though Bach did make subtle changes in certain parts of the *Gloria* when he later reworked the material into the larger *Missa tota*. It is likely that the *Missa* was performed at Dresden. However, despite

¹¹ Alfred Dürr, compact disk notes, *Das Kantatenwerk, Sacred Cantatas Vol. 1, BWV 1-14*, 16-19, Teldec 4509-91755-2, 1972, 35.

¹² Albeit different allocations of choral parts.

¹³ For a complete rendering of this story, see Butt, *Bach Mass*, 7-9.

¹⁴ *Anfechtung* is a proper synonym for the life of the Christian lived in faith. It is a bridge that brings the realities of revelation from the Biblical history into the personal life of the Christian," David P. Scaer, "The Concept of *Anfechtung* in Luther's Thought," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 47 (1983): 28. Bach's motivation for composing the *Kyrie* movement, in particular, might have been associated with his dissatisfaction with his Leipzig position. After Bach had composed the three *Kyrie* movements, it is fathomable that the eschatology contained in the *Gloria* might have been formulated.

the substantial scope and expansive nature of the music Bach composed for the *Missa*, it appears the composer was still not thinking of this music as part of a potential complete mass setting.¹⁵

For the next fourteen years there seems to be little indication that Bach continued to work on the *Mass*. In terms of rethinking the work as a *Missa tota*, it was not until 1747, three years before his death, that Bach began work on the *Credo*. It appears that this is the period in Bach's life when he became preoccupied with offering a theological statement that would represent the culmination of his life's work. In the *Credo* section of the *Mass*, which Bach titled *Symbolum Nicenum*, much of the musical material is derived from earlier compositions, though in such a fashion that the compositional unity of the completed *Mass* is never compromised. It was also within the years 1747-1749 that Bach assembled the final movements of the *Mass*: the *Osanna in excelsis*, the *Benedictus*, the *Agnus Dei*, and the *Dona Nobis Pacem*.

Thus it is clear that the period in which Bach was contributing music to the work that would become the *B-Minor Mass* spanned from 1714 (if one includes the music from Cantata BWV 12) through 1749. It appears that the tension between the "not yet" and the "now" may apply not only to theology, but the act of musical composition as well. Perhaps Bach was acutely aware of this connection as he sought to complete this work "to the glory of God alone."¹⁶ Conceivably, the comfort offered through the text of the sections of the *Mass* he completed in his final years likewise provided eschatological hope for the composer.

Bach's Use of Parody as Theological Statement

During the Baroque period it was standard practice to borrow music from one's own output as well that of other composers. There were no concerns of copyright infringement. On the contrary, the use of another composer's material arranged or transcribed for other musical purposes was even viewed as eulogistic. For Bach this technique of musical composition was no exception as he arranged the music of other

¹⁵"Quite clearly the *Missa* should be viewed as a complete and independent work with its own proportions and unifying elements." Butt, *Bach Mass*, 92.

¹⁶Bach's autograph score at the conclusion of the final movement, the *Dona Nobis Pacem*, indicates *fine* and *DSG* (*Deo Soli Gloria* ["To God Alone the Glory"]). See Stauffer, 46-47.

composers for his own purposes on occasion.¹⁷ This principle was also one method of learning the craft of musical composition.¹⁸

With the constraints frequently placed on Bach in his weekly production of cantatas and other music, it is not uncommon to discover Bach borrowing from earlier pieces. This technique is referred to as "parody," a compositional technique that was prevalent during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Bach utilized it to perfection.

However, the use of parody in the *B-Minor Mass* was not a shortcut for Bach. In the case of the *B-Minor Mass*, Bach's use of parody sheds light on the deeper theological emphases contained and encountered in the final version. The music he borrowed from earlier works was originally wedded to a biblical or literary text and, in a singular way, conjoined with the meaning the composer wished to convey in the relevant section of the *Mass* where the music was applied anew. Hence, the theological meaning inherent in the original version found its manifestation in the final version employed in the *Mass*. To this one instance one may perhaps apply the saying that is usually reserved solely for theology: "that which is hidden shall be revealed" (Mark 4:22), for with Bach's prudent attention to detail and his emphasis on the *theologia crucis*, his christological articulation through musical expression, this application of the Scripture may not be totally inappropriate. Here are a few examples of parody. They may help shed some light in viewing the *B-Minor Mass* as a reflection of the Divine Service.

The first instance of parody may be found in the *Gratia agimus tibi* movement of the *Gloria*. The original version was a setting of the chorus, *Wir danken dir, Gott* from Cantata BWV 29, composed in 1731. The original text in German is nearly identical to the *Gratias* in the *Mass*:

BWV 29

*Wir danken dir, Gott, wir danken dir,
Und verkündigen deine Wunder.*

¹⁷For instance, the three Vivaldi instrumental concertos that Bach arranged for organ.

¹⁸It is believed that the blindness Bach suffered late in life was perhaps on account of his copying of scores by other composers as means of self-instruction when he was a child. This was a frequent nighttime activity which he performed with inadequate light.

We thank Thee, Lord, we thank Thee,
And we marvel at all Thy wonders.¹⁹

BWV 232

Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam.
We give Thee thanks for Thy great glory.²⁰

While there are subtle changes, the essence of the original remains the same. Discussion is necessary regarding the manner in which "thanksgiving" fits into the scheme of the *Missa tota*, particularly as Bach interprets this "thanksgiving" eschatologically, and in the context of the Divine Service. This will be addressed later, for one may discern the significance of Bach's utilization of this same music for the *Dona nobis pacem* in concluding the *Mass*.

Another significant instance of parody also occurs within the *Gloria* in the *Qui tollis*. Here Bach looks back to his Leipzig Cantata BWV 46 of 1723, *Schauet doch und sehet, ob irgendein Schmerz sei*. The mood of the original chorus translates placidly as Bach infuses his music into the Latin text:

BWV 46

Schauet doch und sehet, ob irgend ein Schmerz sei
Mein Schmerz, der mich treffen hat. Denn der Herr
hat mich voll Jammers gemacht am Tage seines grimmmigen Zorns.
Look ye then and see if there be any sorrow like to
that which is done to me. Wherewith God
hath afflicted my soul, the day that knew His terrible wrath.²¹

BWV 232

Qui tollis peccata mundi,
miserere nobis.
Qui tollis peccata mundi,
Suscipe deprecationem nostram.
Thou who takest away the sins of the world,

¹⁹Dürr, notes, *Das Kantatenwerk*, 108.

²⁰The Latin text is derived from the orchestral score of Bach's *B Minor Mass* (London: Edition Eulenberg, Limited, no date); the English translation is derived from *J. S. Bach Messe en Si/H-Moll-Messe*, conducted by Philippe Herreweghe, Harmonia Mundi HMC 901614.15, 1998.

²¹Dürr, notes, *Das Kantatenwerk*, 116.

have mercy upon us.
 Thou who takest away the sins of the world,
 Receive our prayer.

Christ could well have stated the text found in BWV 46 as He approached, was nailed to, and was lifted upon the cross. Thus, as Jesus Christ is raised so that the sins of the world may be forgiven, Bach perceptively observes the association between the original text of BWV 46 and the Latin *Qui tollis*, replete with the original instrumentation that includes two flutes. As suggested by Robin Leaver, flutes in the New Testament indicate mourning and sorrow (see Matthew 11:17), thus the connection of Christ's sorrow with the sorrow of humanity, though Christ's sorrow is a sorrow unto death that the world might have life.²² Herein is no "mourner's bench," but an objective reality expressed via objective means such as a falling triad motif. What other device but a descending triad would make sense? The "Divine Triad" is active throughout eternity for the sake of salvation and Bach's masterful understanding offers the listener entry into the realm of objective truth.

It is believed that the opening *Credo* of the *Symbolum Nicenum* was taken from a chorus, *Credo in unum Deum* in G, composed circa 1747-1748. While there are no supporting documents for proof, one must trust the scholars on this.²³ Certainly Bach was considering, at this point in his life, an extensive confessional proclamation.

The opening chorus of Cantata BWV 171, *Gott, wie dein Name, so ist auch dien Ruhm*, was transmuted as the second movement of the *Symbolum Nicenum*. This movement of the cantata, written for the New Year's Day 1729, was already based on an earlier work about which little is known.²⁴ The texts of the original and the Latin are as follows:

²²Robin Leaver, "Eschatology in the Theology and Music of Bach," delivered on January 19, 2000 at Concordia Theological Seminary's Thirteenth Annual Symposium on The Lutheran Liturgy. Two other significant instances of flute writing as solos occur in the *B-Minor Mass*—in the *Domine Deus* and the *Benedictus*. In the case of the latter, the element of sorrow is evident. However, in the former, one must analyze the movement to understand that the central point of the *Domine Deus* is the section in E-minor that explains the purpose of the incarnation in the title applied to Christ: *Agnus Dei*; only then may the *Qui tollis* ensue.

²³See Stauffer, *Bach*, 48, and Butt, *Bach Mass*, 50-51.

²⁴Gerhard Schulmacher, compact disc notes, *Das Kantatenwerk, Sacred Cantatas Vol. 9. BWV 163-182*, Teldec 4509-91763-2, 1987, 32.

BWV 171

Gott, wie dein Name, so ist auch dein Ruhm bis an der Welt Ende.

God, as Thy Name is, so is Thy praise to where the earth doth end.²⁵

BWV 232

*Credo in unum Deum, Pater omnipotentem, factorem coeli et terrae,
visibilium omnium et invisibilium*

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible.

The text of the opening chorus of BWV 171, significantly, is followed by this aria:

Herr, so weit die Wolken gehen,

Gehet deines Namens Ruhm.

Alles, was die Lippen rührt,

Alles, was noch Odem führt,

Wird dich in der Macht erhöhen.

Lord, as far as clouds in Heaven

Spreads Thy glory and Thy Name.

Ev'ry creature drawing breath,

Ev'ry soul from birth to death,

God Almighty magnifieth.²⁶

When viewed together, the texts from BWV 171 discuss God's creation, thus the first article of the Nicene Creed is inferred in the 1729 setting. This New Year's Day cantata makes reference to new things. Could Bach have made a connection to the first article as beginning or creating anew? The Almighty Maker "magnifieth" all aspects of His creation from birth to death. Could Christ, the first-born of all creation (begotten, not made), here be viewed by Bach as well, making central the second article in terms of christological significance? That Bach favors the use of this material for the second movement of the *Credo* may be determinative.

Sketches for the duet *Ich bin deine, du bist meine* ("I am yours, you are mine"), BWV 213, from 1733, are not extant. However, Stauffer and Butt agree that this music was incorporated into the second article, the *Et in*

²⁵Schulmacher, notes, *Das Kantatenwerk*, 94.

²⁶Schulmacher, notes, *Das Kantatenwerk*, 94.

unum Dominum section of the *Symbolum Nicenum*.²⁷ The significance of this Butt considers instructive. Its close imitation is ideally suited to the paired text of the love duet and it was clearly this element—its “two-in-oneness”—that also rendered it appropriate for a text dealing with the second element of the Trinity, Jesus Christ.²⁸

Of course, the title of BWV 213 is derived from the Song of Songs 2:16 and 6:3. Without offering detailed analysis of how various theologians have viewed this Old Testament book, it cannot be disputed that the intimacy inherent in these verses serves as appropriate expression of the intimacy of the Father and the Son. Christ, who is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3), is depicted in this duet by means of canonic imitation, a brilliant touch on Bach’s part in terms of the text of the entire movement:

*Et in unum dominum, Jesum Christum, Filium Dei unigenitum.
Et ex Patre natum ante omnia secula unigenitum. Et ex Patre
natum ante omnia secula. Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine,
Deum verum de Deo vero. Genitum non factum, consubstantialem Patri,
per quem omnia facta sunt. Qui, propter nos homines, et propter nostram
salutem, descendit de coelis.*

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God of God, light of light, true God of true God; begotten not made; consubstantial with the Father; by Whom all things were made. Who for us men, and our salvation, came down from heaven.

One of the most fascinating utilizations of parody may be found in examining Cantata BWV 12 mentioned previously. The music of the opening chorus of the cantata, *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen*, was infused into the *Crucifixus* text of the *Symbolum Nicenum*. Chromaticism during the Baroque period could represent death, satan, evil, and the like. The technique of “ground bass” or “chaconne” drives the point home even further. It is the repetition of this bass line with its harmonic implications that may represent the aspects of temporality and eternity on the cross. The eternal sacrifice of Christ, the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8) is made more poignant by each repetition. The

²⁷See Butt, *Bach Mass*, 52-53, and Stauffer, *Bach*, 48.

²⁸Butt, *Bach Mass*, 52.

prophets prophesied the event. No theology of glory could interrupt the divine will of God.

The texts are interconnected not only by the elements of emotion, but also by the "sign of Jesus," the cross itself:

BWV 12

*Weinen, Klagen,
Sorgen, Zagen,
Angst und Not
Sind der Christen Tränenbrot,
Die das Zeichen Jesu tragen.
Weeping, lamenting,
Worrying, fearing,
Anxiety and distress
Are the tearful bread of Christians
Who bear the sign of Jesus. (italics added)*

BWV 232

*Crucifixus etiam pro nobis, sub Pontio Pilato
passus et sepultus est.
He was crucified also for us, suffered under
Pontius Pilate, and was buried.*

While the earlier cantata was describing the disciples' sadness at Jesus' departure as indicated in the gospel reading (John 16:16-23), the tears and sighing (as musical motif) become an important characteristic in the ensuing *Crucifixus*. In addition to the chromatic ground bass, the death of Christ is depicted through the use of falling vocal lines and the reappearance of the flutes.²⁹

The *Et expecto* movement of the *Symbolum Nicenum* is derived from the second movement of Cantata BWV 120, *Gott, man lobet dich in der Stille*. The music in this instance goes through a less subtle transformation than is the case with the other parodies. The texts for the original cantata and the *Et expecto* are as follows:

²⁹See discussion regarding the use of flutes in connection with the *Qui tollis* of the *Gloria*, 228-229.

BWV 120

*Jauchzet, ihr erfreuten Stimmen,
 Steiget bis zum Himmel 'nauf!
 Lobet Gott im Heiligtum
 Und rehebet seinen Ruhm;
 Seine Güte,
 Sein erbarmendes Gemüte
 Hört zu keinen Zeiten auf!*
 Shout ye, all ye joyful voices,
 Mounting up to Heaven climb.
 Praise ye God on high enthroned,
 Let your song be full entoned;
 His compassion,

Show to us in richest fashion,
 Ceases not thru endless time.³⁰

BWV 232

*Et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum.
 Et vitam venturi saeculi. Amen.*
 And I await the resurrection of the dead,
 And the life of the world to come. Amen.

Connections abound between the earlier text and the Latin: "Mounting up to heaven climb" (BWV 120), "the resurrection of the dead" (BWV 232), "Ceases not thru endless time" (BWV 120), "life of the world to come" (BWV 232). The final section of the third article of the Nicene Creed offers the "shouts" from the earlier text by use of the trumpets and drums. Here Bach creates a more succinct music than is the case with the earlier version while expanding the inner harmonic movement. As will be discussed later, the waiting for the life to come has hints of realized eschatology from a christological perspective even though the Christian is still in the mode of inaugurated eschatology.

There is an important hermeneutical element present in this transition from cantata to mass as well. One of the texts used for this cantata is Psalm 65:1, which states, "Praise is awaiting You, O God, in Zion; And to

³⁰*Das Kantatenwerk, Sacred Cantatas Vol. 7, BWV 119-137* (Teldec 4509-91761-2, 1982), 76.

You the vow shall be performed." Though Psalm 65:2 does not appear in the cantata proper, still one reads, as surely did Bach, "O You who hear prayer, To You all flesh will come." There is no uncertainty as to Bach's understanding of this psalm text in terms of eschatological hope. In the original cantata, Psalm 65:1 is sung meditatively as a solo aria rather than joyful exposition with chorus and orchestra. It is only through an understanding of the destiny of "all flesh" in terms of the *eschaton* that one would offer such a unique setting of this text.

It is also possible that other sections of the *Mass* found their origin in earlier music. However, the issue is not how much music Bach "borrowed" from himself in setting the *Missa tota*. Considering the multifarious styles available to Bach, it appears the *Thomaskantor* was able to create an extensive work with thematic and stylistic unity despite the fact he chose ancient and modern compositional techniques in his application of the texts. The stylistic and compositional unity was never compromised in this work, as his musical genius and proclivity for theological statement were undeniably sparked in completing the *B-Minor Mass*.³¹

Excursus - Music: not as Sacrament, but Sacramental

Without Christ there is no salvation. Christ comes to His own through word and sacrament. It is through these means that grace is imparted. David Scaer has stated, "The Father is the Lover, Jesus is the Loved One – the Beloved. When Love hits the cross, Love moves through the cross into grace. Through the sacraments we participate in Jesus."³² The origin of the sacraments is indicated further by Scaer: "The sacraments have their origin in Christ's death. With two angels at his side, one angel holds

³¹"Johann Sebastian Bach, in a final flash of inspiration close to the end of his life, had found a decisive way of assuring that posterity would understand that his last and greatest church composition, despite its protracted and sporadic gestation extending over a full quarter-century (virtually the entirety of his career in Leipzig), was indeed an emphatically unified whole: a single, profoundly monumental, yet integral masterpiece." Robert L Marshall, *The Music of Johann Sebastian Bach - The Sources, the Style, the Significance* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1989), 189.

³²David P. Scaer, classnotes transcribed by the author from "Grace and Sacraments," Spring Quarter 1993, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

the baptismal font to catch the water flowing from His pierced side as the other collects the blood."³³

If salvation is God's activity in our life through these means of grace, there can be no salvation apart from them. However, the premise of the remaining section of this excursus is that the *B-Minor Mass* is the word set to music, music of absolutely transcendental character; and while one could not presume to say that the notes of Bach are "God-breathed" in the sense the Scriptures are, they are certainly inspired. Saint Paul proclaims, "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God."³⁴ Law and gospel are inherent in the Latin text as well as Bach's setting. (All one needs know is the translation of the Latin in one's own language!)

Is it not possible that what the yearning, even unregenerate humanity senses in the *B-minor Mass* is eschatological hope, the "not yet" in which Christians hope and believe? Is it not possible that the unregenerate person could hear this *Mass* and proclaim, "I must be baptized!"?

From *Symbolum Nicenum*:

Confiteor unum baptisma in remissionem peccatorum.

I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins.

This is not to infer that music is a sacrament. Jesus did not institute music or singing as a sacrament, though he did participate in the singing of a hymn [or hymns] on the night in which he was betrayed.³⁵ It is possible that one of the texts he sang might have been Psalm 118, which contains Martin Luther's favorite verse, "I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the LORD" (17).

However, Luther called music *Frau Musica*,³⁶ and in his preface to Johann Walter's 1538 "Glory and Praise of the Laudable Art of Music,"

³³Scaer, "Grace and Sacraments" classnotes.

³⁴Romans 10:17.

³⁵See Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26.

³⁶Peter Brunner states, regarding *Musica*, "Thus the *Musica*, which lays hold of the word, and the word, which is clad in the *Musica*, become a sign of that peculiarly uncommon, unworldly, exuberant, overflowing element of Christian worship, which is something stupendous and something extremely lovely at the same time. . . it is singularly appropriate to this pneumatic presence that the word joins hands with the *Musica* and the latter becomes the audible form in which the word appears." *Worship in the Name of Jesus* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 273.

Luther penned this preface in the form of a poem, putting "his words on the lips of *Frau Musica*."³⁷ The following excerpt offers insight into Luther's understanding of music:

But thanks be first to God, our Lord,
 Who created her [music] by his Word
 To be his own beloved songstress
 And of *musica* a mistress.
 For our dear Lord she sings her song
 In praise of him the whole day long;
 To him I give my melody
 And thanks in all eternity.³⁸

Luther obviously viewed music with high regard. His statement, "I place music next to theology and give it the highest praise," is one of his most famous. The Reformer composed hymns and motets. He saw inherent in the craft of musical composition the connection with law and gospel.³⁹ In praising Josquin's music he stated, "What is law doesn't make progress, but what is gospel does. God has preached the gospel through music, too, as may be seen in Josquin, all of whose compositions flow freely, gently, and cheerfully, are not forced or cramped by rules, and are like the song of the finch."⁴⁰

As related to the Latin text of the Mass, Peter Brunner's statement might apply, particularly in correlation to Bach's setting:

The word form of this poetry would be incomplete if the words were merely spoken; they insist on being sung. The word's real essence is first attained when it is seized by the musically animated tone. Since "a song involves a being native to two worlds," this

³⁷Carl Schalk, *Luther on Music - Paradigms of Praise* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988), 35.

³⁸Schalk, *Luther on Music*, 36.

³⁹Luther also made this statement of criticism regarding a contemporary organist using the language of theology: "That *lex ira operatur* (the law works wrath) is evidenced by the fact that Joerg Planck plays better when he plays for himself than when he plays for others; for what he does to please others, sounds *ex lege* (from obedience to the law) and where there is *lex* (law) there is lack of joy; where there is *gratia* (grace) there is joy." Schalk, *Luther on Music*, 23.

⁴⁰Schalk, *Luther on Music*, 21.

composition first achieves completion when its text is clad in melody.⁴¹

Bach's *B-Minor Mass* more than meets the criteria Luther, Brunner, and other theologians demand of music. While this work was not composed for liturgical use in its final form, it is a picture or portrayal of the liturgy, and the listener is even drawn to the never-ending heavenly liturgy. The "not yet" of eternity is present in this work, but so too is the "now" of the human condition. Thus theological counterpoint is interlaced throughout the *Mass* offering the listener glimpses of both inaugurated and realized eschatology.

Music, just as in all aspects of human existence, is brimming with emotional/intellectual contrast and paradox.⁴² Major and minor keys, so-called masculine and feminine themes, contrapuntal textures and techniques, faster and slower *tempi*, all reflect the tensions and resolutions of our human condition. The *sense* of stern warning inherent in the law and the *sense* of comforting grace inherent in the gospel are mirrored in music, whether the composer is aware of this or not. While music *itself* may not be salvific in the purely biblical sense, nonetheless the created order reflects the glory of God. Certainly the created work of His created ones reflects the judgment and mercy paradox, just as nature mirrors those same dichotomies. As Paul Gerhardt states in one of his hymns:

Evening and morning,
Sunset and dawning,
Wealth, peace, and gladness,
Comfort in sadness
These are your works and bring glory to you . . .

Ills that still grieve me
Soon are to leave me;
Though billows tower

⁴¹Brunner, *Worship*, 272.

⁴²The next several paragraphs of the essay are a paraphrase and development of an earlier, unpublished essay entitled, "Quests for Reconciliation and Peace: Twentieth-Century Music as Reflection of Theology" (1995). The introduction compared Bach's *Gloria in excelsis* and *Dona nobis pacem* with the corresponding sections in Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. The formulation of that discussion spawned the idea for the topic of this current essay.

And winds gain power,
After the storm the fair sun shows its face . . .⁴³

It is most probable that all human beings, at some point in their lives, have heard a piece of music and responded by way of tears, or contrition, or renewed strength, or repentance, or joy. While there may be a multitude of techniques that a composer might employ (albeit subconsciously in most cases) which might symbolize this sense of "law and gospel," most composers are likely unaware of these unique traits inherent in their music. There is the instinctive aspect of creativity to consider, and perhaps this instinct is truly inspiration. Perhaps God is, in some fashion, touching this or that composer. Of one thing one can be assured, the creativity itself is gift from the Creator meant as a gift to His creation. In its purest form, the art will glorify the One from whom all creativity originates.

Thus music may be viewed as a *reflection* of theology, if not a sacrament. From a compositional perspective, I cannot help but ponder that the creative activity of the Christian, and, more specifically, Lutheran composer, must reflect that activity that has already been revealed through the word and sacrament. Surely for Bach this was the case, for one may even observe these characteristics in his instrumental music. Michael Marissen states, "According to Lutherans, especially seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Lutherans, the true purpose of music, including instrumental music, even apart from its liturgical use, was to glorify God and to uplift people spiritually by turning their minds to heavenly matters."⁴⁴

Of course, more specifically, Bach's church music has inspired Christians and those outside of the faith since his death in 1750. One need only mention the case of Felix Mendelssohn who, upon rediscovering Bach, was inspired to reexamine the matter of his own faith. His own oratorio, *St. Paul*, is the fruit of this rumination.

Even the redoubtable Johann Goethe — who, despite his poetic genius, did not subscribe to Christianity's view of redemption — could hardly contain himself in response to his initial exposure to Bach's music.

⁴³Paul Gerhardt, *Evening and Morning*, from *Lutheran Worship* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), number 419, from stanzas 1 and 3.

⁴⁴Peter Marissen, *The Social and Religious Designs of J. S. Bach's Brandenburg Concertos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 116.

Goethe states: "I said to myself, it is as if the eternal harmony were conversing within itself as it may have done in the bosom of God just before the creation of the world. So likewise did it move my inmost soul, and it seemed as if I neither possessed nor needed ears, nor any other sense – least of all the eyes."⁴⁵

Uwe Siemon-Netto cites a startling but fathomable phenomenon when he states:

Twenty-five years ago when there was still a Communist East Germany, I interviewed several boys from Leipzig's *Thomanerchor*, the choir once led by Johann Sebastian Bach. Many of those children came from atheistic homes. "Is it possible to sing Bach without faith?" I asked them. "Probably not," they replied, "but we do have faith. Bach has worked as a missionary among all of us."⁴⁶

More incredulous is what Siemon-Netto states next, though through the eyes of faith, all things are possible. He states: "During a recent journey to Japan I discovered that 250 years after his death Bach is now playing a key role in evangelizing that country, one of the most secularized nations in the developed world."⁴⁷

Bach as evangelist indeed! But while the *B-Minor Mass* is not a sacrament, it has imparted and will continue to impart grace by hearing if one has ears to hear. Bach certainly did. If one desires to be baptized upon hearing this work, or if a Christian remembers his baptism, could this work thus be termed "sacramental" with a lower case "s"? Perhaps one could be so bold as to proclaim, "through the *B-Minor Mass* we participate in Jesus," not because the *Mass* is a sacrament, but because Christ is truly present through His word presented in Bach's *Mass*. Bach the preacher offers his "congregation" a perfect sermon, and better yet, a fully developed liturgy that reflects the Divine Service and causes one to reflect on the eternal heavenly liturgy. The listener can reject God's grace, but one cannot earn it. If Bach's music is responsible for the salvation of any human being, it is due to the work of the Holy Spirit in drawing the person to Christ through the word. Thus Bach could proclaim, "To God alone be the glory."

⁴⁵James, *Music of the Spheres*, 190.

⁴⁶Siemon-Netto, "J. S. Bach in Japan," 15.

⁴⁷Siemon-Netto, "J. S. Bach in Japan," 15.

**Eschatological Hope in the Mass as Discerned
in its Final Formal Structure and its
Connection to the Divine Service**

Some scholars and musicologists classify Bach's *B-Minor Mass* as "church" music. This is not true in the utilitarian sense, for Bach certainly never conceived of the entire work for liturgical use nor could the *Mass* serve well in that capacity. While sections of the composition may be befitting for liturgical use, the scope of the work is utterly too imposing for use in the Divine Service. If the work was not intended to function in a utilitarian sense, then what is its *raison d'être*? Laurence Dreyfus has stated,

. . . for Bach, thinking in music was a necessary consequence of a belief in its divine origins. Since his innovative powers of invention expanded rather than rejected music's traditional forms of representation, Bach's compositional stance was entirely consonant with theological orthodoxy, at the same time that no available theological language within theology or music could adequately come to terms with it.⁴⁸

Bach's creative process in the composing and assembling of the *B-Minor Mass* focused on the central Christology in the Latin text. Scaer writes: "The One who comes to us as a humble babe in Bethlehem invites us to believe that He has come from above."⁴⁹

Contained in the Latin text is this very essence of truth. The various movements of the mass each convey Christ's presence among us in one way or another. This discourse will now focus on specific areas of the *B-Minor Mass* that point to an eschatological reality as contained in the Divine Service.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Laurence Dreyfus, *Bach and the Patterns of Invention* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 243.

⁴⁹David P. Scaer, *Christology, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics*, Vol. VI (Fort Wayne: The International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1989), 9.

⁵⁰For a decidedly Reformed interpretation, see Calvin R. Stapert, *My Only Comfort – Death, Deliverance, and Discipleship in the Music of Bach* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), especially 42-48, 87-101, 217-225.

Use of Major and Minor Modes as Means of Theological Interpretation

Bach's use of major and minor keys is informative. While one cannot offer a systematic explanation of this shifting of modes, suffice it to say that those sections of the work that depict the *Christus Redemptor* theme and inaugurated eschatology are generally in a minor key, while those that represent the *Christus Victor* theme and realized eschatology are generally in a major key.⁵¹ This is not to imply that the *Christus* and eschatological themes are always convergent, however.

Nevertheless, it is not that simple, for Bach the theologian intuitively understands the tension between the "now" and the "not yet" as may be discerned in the *Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris* solo from the *Gloria*. This, too, is in the key of human suffering, B-minor. Why did Bach assign this key and mode to this text? This cannot be approached unless the focus is christological. In His ascension, Christ takes our flesh to the right hand of the Father, though we are still awaiting the glory to come. Thus, redeemed humanity is torn between two worlds, and it is only in the Holy Supper that we have this glimpse of the glory that is to come at the last day. Those who are not Christian are also torn between two worlds: the world of sin and that of redemption. In terms of those who are members of the Body of Christ, Bach's theological interpretation suggests that we have been raised with Christ as He takes His seat at the right hand of the Father, for in the *Et Resurrexit* Bach creates a D-major "dance" inherited from the earlier *Gloria* and *Cum Sancto Spiritu*. But B-minor makes its way back into the central portion of the *Et Resurrexit* as Bach arrives at the text, *sedet ad dexteram Dei Patris*. This is consistent with Bach's christological perspective. Christ is true God and true Man.

The other minor key sections of the *Mass* depict the reality of human existence in awaiting the consummation of the age. For example, in the opening *Kyrie eleison*, one cannot help but be drawn into, and even participate in, the angst-filled cry for mercy in the introduction. This introduction is immersed in the "now," yearning for the "not yet"; however, the peace that is promised in Christ inaugurates the eschatological reality. Bach then succeeds these universal, primal shouts, with controlled expressions of mercy by means of five-part contrapuntal texture. (The second *Kyrie eleison*, in a strictly polyphonic ancient style

⁵¹See *Qui tollis, Et incarnatus est, Crucifixus, Agnus Dei* and *Gloria, Gratias agimus tibi, Cum Sancto Spiritu, Et resurrexit, Et expecto*.

and also in a minor key, is then constrained because of the gentle and lyrical *Christe eleison* that precedes it. The plea for mercy is thus less active and more passive as one awaits the "arrival" of the gospel within the context of the Divine Service, and in terms of the *B-Minor Mass*, the knowledge of Christ through the word contained in the text.)

The three duets that sing of Christ's presence and mercy are in major keys.⁵² High Christology in these gentle movements is represented by the use of occasional parallel thirds and sixths (symbols of the Trinity and Man, respectively). In addition, in the first version of *Et in unum Dominum Jesum Christum* we perceive the violins "coming down from heaven" (on a descending dominant seventh chord, creating the momentum—built on thirds—whereby the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us) where the text reads *descendit de coelis*, thus representing not only the incarnation but the eventuality of the real presence in the Holy Supper.⁵³ This same gesture of descending violins is again offered at the phrase, *Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria Virgine et homo factus est*. In the second version, with a text revision due to the later addition of the separate *Et incarnatus est*, Bach's assignment of the text coordinates with the descending violins at the phrases, *(Deum) de Deo vero*, and *et qui propter nostram salutem descendit de coelis*. Within the context of this major key duet, these two instances Bach modulates to minor keys, representing the necessity of divine intervention for the sake of the sin of the world. B-minor makes a reappearance with the texts *(ex Patre natum) ante omnia saecula* and the first pronouncement of *Deum de Deo*. Thus, Christ's incarnation is a "minor key" event, though a "major key" event for the sake of humanity.

The most intense solo in the entire work is the *Agnus Dei* in G-minor. This angular music makes strong use of imitation between the alto voice and the violins, creating a bridge between humanity and divinity as

⁵²See *Christe eleison, Domine Deus, Et in unum*.

⁵³In Bach's first version of the *Symbolum Nicenum*, the *Incarnatus est* text was subsumed by the *Et in unum Dominum Jesum Christum* duet and followed directly by the *Crucifixus*. In the original manuscript, there is an inserted page with the newly composed choral *Et incarnatus est*. This leaf actually interrupts the previous page's four measure introduction to the *Crucifixus* which is then continued on the leaf following the insert. Bach then reallocated the text for the second version of *Et in unum Dominum Jesum Christum*. See *Johann Sebastian Bach – Mass in H-Moll* (facsimile of the composer's manuscript), (Basel: Bärenreiter Kassel, 1983), 110-113.

Christ offers his body and blood for the salvation of humankind. The jagged and chromatic nature of the music in the aria demonstrates the profound reality that Christ has, indeed, participated in our humanity in all its anguish and death. The pause in measure 34 on the word "sin" is a reflection on the moment of death in the midst of Jesus' thirty-fourth year. There is no mistake for Bach in the understanding of the purpose and reason for Christ's death. But as this music is both angular and dissonant, the rising and falling of the voice and violin parts in antiphonal imitation occur on *qui tollis peccata mundi* and *miserere nobis*. The interval relationships of these rising and falling motifs revolve around sevenths, real or implied by harmonic means. Could these sevenths represent God's perfect sacrifice by which all are made new, or that there is nothing a person can do to earn salvation (a sixth would connote the number of man)? Why else embrace these two textual phrases with such intervallic consistency? As well, these rising and falling motifs occur repeatedly, perhaps depicting the matter of confusion as to which state the listener really finds himself. Are we in the past, present, or future, regarding the matter of salvation? In terms of the liturgical moment in the Divine Service, we have received, or are receiving the body and blood of our Lord as an eschatological moment. In terms of the *Mass* as a work unto itself, the listener is aware of the reason for Christ's incarnation. This is a *present* moment. While liturgical connections should not be taken lightly, Bach, in offering final touches on this major opus, presents his most expressive music in this movement preceding the final *Dona nobis pacem*.

Perhaps this music is so powerful because this moment of death seems to have a correlation to our own impending death. Joseph Ratzinger states:

But now the relevance of the christological question begins to become apparent. The God who personally died in Jesus Christ fulfilled the pattern of love beyond all expectation, and in so doing justified that human confidence which in the last resort is the only alternative to self-destruction. The Christian dies into the death of Christ Himself. . . . Man's enemy, death, that would waylay him to steal his life, is conquered at the point where one meets the thievery of death with the attitude of trusting love, and so transforms the theft into increase of life. The sting of death is extinguished in Christ in whom the victory was gained through the plenary power of love

unlimited. Death is vanquished where people die with Christ and into Him.⁵⁴

Time and Timelessness – the Temporal and the Eternal

There are moments in hearing Bach's work when the listener is simply awestruck by the sheer majesty of the movements of exaltation in the *Mass*.⁵⁵ This type of response creates an element of timelessness because the sounds Bach has produced are so remarkably transcendental that one is not thinking of the "here and now," but is focusing on the "not yet," or at least the hope for realized eschatology. Why does this occur?

The answer might be derived from an understanding of the nature of time and eternity in the christological event. Herman Sasse states,

The death of Christ is indeed a unique historical event. As with every actual event in earthly history, it is unrepeatable. But at the same time, like the Exodus from Egypt commemorated in the Passover, it is also God's redemptive act, something that stands outside of earthly time, which does not exist for God. Rev. 13:8 calls Christ "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" [KJV]. He is the Crucified not simply as *staurotheis* (aorist, which signifies a single event) but as the *estauromenos* (perfect, which means that what happened continues in effect. . . . From this we may see that with God a "temporal" event can be "eternal."⁵⁶

The celebration of the Lord's Supper as the church's divine service has become the counterpart of the divine service that takes place in heaven. . . . Thus in the Lord's Supper the boundaries of space and time are overcome: Heaven and earth become one, the incalculable interval that separates the present moment of the church from the future kingdom of God is bridged.⁵⁷

It must be emphasized, once again, that it is not being suggested that the hearing of the *B-Minor Mass* is efficacious in the manner in which

⁵⁴Johan Auer, Joseph Ratzinger, *Dogmatic Theology: Eschatology – Death and Eternal Life* (Washington, District of Columbia: The Catholic University Press, 1988), 97.

⁵⁵See *Gloria, Gratias agimus tibi, Cum Sancto Spiritu, Credo in unum Deum* (II), *Et resurrexit, Et expecto, Sanctus, Osanna, Dona nobis pacem*.

⁵⁶Hermann Sasse, *We Confess the Sacraments* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985), 30.

⁵⁷Sasse, *We Confess the Sacraments*, 92-93.

Sasse is discussing the Sacrament. However, it is the opinion of this writer that Bach's work is an illustration, reflection, and representation of the earthly and heavenly liturgy. In that sense, the matter of timelessness inherent in the process of hearing the work might be understood. Once again, if the central emphasis in Bach's musical gesture is Christ, then one may proclaim with Sasse, "We may never forget that the presence of Christ, His divine and human nature, is always an eschatological miracle in which time and eternity meet."⁵⁸

Do time and eternity meet in the hearing of the *B-Minor Mass*? Yes, in the sense of inaugurated eschatology. Luther stated, "For here one must put time out of one's mind and know that in that world there is neither time nor hour, but that everything is an eternal moment."⁵⁹

The yearning for eternity is certainly present in the music, if not eternity itself. Bach portrays eternity with such grandeur that the earthly things of our temporal existence are supplanted. However, the theology of the cross is an ever-present factor as well, reminding each listener that our existence on this planet is both contrapuntal and paradoxical. Thus, as we experience Bach's setting of the gospel of Christ, we are pulled via the contrapuntal tension both musically and theologically.

The Connection between the "Gratias" and the "Dona Nobis Pacem"

The most significant connection between the Divine Service and the *B-minor Mass* may be discerned in these two movements. With the *Dona nobis pacem*, Bach chose to conclude the entire *B-minor Mass* with the same music he had parodied from *Wir danken dir* in the *Gratias agimus tibi*. This connection is the most salient of theological emphases in Bach's mind, for the connection between the theology of his early work on the *Mass* and his culminating activity may be discerned as two separate texts related to each another and to the eschatological themes in the *Mass*—the opening of the *Gloria* and the concluding *Dona nobis pacem*, respectively.⁶⁰

*Gloria in excelsis Deo,
et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.
Glory to God in the highest,*

⁵⁸Sasse, *We Confess the Sacraments*, 137.

⁵⁹Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 515-516.

⁶⁰See James, *Music of the Spheres*, 190.

and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Dona nobis pacem.

Grant us peace. (emphases added)

Bach most certainly viewed these texts both in their historical and liturgical contexts. For Bach, the announcement of peace in the proclamation of the heavenly host recorded in Luke 2:14 was the same peace contained in the eucharistic activity of Christ in the sacrament. The source of peace and reconciliation prayed in the conclusion of the *Mass* is the same as that announced at Christ's birth. The atoning work of Christ on the cross, the undisputed core of Bach's theology, is seen as the source of peace—that is, the forgiveness of sins—in the angelic proclamation to the shepherds on the night that Christ was born in Bethlehem. Heaven and earth were joined through the Incarnation in the womb of Mary, and continue to be joined throughout the ages because of God's salvific activity through Jesus Christ.

Bach devotes a hundred measures of music to the opening textual phrase of the *Gloria*—*Gloria in excelsis Deo*—in a royal and celebrative D major *Vivace*, 3/8 meter dance. However, the crux of the movement occurs as the choir devotes seventy-six measures in a serene, but confident, 4/4 meter stating the reason for singing this glory to God—*et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis*. Bach develops this material, interweaving the text and thematic motif contrapuntally and crescendos to a climactic and pronounced conclusion. This glory to God and peace on earth are interpreted by the composer as the foremost revelation of reconciliation and peace.

Bach creates a profound musical connection between the birth announcement of Christ and the invocation of peace at the conclusion of the *Mass* in his choice of musical material for the latter of the two. Contained within the *Gloria* section of the *Mass* is the choral movement, *Gratias agimus tibi*:

Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam.

We give thanks to Thee for Thy great glory.

The connections of the glory of God, peace, and thanksgiving (ευχαριστια), are made evident through Bach's use of precisely the same musical material employed in the *Gratias agimus tibi* in the concluding *Dona nobis pacem*, thus, another parody, but the most significant in the entire *Mass*. The opening assured, but reflective, ascending bass line of

this choral fugato, also in D major, is transformed within a brief forty-six measures into a regal, majestic and confident statement – of thanksgiving the first time, and peace in concluding the entire work – which is not only imperative in tone, but actualized. For Bach specifically, the theological emphasis may be discerned as *Christus pro me*, a personal reconciliation between God and the human being Johann Sebastian Bach. While the *Christus pro nobis* is most certainly the church's corporate proclamation of and response to that which has been proclaimed to us by God through His word, Bach discerns a personal appropriation to every Christian. For this study, the significance is also applicable, potentially, to those outside of the faith, for "God with us" is a reality, the knowledge of which is dependent on the activity of the Holy Spirit in the midst of faithful preaching of His word and reception of His sacraments. Baptism is available to all that have ears to hear, as is the Holy Supper, the knowledge and meanings of which are present in this *Mass* in its very musical explication.

One may unambiguously observe in Bach a theology of reconciliation and peace between God and humanity – and that at a personal level – because of Christ's atonement. While Bach's peace is indeed a "here and now" actuality by means of inaugurated eschatology, chiefly through Christ's activity in the church's liturgy and eucharist, he is, in his compositional gesture, awaiting a "new heavens and new earth" (Revelation 21:1) when eschatology will be realized in all its fullness and when "we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:1-3).

For Bach, the main focus in the *Mass* appears to be the "peace which passes all understanding" expressed in the incarnation. Through the liturgical service of the eucharist, God continues to offer the forgiveness of sins, faith, and peace to human beings. The forgiveness of sins, the peace from above, the reconciliation of God and sinful humanity, are all present in the *Mass*. While the Lutheran emphasis on the two tables of the law – love of God and neighbor – is a natural interpretive component in all of Bach's music, Bach expends his interpretive compositional energies in this late work on a redirection of the statement of corporate forgiveness in Christ, *Christus pro nobis*, to that of the individual in Christ, *Christus pro me*. Christ's birth, which the angels announced, continues to herald to us this good news of salvation, forgiveness, and peace. The final statement of peace in the *Mass* is made with the understanding that this peace comes through the body and blood of our Lord in His Holy Supper. The thanksgiving implied in the *Gratias* is directly applied to the

peace which *has* come in the eucharist, the peace which gives hope in the anticipation of the "not yet." This is the very glory of God in the "now."

Thus the meaning inherent in the *Et in terra pax, Gratias agimus tibi, and Dona nobis pacem* all relates to the inaugurated eschatological realm where Christ dwells among His people through the Incarnation and the Real Presence in the Holy Supper, even as the hope for realized eschatology is reinforced.

Et Expecto

Our greatest Christian hope in the *Mass* is expressed in the *Et expecto* section of the *Symbolum Nicenum*, for it is here that eschatology is artlessly represented in the text which, when wedded to Bach's music, propounds a resplendent aural depiction of this Christian hope. This chorus is accompanied by the usual forces with the addition of trumpets and timpani. While this is not the first time Bach has utilized this instrumentation, it is the first time that the trumpets act as heralds of the "resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come" (though one may find a corollary in the opening of the *Gloria in excelsis*, which certainly has a connection with the hope for the resurrection). It is here that Bach shows his greatest ebullient self. Is it possible that for Bach this section of the Creed had the most meaning in terms of his own perspective on the Divine Service? In his last years, this element of Christian hope must have had a profound impact on the composer.

Sanctus

As indicated before, Bach's first actual textual/compositional contribution to the *B-Minor Mass* was the towering *Sanctus* written for Christmas Day in 1724. The text for the *Sanctus* from Isaiah 6:1-4 and its liturgical connection as announcement of Christ's presence was certainly understood by the composer in relationship to Luther's setting of "Isaiah, Mighty Seer, in Days of Old" from his *German Mass*:

Isaiah, mighty seer, in days of old
 The Lord of all in spirit did behold
 High on a lofty throne, in splendor bright,
 With flowing train that filled the Temple quite.
 Above the throne were stately seraphim;
 Six wings had they, these messengers of Him.
 With twain they veiled their faces, as was meet,
 With twain in rev'rent awe they hid their feet,

And with the other twain aloft they soared,
 One to the other called and praised the Lord:
 "Holy is God, the Lord of Sabaoth!
 Holy is God, the Lord of Sabaoth!
 Holy is God, the Lord of Sabaoth!
 Behold, His glory filleth all the earth!"
 The beams and lintels trembled at the cry,
 And clouds of smoke enwrapped the throne on high.⁶¹

The significance of Bach setting the Latin *Sanctus* for Christmas Day cannot be overstated. The angelic hosts, so important to the announcement of Christ's birth in Luke 2:13-14, are portrayed with an unprecedented majesty not encountered again in Bach's output until the opening chorus of the *Gloria* composed in 1733. This joyful dance connects significantly with the *pleni sunt coeli* section of the *Sanctus* (same key, meter [3/8], and tempo). The incarnational reference from the Christmas story cannot be mistaken. Scaer states, "In Lutheran theology God is not remote but is rather so close to man that the Incarnation is understood as a real expression of what God is like."⁶²

However, the glorified Christ seated at the right hand of the Father is in view as well when examining Revelation 4:8-9 and its similarity to the above-mentioned Isaiah passage:

And the four living beings, one by one of them having each six wings,
 Around and within are full of eyes, and they have not rest day or night saying,
 Holy holy holy
 Lord (the) God (the) Almighty,
 The [one who] was and (the) is and the coming one.

This picture of worship in heaven includes all Christians . . . those in their temporal state and those in eternity.⁶³ In both the Isaiah and Revelation accounts, the Seers view angelic creatures celebrating and proclaiming the holiness of the Triune God. Holy is the Father, Holy is

⁶¹Jesaja, *dem Propheten*, Martin Luther (1520). See *The Lutheran Hymnal* [hereafter TLH] (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), #249.

⁶²Scaer, *Christology*, 27.

⁶³Revelation 5:13 and following.

the Son, Holy is the Spirit. In John's vision the creatures "have not rest day or night" as they declare the glory of God. However, the church of God on earth has the opportunity to join the praises of the hosts of heaven in singing this ceaseless *Sanctus* hymn! Participation in this hymn assures the body of Christ of its participation in the praises of heaven, and therefore the participation in eternity itself. It behooves one to recall that while Isaiah's vision of the Divine Presence was in the context of the Temple *cultus*, Saint John's vision connotes a cosmic Divine Presence where all of creation will ultimately join in the never-ending hymn. The omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience of God are decidedly affirmed within the christological context.⁶⁴

In this liturgical act all are singing the same "new song," for Christ as the New Song in his never-ceasing salvific offering comes to us in the Holy Supper, as those in eternity are celebrating Christ's "real presence" in the realm of what we—in our current perception—view as realized eschatology. Bach's setting of the *Sanctus* for Christmas Day reflects the incessant eternal glory of God as expressed by Isaiah and Saint John as well as the "Glory to God in the highest" as announced to the shepherds by the heavenly host. The eternal and the temporal are conjoined in the incarnation (while inaugurated and realized eschatology are concurrently implied), as Bach's music portrays this conjoining in all its grandeur.

Scaer's statement offers theological rumination on the incarnation: "Lutherans hold that all of the very Godhead Himself became flesh in Jesus. . . . On the one hand He rules heaven and earth from His mother's arms, but on the other He is completely dependent upon her for His life and sustenance."⁶⁵

Thus, Bach's *Sanctus* setting of Christmas Day of 1724 alludes to God's presence in the world through the incarnation while concurrently serving as liturgical statement of the Real Presence of Christ through the sacrament. In terms of what this means eschatologically, John Stephenson states:

The confession of the real presence which culminates in FC SD VII unfolds untrammelled realized eschatology in Jesus Himself and

⁶⁴Unpublished paper by the writer, "The New Song: Music in the Heavenly Liturgy (A Theology of Musical Composition for the Late 20th Century)," 11-12.

⁶⁵Scaer, *Christology*, 49, 61.

inaugurated eschatology in the communicants nourished by Him: Christ's body and blood, present on His altar throne and given His faithful for the impartation of forgiveness, life, and salvation.⁶⁶

The listener in the "now" yearns for the "not yet" in hearing this effulgent *Sanctus*; but in a real sense, the "not yet" is being offered when understood in the context of the Divine Service. Thus this earliest contribution to the *Missa tota* is one of the most poignant moments in the entire work.

Summary

Werner Elert once wrote, "The eye of faith will see the beauty of the world as the conquering of demonic darknesses. Its ear will hear inexpressible things in music—things that are of divine origin."⁶⁷

Bach's ear indeed heard these inexpressible things, things "of divine origin." It is our privilege in our time to have access, not to an antiquated, obsolete piece of music that has no relevance to our time, but to a timeless masterpiece . . . timeless because the very essence is Christ. Again, Elert:

Just as justification places the individual before the hereafter, so the idea of the kingdom places the world before the hereafter. The world is time—time as flight. Our entire consciousness of being in the world has dissolved in time. "But what crossing over is," says Luther, "experience teaches us. For we cross over every day."⁶⁸

Thus Bach could proclaim, in unison with Luther and all who have believed and will believe, "All to the praise of Him who is the Master of all beauty. All praise sung by faith at the present time is but a beginning of the eternal hymn."⁶⁹

This eternal hymn is indeed the liturgy, the Divine Service in all its essence. Just a few years before his death, Johann Sebastian Bach was compelled to complete a mass he had begun almost a quarter of a century before because, as a Lutheran, he was conveying through sound a musical representation of the Divine Service. This was not a utilitarian mass

⁶⁶John R. Stephenson, *Eschatology* (Fort Wayne: The Luther Academy, 1993), 30.

⁶⁷Elert, *Structure*, 461.

⁶⁸Elert, *Structure*, 507.

⁶⁹Elert, *Structure*, 517.

intended, in its complete form, as a vocal and instrumental offering for Saint Thomas Church in Leipzig. While some of the movements were performed at various times in his career as a church musician, the entire *B-minor Mass* was never performed *in toto* during Bach's lifetime.

Conclusion: *Eschatos* for Bach

Whether apocryphal or not, it has been transmitted throughout the last 250 years that Bach, afflicted by blindness in his last two years, died as he was in the midst of dictating a chorale.⁷⁰ While the circumstances are sketchy, and scholars disagree on which hymn text Bach was considering in this final chorale, it is significant in any case in terms of Bach's view of eschatology. The two possible texts are either *Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sein* ("When in the hour of deepest need") or *Vor deinen Thron tret'ich* ("Before your throne I step"). In either case, Bach's final moments, as he dictated—probably from the keyboard—were focused clearly on that which he believed and professed throughout his life.⁷¹ Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht has stated that Bach's music displays:

[S]trong evidence of Bach's belief in God, and it is this aspect of the piece that emerges more important than its objective purposes, musical expression, or public intent. The chorale reveals far more than its immediate reason for existence; it also exhibits the strong personal faith behind Bach's life and creative identity. It is as if Bach were saying: "God is the reference point of my Life, and though I am a wretched human being, I am united to Him through the mercy of Christ."⁷²

The first and last stanzas of *Vor deinen Thron tret'ich hiermit*:

*Vor deinen Thron tret'ich hiermit,
O Gott und dich demütig bitt:
Wend dein genädig Angesicht
Von mir betrübtem Sünder nicht.*

Ein selig Ende mir bescher,

⁷⁰For an enlightening article regarding this topic, see Christoph Wolff, "The Deathbed Chorale: Exposing a Myth," *Bach - Essays on His Life and Music*, 282-294.

⁷¹See Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht, *J. S. Bach's "The Art of the Fugue" - The Work and its Interpretation*, translated by Jeffrey L. Prater (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1993), 30-37.

⁷²Eggebrecht, *Bach's "The Art of the Fugue,"* 32.

*Am jüngsten Tag erwecke mich,
Herr Daß ich dich schau ewiglich:
Amen, amen, erhöre mich!*⁷³

Before Thy throne my God, I stand,
Myself, my all, are in Thy hand;
Turn to me Thine approving face,
Nor from me now withhold Thy grace.

Grant that my end may worthy be,
And that I wake Thy face to see,
Thyself for evermore to know!
Amen, amen, God grant it so.⁷⁴

Thus Bach, in his final moments of consciousness, was in the midst of the "not yet," yet confident that, in his compositional activity, he awaited the "now" in which he hoped and believed.⁷⁵

In the Bärenreiter Kassel edition of the *B-Minor Mass*, a facsimile of Bach's complete manuscript, Alfred Dürr's commentary begins by offering a publication history of the score. He states:

When the Zurich publisher Hans George Nägeli decided to undertake the first publication of Bach's B minor mass, he invited subscriptions in the following words: "Announcing the greatest musical work of art of all times and peoples."⁷⁶

Today, Nägeli's statement still rings true. The work is the greatest composition in the corpus of western art music, but it also offers the greatest statement of doctrine and faith in music history.

In examining this facsimile score in Bach's own hand, which represents the *Thomaskantor's* style of manuscript from 1733 through his final years, one may discern the composer's faltering handwriting. However, the one thing that permeates and persists throughout the 188-page score without wavering is the record of Bach's faith. This faith may be discerned in the very compositional process as one observes the inscriptions at the

⁷³ Eggebrecht, *Bach's "The Art of the Fugue,"* 33.

⁷⁴ Peter Washington, *Bach* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 127.

⁷⁵ Bach suffered a stroke, never recovering, and succumbed six days later.

⁷⁶ See introduction by Alfred Dürr to the Bärenreiter edition of Bach's manuscript score, 10.

beginning of the 1733 *Missa*, the *Symbolum Nicenum*, and the *Osanna/Benedictus/Agnus Dei/Dona Nobis Pacem* section, the initials, J. J., *Jesu juva* (Jesus help). Inscribed on the final pages of the *Missa* and the *Dona Nobis Pacem* is *D S Gl, Deo Soli Gloria* (To God alone be the glory).

The *B-Minor Mass* is a musical testimony to that which Christ has done out of His love for us. Bach's experience of the *eschaton* in his liturgical devotion found its expression in this extraordinarily profound work. One who does not believe cannot appreciate the theological wonders contained in this masterpiece, but the appreciation of and love for the work itself can create a yearning for the marvelous things the *B-Minor Mass* professes. The Christian, while appreciating these wonders, is more deeply drawn into the theological reality it espouses. For the Lutheran, the clear delineation of the Divine Service may be deduced from the opening "Lord, have mercy" to the final exclamation, "Grant us [thy] peace." Johann Sebastian Bach has offered us a taste of the heavenly liturgy in his *B-Minor Mass*. To God alone be the glory!