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Johann Sebastian Bach and Scripture: "O God, from Heaven Look Down"

Paul Hofreiter

Introduction

On 18 June 1724 Johann Sebastian Bach first presented his newly composed Cantata for the Second Sunday after Trinity, *Ach Gott, vom Himmel Sieh Darein*—which is denominated henceforth by its title in English translation, "O God, from Heaven Look Down"—at St. Thomas Church in Leipzig. The text, most likely revised by Picander,¹ was originally penned by Martin Luther as a paraphrase of Psalm 12 two hundred years before the setting of Bach's cantata.² In the psalm and, therefore, subsequently in Luther's paraphrase and Bach's cantata as well, false doctrine and evil-doers are countered and subjugated by the truth, power, and authority of the holy word of God.

This essay will consist in a brief overview of the reformer's paraphrase of Psalm 12 and a detailed investigation of the composer's engagement with what is essentially Luther's text (only slightly altered),³ resulting in a powerful and authoritative theological and artistic statement created in an era of tension and ambiguity involving Orthodox Lutheranism (of which Bach was a representative),⁴ Pietism, and Reformed theology. The outline, therefore, will be as follows: (1.) Luther and his paraphrase of Psalm 12; (2.) a general depiction of Bach's view of Scripture and use thereof in his cantatas; and (3.) Bach's setting of "O God, from Heaven Look Down."

I. Luther and His Paraphrase of Psalm 12

Peter Brunner aptly asserts the significance of the psalms to the liturgical life of the church in his *Worship in the Name of Jesus*:

The Psalter of the Bible plus the Old and New Testament canticles are the church's prayer-book and its hymnbook in one. When these biblical psalms are prayed and sung in worship, the words of Holy Scripture are directly proclaimed. In verbal content, the singing of psalms is closely related to the reading of Scripture. The element of witnessing proclamation is not lacking either; this is already intimated in the manner of presentation. When the church

takes the psalms on its lips, as for instance in the prayer psalms, it testifies that it has taken these words into its heart and now professes them as its own . . . This type of presentation of the word may effect a meditative appropriation, a spiritual "eating" of the word such as is achieved in hardly any other form of proclamation in worship.⁵

There is no more appropriate way to begin discussing Martin Luther and his hymns than to note the mystery and joy of this psalmodic component of the *Gottesdienst* ("God's Service") of the church. For Luther and Bach were both keenly aware of the significance of worship and God's consistent activity as initiator throughout the Divine Service.

Luther had an endearing term for music when it was wed with Scripture, *Frau Musica*. It was his conviction that, when the word of God and music were combined, there the Holy Spirit worked faith. "For Luther, music was always the *viva vox evangelii*, the living voice of the gospel, a gift of God to be used in all its fullness in Christian praise and prayer."⁶ In his "Preface to the Burial Hymns," Luther stated:

We have put this music on the living and holy word of God in order to sing, praise, and honor it. We want the beautiful art of music to be properly used to serve her dear Creator and His Christians. He is thereby praised and honored and we are made better and stronger in faith when His holy word is impressed on our hearts by sweet music. God the Father with Son and Holy Spirit grant us this. Amen.⁷

Luther was certainly not dispassionate about the use of music in proclaiming the word. Some of his paraphrases of the psalms were, in fact, the most effective means available of proclaiming the truths of the Reformation to others—in that these hymns would be sung by all the people, not merely a chosen few. The restoration of the universal priesthood of believers to ecclesiastical doctrine was a gift which Christ had always intended to bestow on His church. Now the church would be proclaiming all the gifts of God in song *en masse*.

Martin Luther commented on a few of the verses of Psalm 12

already in his first series of lectures on the Psalms, delivered between 1513 and 1515. Within a decade Luther's study of this psalm would lead to the composing of a paraphrase heralding the truth of the word of God in the vicissitudes of the Reformation. Even in his early lectures Luther already saw the gospel of Christ in verse six ("The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times"):

Thus the gospel is called "silver," first, because it is precious, not according to the flesh, but because it makes the soul precious in the sight of God; second, because it is solid, that is, because it makes people solid and full, not like an empty reed and a carnal letter . . .; third, because it is heard far and wide. Thus the sound of the gospel has gone out through all the world (Psalm 19:4), and it makes the disciples sonorous and eloquent. Fourth, it is weighty, because it does not contain fables or superficial things, and it makes men serious and mature . . . Fifth, it is white and shining, because it is modest and chaste and teaches modesty; it speaks modestly.⁸

In Luther's view heresy was caused by a hierarchy of recalcitrance, and the only hope of countering this heinous and contagious cancer was the verity of the pure and unadulterated word of God. In his explanation of Psalm 12:6 Luther, even before his discovery of the true nature of the gospel, perceives the effects of the gospel and even states that, so far from being weakened by "trying" and "testing," the gospel "is rather clarified and strengthened by the controversies of the heretics."⁹

In 1523 Luther wrote at least eight, and possibly nine, hymn-texts. "O God, from Heaven Look Down" is unfortunately eclipsed in fame by such hymns as "Dear Christians, Let Us Now Rejoice" and "From Trouble Deep I Cry to Thee" and certainly by the most popular of all his hymns, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." To make matters worse, the only Lutheran hymnbook in current usage containing "O God, from Heaven Look Down" is *The Lutheran Hymnal*.¹⁰ This unfortunate turn of events, however, should not dissuade the church from reintroducing such a sententious and powerful "battle hymn." There is, indeed, no excuse for allowing such a statement of faith to

remain in obscurity; for, when the people of God sing together of the promises contained in the word of God, then *Frau Musica* engages with them in the battle of the church against false teaching.

Oliver Rupprecht has written aptly as follows in a previous volume of this journal:

With a depth of understanding born of personal experience and with a strength of imagination envisaging the collective cry of the beleaguered church, Luther paraphrases Psalm 12 as an intense plea by the persecuted church, answered by the glorious reply of her compassionate and omnipotent Lord. The stanzas of "O Lord, Look Down from Heaven, Behold" (Psalm 12), like those of other psalm hymns, have a remarkably modern ring. "Heresy" and "false doctrine" refer to the contemporary denial (in his day and ours) of Luther's "pure doctrine." And the beautiful statement about the divine word—"Its light beams brighter through the cross"¹¹—is a modern refinement of a basic biblical teaching. To sing the six stanzas of . . . [this hymn] is to experience deepening thought and profound emotion but, above all, a reassurance of God's supremacy and His power—active through His word.¹²

No additional attestation to the richness of this hymnic treasure is necessary.

II. A General Outline of Bach's View of Scripture and Its Use in His Cantatas

Johann Sebastian Bach has come to be known as "The Fifth Evangelist" because of his unabashedly confident declarations of faith through his music.¹³ It is fashionable in today's post-Christian secularized world to attempt to explain away Bach's vigorous faith by regarding him as an opportunist or, at most, a professional musician whose main concern was his career. Humanistic scholars and everyday agnostics desire, of course, to conform Bach to their own image. The evidence, however, simply will not allow this opinion to stand.

Bach was, in fact, a convinced Lutheran of orthodox stripe,

devoted to his Lord and his Lord's church. Felix Mendelssohn recognized this conviction when, in 1829, he discovered the score to Bach's *Passion According to St. Matthew* virtually one hundred years after it had been composed. We today, of course, owe Felix Mendelssohn a profound debt of gratitude. For not only did Mendelssohn rediscover the score of the aforesaid passion, but he also conducted the first performance of the work in approximately a century and aided in bringing Bach's music the international acclaim which it deserved.¹⁴

Johann Sebastian Bach was a servant of Christ, a servant of his church, and a servant of his fellow-men. During his own lifetime, however, he was recognized mainly as an organist. His sons were better known and more popular composers than their old-fashioned father. But Johann Sebastian, unlike the artists who emerged during the ages of rationalism and romanticism, did not question his role as a servant. His goal was simply to "advance the music in the divine service toward its very end and purpose, a regulated church music in honor of God."¹⁵ Martin Naumann continued as follows in describing J. S. Bach:

His character as a Lutheran becomes evident . . . by his musical confessions. The Lutheran Confessions like all true confessions of the church are in praise of God. This praise of God contains both the confession of sins and the confession of faith. Bach's works are usually bracketed by the letters J. J. and S. D. G. At the beginning he asks: "*Jesu, Juva: Jesus Help!*" And at the end he says: "*Soli Deo Gloria: To God alone be glory.*"¹⁶

These abbreviations are found in a multitude of his manuscripts—not only in his music for the church, but in many of his so-called "secular" works as well.¹⁷ Bach celebrated God's gift of salvation through faith in Christ in every arena of his existence. Gunther Stiller speaks of Bach as follows:

Doubts as to whether his music was sacred or not existed for him as little as they did for Luther and his church. For both of them there existed only one music which became sacred or profane through the spirit in which it was per-

formed.¹⁸ Bach lived and worked "in an existence that was not yet split into sacred and secular divisions but was internally united and nourished from the center of the faith of the Lutheran Reformation." This is the same as saying that "Bach's ties to the Lutheran liturgy also signify the right and the duty to become active in the extra-liturgical, the secular, area," obviously because "Martin Luther does not limit the concept 'worship' to the liturgical practice of a congregation gathered around word and sacrament but describes the entire life and activity of a Christian as an act of worship."¹⁹

Within the context of this faith, Bach served as *Kapellmeister* in Leipzig from 1723 until his death in 1750. It was here that he wrote the majority of his cantatas, and it was in these works designed for the Divine Service of word and sacrament that some of the most profound conjoining of the word of God and the music of Johann Sebastian Bach occurred.

The ecclesiastical cantata had been employed in Lutheran worship for some time. The main goal of the cantata was the proclamation of the word of God. In Bach's day these musical settings were presented "between the reading of Scripture and the sermon." Naumann elaborates in this way:

As a rule a well-known chorale or hymn was chosen. Usually the text of the first stanza was used at the beginning and the final stanza at the end without textual change, but the intermediate stanzas were altered to fit the movements. Again Bach realized that his work must serve the word of God. He treated the gospel or epistle of the Sunday, not only according to the text of the chorale used, but according to his understanding of and faith in the words read and preached.²⁰

Bach had the theological insight to convey in these cantatas, both in musical language and symbolism, such doctrinal emphases as law and gospel. Robin Leaver describes the general procedure in a previous volume of this journal:

Many cantatas have a similar ground plan. In the opening

chorus the problem is stated, that is, the demands of the law; a recitative and aria draw out some of the implications; then, approximately midway through the cantata, the problem is resolved, that is, the gospel is proclaimed; a note of joy in the gospel is heard in the following aria or arias; and the cantata concludes with the chorale, which underscores the message of the gospel with a statement of faith.²¹

Bach's proclivity to orthodox Lutheran doctrine will be evident to anyone who engages in any study at all of his cantatas. Besides the aforementioned doctrine of the proper distinction between law and gospel, Bach's scores enunciate such other Lutheran emphases as the theology of the cross, the *simul iustus et peccator*, and the *finitum capax infiniti* so essential to Lutheran christology.²²

Bach's devotion to the word of God is also evident in the symbolism which he employs in his cantatas. The elements of symbolism in general and of his numerical symbolism in particular in the music of J. S. Bach (both in that composed for the church and in that composed for the court) are connected with consistency to his understanding of Scripture.²³ Jaroslav Pelikan, in *Bach among the Theologians*, quotes Friedrich Smend in discussing the importance of the word of God for the composer:

Bach's cantatas "are not intended to be works of music or art on their own, but to carry on, by their own means, the work of Luther, the preaching of the word and of nothing but the word."²⁴

It is a matter of record that Bach acquired a significant theological library. In this library were two complete sets of the works of Martin Luther and a number of other exegetical volumes and devotional books.²⁵

One of the major components in this fifty-two volume collection was the three-volume *Biblia Illustrata* of Abraham Calov, now the valued possession of the library of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. This Bible, affectionately referred to as "Bach's Bible," is unquestionably the most significant witness to the nature of Bach's theological outlook.²⁶ It is most likely that Bach purchased this Bible in 1733 at the age of forty-eight. Its pages abound in

annotations which show that Bach was a thoughtful and convinced Christian who studied and treasured the word of God. Presumably Bach consulted this three-volume commentary frequently in studying the biblical texts which he set to music. Leaver concurs with Werthemann:

Bach's basic reverence and respect for the Bible is reflected in the librettos he chose for his cantatas, since "the decisive task of the cantatas consists not in narration or dramatic presentation of the events, but in an always new relation of this event to the men of the present."²⁷

This approach evinces a decidedly Lutheran view of biblical exegesis when viewed in conjunction with the other techniques which Bach employed in his texts and settings.

The relation of the biblical "event to the men of the present" is an essential feature of proclamation. Bach held to the eternal truths of Scripture but spoke anew to his time. It is clear that it was precisely the God-given ability which Bach possessed to this end which has accorded him universal recognition beyond the period in which he lived.²⁸ Bach, the servant of the divine word, employed his talents to the glory of God; and his music, which was considered antiquated in his own day and was forgotten for almost eighty years after Bach's death, was rediscovered in the 1820's and still continues to astonish today. J. S. Bach, in fact, has been called countless times the only truly "modern composer."

To understand Bach, then, one must appreciate his role as expositor and preacher of the word of God. In his cantatas, oratorios, and passions the biblical elements are woven together in a fabric which would exceed the expectations of a homiletician.²⁹ Bach saw the significance of every aspect of his *Gottesdienst* and never underestimated the role of his own contribution to the whole, while always retaining a deep sense of reverence and humility. Peter Brunner's description of that which occurs when the gospel and the Holy Spirit are at work is relevant and reminds one of Luther's concept of *Frau Musica*:³⁰

Where the gospel and the Holy Spirit are at work, man now already receives a bit of the joy that is no longer of this

world. In this joy, saying turns into singing. In this joy even the linguistic form of the proclaiming and the praying word will exhibit that wonderful unity of melody and word which is characteristic of the psalm song of the *ekklesia* ... The victory over the death-dealing law through the gospel, the reception of salvation in Christ, the liberation through the Spirit, the anthropological, cosmological, and plan-of-salvation place in which the church's worship takes place on earth, the New Testament pneumatic character of Christian worship, the eternal praise of divine glory, which has its beginning in worship—all of this together makes the form of the word in worship turn into song and hymn.³¹

In the music of Bach we do, indeed, find "the word in worship turn into song and hymn." Such is the case largely because Bach's faith was rooted in the theology of Lutheran orthodoxy which "perceived music as an *explicatio textus*—a means of interpreting God's word— and as a *praedicatio sonora*—a resounding sermon. Both Martin Luther and Johann Sebastian Bach shared this musical experience."³² Paul Minear gives Bach this commendation:

Bach's exegetical expertise . . . entitles us to apply to his work a technical term that has become popular in recent years: narrative-theology. He thought theologically by telling a story. For him and his music, "doctrinal verities and a human story are one." With its diachronic succession of notes in time, Bach's music establishes a forward-moving momentum that enables his hearers to accompany the gospel story from step to step . . . However, the vocational drive was stronger [for Bach] than the professional. He had a life-time calling from God to create forms of music appropriate to God's praise. His love for the Bible and the church was translated into a passion to fuse faith and music, theology and liturgy, perhaps we should say, to choreograph "the dance of God."³³

What emerges, then, from a study of Bach is a portrait of a serious believer. He was a pious man, but not pietistic. He was a devout Lutheran, embracing a confessional orthodoxy which was by no means, however, a cold (much less dead) orthodoxy. His

theological zeal pervades the very fabric of his music. In his desire to serve his Lord he simply proclaimed to the people of God that which was proclaimed to him in the word of God.³⁴

III. Bach's Setting of "O God, from Heaven Look Down"³⁵

Bach's cantata, "O God, from Heaven Look Down" (*BWV 2*), was written for the Second Sunday after the Feast of the Holy Trinity. The cantata, "with its lament on man's turning away from God, is well matched to the gospel reading, the parable of the Great Supper (Luke 14:16-24)."³⁶ It is based, as previously stated, on Luther's paraphrase of Psalm 12.

The structure of Luther's paraphrase is a hymn of six stanzas. Stanza one expounds verse one of the Psalm; stanza two, verse two; stanza three, verses three and four; stanza four, verse five; stanza five, verse six; and stanza six, verses seven and eight.³⁷ Bach builds a six-movement cantata around the framework of these stanzas with the outer stanzas taken from Luther word for word and the inner stanzas slightly modified, "though not without incorporating more or less literal quotations from Luther's hymn."³⁸ It is interesting to note, before analyzing the work, that this cantata is replete with references to Scripture or its attributes, such as "word," "truth," and "Bible." This hymn deserves its place with "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" as one of the most influential hymns of the Reformation.

1. Chorus (translated literally):
*O God, look down from heaven,
 And let Thy mercy be aroused!
 How few are Thy saints,
 We poor ones are forsaken:
 Thy word is not acknowledged,
 Faith has become quite extinct
 Among all mankind.*

In the first movement of the cantata Bach employs the motet form with its imitative contrapuntal texture,³⁹ emphasizing not only the imploring nature of the text ("O God, look down from heaven"), but also the dark character of the Hypo-Phrygian mode used in the melody of this chorale.⁴⁰ It is this mode which is responsible for the

foreboding sense of impending assaults on the word of God and Christian faith by false teachers. Also of note is the use of the darker alto voices, not the brighter sopranos, in presenting the chorale melody. Interestingly, it is on *Wort* ("word") that we find Bach focusing as he develops the contrapuntal material of the phrase, "Thy word is not acknowledged." What is present in this opening section, therefore, is a plea for mercy and then a complaint to God that His word has not been properly acknowledged. Bach, the musical expositor, emphasizes Luther's statement of the results of turning away from the divine word—"faith becomes extinct" (the negative side, in other words, of the Lutheran belief in the saving efficacy of Scripture).

2. Tenor Recitative (translated literally):
*They teach a vain and false cunning
 Which is against God and His truth;
 And what their own wits have thought up—
 O misery which grievously harms the church—
 This must take the place of the Bible.
 The one chooses this, the other that;
 Foolish reason is their compass.
 They are like those graves of the dead
 Which, even though beautiful from outside,
 Contain only stench and decay
 And have nothing but filth to show.*

The second movement of the cantata, allotted to a tenor, begins with a direct statement of the first line of the chorale melody punctuating and accentuating the text, "They teach a vain and false cunning," followed by a recitative emphasizing the word, "truth."⁴¹ Bach's setting conveys the tragedy of false teaching, which constitutes blasphemy against the truth of God's word. One recalls Jesus, who refers to Himself as the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), imploring the aid of the Father in His high-priestly prayer: "Sanctify them by Thy truth. Thy word is truth" (John 17:17).

In the second section of the movement Bach returns to a direct melodic statement of the fifth line of the stanza—"The one chooses this, the other that"—which brings the listener back to the original tone of this and many other psalms in which a believer cries out to

God in complaint. In this portion of the recitative Bach provides foreboding melodic and harmonic color to the words "graves of the dead," "stench," and "decay." Throughout this movement the main harmonic component is the use of various diminished seventh chords,⁴² which provide an unstable chromaticism.⁴³ One is reminded of Jesus' parable of the foolish and the wise builders (Matthew 7:24-27) when the tenor says of heretics that "foolish reason is their compass." When the *usus magisterialis* of reason replaces the word of God as the *principium cognoscendi*, the building is doomed to destruction.

3. Alto Aria (translated literally):
*Destroy, O God, the doctrines
 That pervert Thy word!
 Restrain heresy
 And all the rabble spirits;
 For they say without hesitation:
 Defy Him who would be our master!*

The third movement of the cantata is the only one in a major key, contributing to a totally contrasting atmosphere. An almost naive confidence is conveyed through Bach's use of an imitative texture involving basso continuo, violin, and alto.⁴⁴ One recalls the assurance of David in Psalm 27 (verse 1):

The Lord is my light and my salvation.
 Whom shall I fear?
 The Lord is the strength of my life.
 Of whom shall I be afraid?

In this tuneful aria the alto sings her request of God in a tone which is almost carefree:⁴⁵ "Destroy the doctrines that pervert Thy word!" Once again Bach places the emphasis on "word," which is the highest point of contour in the melody of the first section.

In the second section the now minor key creates a lugubrious atmosphere as Bach melismatically prolongs the word "all," entreating God to "restrain heresy and *all* the rabble spirits."⁴⁶ Then, returning to the first line of the movement and also returning to the major key, Bach attaches a chromatic melisma to the word "pervert,"⁴⁷ which may signify the distress of believers when observing

the ways of the wicked in distorting and perverting the word of God. The childlike confidence, however, which was heard initially returns before the aria is completed.

4. Bass Recitative (translated literally):
*The poor ones are troubled;
 Their sighs—their anxious lamenting
 At so much affliction and distress,
 Through which the enemies torment pious souls,
 Penetrates the gracious ear of the Most High.
 Therefore, God speaks: I must be their Helper!
 I have heard their imploring.
 The dawn of help,
 The bright sunshine of pure truth shall,
 With new strength that brings comfort and life,
 Revive and delight them.
 I will have mercy on their distress,
 My healing word shall be the strength of the poor ones.*

The fourth movement of the cantata is a bass recitative, the first part of which describes the plight of the "poor ones," those who are going through much affliction because of their faith as they observe the ways of the unrighteous. Bach, however, in the second portion of this recitative, supplies an arioso of sorts as God speaks His words of comfort: "I must be their Helper!" Bach's musical gesture, a melodic motif ascending with undeterred purpose, brings several thoughts in succession to the listener's mind. One begins with the parable of the pharisee and publican: "for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:14).⁴⁸ The listener is then, of course, drawn to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The listener may then go on to think of these words of Jesus: "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:38-40).

God hears the prayers of His people, and Bach's setting here

encourages trust in the protection afforded by God. The eternal God, in the incarnation, has come down from heaven to become as we are, so we may become as He is (2 Corinthians 5:21). He will lift us up. This is our confidence and joy. He is our Helper. But in this world we are not assured of a life without conflict. In fact, "we must through much tribulation enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Jesus prayed to the Father: "I do not pray that Thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that Thou shouldest keep them from the evil one" (John 17:15).

There is one additional matter of theological and musical interest in this movement. When, in the midst of this recitative, the arioso commences with God speaking ("I must be their Helper!"), one finds Bach using a device similar to that which he employed in his *Passion According to St. Matthew*. There, in every occurrence of the words of Jesus (except in the case of "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"), Bach orchestrated the utterance with the use of sustained violin tones which are intended to signify the incarnation. In the fourth movement of the cantata "O God, from Heaven Look Down," the composer uses the violins, technically speaking, in a virtually identical manner; Bach is now describing God, in this case, as looking down from heaven and so preparing to raise up His people from their affliction and distress (in accord with Luke 18:14). While this similarity could be interpreted in differing ways, the reference is presumably to the restorative powers of the word of Christ, as such word is both spoken and attached by Him to substantial elements in His sacraments—to water in holy baptism and to His own body and blood (as well as bread and wine) in the sacrament of the altar ("with new strength that brings comfort and life"). The healing word of Christ constantly offers solace and strength to the "poor ones" as they undergo *tentatio*.⁴⁹ The theology of the cross—so much a part of Psalm 12, Luther's paraphrase, and Bach's cantata—clearly appears in germ, then, in this fourth movement of the cantata; where there is trouble and affliction the Christian will come to know his God and Savior more fully. This idea will, however, be articulated and developed more explicitly in the ensuing movement.

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5. Tenor Aria (translated literally):
*Silver is made pure through fire,
The word is proved true through the cross.
Hence a Christian shall at all times
Be patient in affliction and distress.*

Embodied in this fifth movement is the main theological emphasis of the cantata. Here the theology of the cross is presented in its fullness. The words "word," "cross," "affliction," and "distress" are given special musical attention; and "the word is proved true through the cross" constitutes the central phrase in the aria. In the setting of this phrase "word" is highlighted in its first enunciation, and in its repetition "cross" is stressed. Bach engages in melismatic elongation of the words to expound the way in which they encourage Christians to bear their crosses patiently. It is this patience which is elaborated in the second section of this aria; the Christian thereby finds meaning in his struggles and sufferings. The Christian must see his cross in relation to the cross of Christ, for it is through his own sufferings that the Christian is drawn to rely more completely upon the sufferings of his Lord on behalf of His people. He already experienced all the suffering which all others combined could possibly know (Hebrews 4:15).

It is through the trials of Christians, then, "that the genuineness of faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise and honor and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:7). The analogy which Psalm 12:6 employs to describe the word of God states the basic principle: "The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times." The libretto of the cantata before us applies this principle to the Christian life: "Silver is made pure through fire, the word is proved true through the cross." In the most authentic and profound sense, the word of God (both the threats of the law and the promises of the gospel) was proven true in the first instance in the cross of Jesus Christ,⁵⁰ but it necessarily follows therefrom that the word of God is likewise found true in the lives of believers in the cross of Jesus Christ. Significantly, the last occurrence of the word "cross" here is extended not simply melodically, but by use of a chromatic succession downward as well.

Perhaps there is an allusion to the incarnation itself.

6. Chorale (translated literally):
*This [word], God, mayest Thou preserve pure
 Before this wicked race;
 And let us be commended unto Thee,
 That they may not mix among us.
 The godless mob is found all around,
 Wherever such heretics are
 Exalted among Thy people.*⁵¹

The text of this chorale, deriving *in toto* once more from Martin Luther, is again a faithful paraphrase of Psalm 12. Yet Luther adds at least one important feature to the original wording. He implores God that the wicked might "not mix among us." This cry against heterodoxy, and ultimately heresy, gives the chorale its special significance to the orthodox Christian in Luther's day, in Bach's era, and in our own period of history. The urgency of this petition proceeds from observing the uniform consequence of allowing the exalting of false teachers among God's people. Such exaltation, states Luther, always attracts a "godless mob" loyal to the teachers concerned. The yearning, still, of the people of God to be rid of the wicked who "mix among us" remains in this chorale a prayer; it arises, then, not from a theology of glory, but rather the theology of the cross. For it will not be until the last day that the wheat and the tares will be separated. The Lord Jesus declared: "Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn'" (Matthew 13:30). Although, then, the Christian will defend the orthodox faith to the death, there is no guarantee against the exaltation of perverse teachers in the external church. On the last day, however, they will be humbled, while the genuine people of God will be exalted.

The closing chorale contains some of the most disturbing harmonic conflict in the entire cantata before us. Bach "mixes" modes as he contrasts orthodoxy and heresy. As sturdy and confident as this cantata is, the chorale ends with a negative statement placing dramatic emphasis on the continuing *tentatio* in the life of every true believer, paralleling directly Psalm 12:8, "The

wicked prowl on every side, as vileness is exalted among the sons of men." Thus concludes one of Bach's most descriptive, important, and exemplary cantatas.

Conclusion

Today one may find many theologies which are, in fact, simply surveys of human opinion as opposed to the one theology which is based on truth, the truth revealed in the word of God. The world, of course, despises this truth, but for the believer it is a precious treasure which brings salvation and eternal life with God. In his *Summaries of the Psalms* of 1531 Luther described Psalm 12 as follows:

It laments over the teachers who are always inventing new little discoveries and filling up God's kingdom everywhere with these new services to God. For where human doctrines once go in, there is no stop or end to them, but they increase more and more. They load down the poor conscience beyond all limit and work so that few true saints may remain. Against all this, the psalm comforts us that God will awaken His salvation, that is, His word, which confidently storms against this work of straw. He will free the imprisoned conscience. This does not happen, however, without cross and agony. As silver is purified in the fire, so they also must suffer in the meantime, and by this means become ever more pure and perceive the truth so much more clearly. This psalm belongs in the second and third commandments and the first and second petitions.⁵²

Psalm 12 has, indeed, much to give both clergy and laity not only by way of exhortation but also by way of consolation. The sixth verse, once more, states: "The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times." Then comes the most important verse (7): "Thou shalt keep them, O Lord; Thou shalt preserve them from this generation forever."

Martin Luther, theologian and musician, was and remains a voice in his time and ours proclaiming the necessity and verity of the word of God to a corrupted and despairing church. The Bride of Christ,

of course, responded and will in the end emerge victorious over all her foes, but not without grave struggles and temptations. The Lord was and is and always will be gracious.⁵³

Bach, the composer and theologian, also was and remains a voice in his time and ours bearing witness to the truth. Unrecognized and seemingly unappreciated by his own as a composer, he continued to produce his music in the context of God's service. His very motivation for composing was the grace of God given him in baptism. As Bach served his Lord Jesus Christ, he composed work after work as means of proclaiming the truth of Scripture. In an age of Pietism and Rationalism, Bach held to Lutheran orthodoxy because of his confidence in the word of God. Yes, he loved the word of God and, therefore, set its words of eternal life to the greatest music which has ever been composed by any man in history. And all this work of his he did, indeed, to the glory of God alone—*soli Deo gloria*.

Appendix

"Ah God, from Heaven Look Down"

(Ach Gott, vom Himmel Sieh Darein)

Martin Luther's Paraphrase of Psalm 12 (1523)

(as translated by George MacDonald and Ulrich Leupold)

Ah God, from heaven look down and view;

Let it Thy pity waken;

Behold Thy saints how very few!

We wretches are forsaken.

Thy word they will not grant it right,

And faith is thus extinguished quite

Amongst the sons of Adam.

They teach a cunning false and fine,

In their own wits they found it;

Their heart in one doth not combine,

Upon God's word well grounded.

One chooses this, the other that;

Endless division they are at,

And yet they keep smooth faces.

*God will outroot the teachers all
Whose false appearance teach us;
Besides, their proud tongues loudly call
"What care we? Who can reach us?
We have the right and might in full;
And what we say, that is the rule;
Who dares to give us lessons?"*

*Therefore saith God: "I must be up;
My poor ones ill are faring;
Their sighs crowd up to Zion's top,
My ear their cry is hearing.
My healing word shall speedily
With comfort fill them fresh and free,
And strength be to the needy."*

*Silver that seven times is tried
With fire, is found the purer;
God's word the same test will abide,
It still comes out the surer.
It shall by crosses proved to be;
Men shall its strength and glory see
Shine strong upon the nations.*

*O God, we pray, preserve it pure
From this vile generation
And let us dwell in Thee, secure
From error's infiltration.
The godless rout is all around
Where these rude wanton ones are found
Against Thy folk exalted.⁵⁴*

Endnotes

1. Picander was the pseudonym of Christian Friedrich Henrici who also collaborated with Bach on *The Passion According to St. Matthew* in 1729. Readers may see Gerhard Herz, *Essays on J. S. Bach* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), pp. 57-58, 274. Picander's authorship, to be sure, of BWV 2 is less than certain, but his probable authorship has been inferred from comparisons with other cantatas for which Picander definitely

provided the texts as well as *The Passion According to Saint Matthew*. Readers may compare the notes included with the recording published as volume 1 of *Das Kantatenwerk* (Telefunken 6.48191, 1971). The cantata retains the exact wording (in the original German) of the first and sixth stanzas of Luther's hymn. Picander's name is conjoined with movements two through five inclusive.

2. Luther composed the text of *Ach Gott, vom Himmel Sieh Darein* in 1523. It was subsequently published in the *Achtliederbuch* in Wittenberg and the *Enchiridion* in Erfurt in 1524.
3. Readers may refer back to note 1 for information regarding the text.
4. For an interesting discussion of orthodoxy, pietism, and Bach, readers may see Robin A. Leaver's article, "Bach and Pietism: Similarities Today," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 55 (1991), pp. 5-21.
5. Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), p. 137.
6. Readers may see Carl Schalk, *Luther on Music* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1987), p. 30.
7. The translation derives from Paul Zeller Strodach, revised by Ulrich S. Leupold, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 53 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), p. 328.
8. *First Lectures on the Psalms*, I, *Psalms 1-75*, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 10 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1974), p. 103. At this juncture in his life, of course, the young Luther was still using the medieval method of allegorical interpretation.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Readers may see *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), Hymn 260.
11. Readers may refer below in Section III to Bach's compositional treatment of this phrase as it occurs in the cantata: "The word is proved true through the cross."

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12. Readers may see Oliver C. Rupprecht's article, "Timeless Treasure: Luther's Psalm Hymns," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 47 (1983), p. 137.
 13. For an ambiguous discussion of Bach and this designation, readers may see John Ogasapian's article, "Bach: The 'Fifth Evangelist'?" *Journal of Church Music*, 27:3 (March 1985), pp. 13-16.
 14. It is also the trend today to discredit the authenticity of Mendelssohn's faith. It is edifying, however, to read the essay, "Mendelssohn's First Great Oratorio," by German scholar and musicologist Hans Christoph Worbs, who states, "A Jew by birth, but a Christian by choice, Mendelssohn [1809-1847] was writing a piece of personal history into his oratorio about the converted Saul [*Paulus*] . . . Unquestionably, *Paulus* dramatizes Mendelssohn's own conflicting experiences. Baptized into Christianity, he grew up in the Christian faith and, in contrast to many Jews, who purchased the baptismal certificate as an 'entrance ticket to European culture' (to quote Heinrich Heine), he was a Christian by conviction." This essay may be found in the notes to the compact-disc recording of *Paulus* by Philips (420 212-2, 1986), p. 20. Parenthetically, it is interesting to note that Mendelssohn was a young man just twenty years of age when he unearthed and subsequently conducted the momentous performance of Bach's *Passion According to St. Matthew* in Berlin in 1829.
 15. Readers may see Martin J. Naumann's article, "Bach the Preacher," in *The Little Bach Book* (Valparaiso: Valparaiso University Press, 1950), pp. 17-18.
 16. *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.
 17. Bach, like Luther, differed from the mode of distinction between the "sacred" and the "secular" which one finds in modern thinking.
 18. Readers may see Herz, *Essays on J. S. Bach*, p. 4.
 19. Gunther Stiller, *Johann Sebastian Bach and Liturgical Life in Leipzig* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984), translated by Robin A. Leaver, p. 206. Stiller is quoting Friedrich Smend in the first instance, *Bach in Cothen* (Berlin, 1951), and in the second case is quoting Christhard Mahrenholz, *Musicolog-*

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- ica et Liturgica: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ed. K. F. Muller (Kassel, 1960).
20. Naumann, *The Little Bach Book*, p. 18.
 21. Leaver, "Bach and Pietism: Similarities Today," p. 17.
 22. For a general overview of Bach's theological aptitude, readers may see *God's Composer, Bach*, issued as one of the "Living Faith Series Adult Studies" (Philadelphia: Parish Life Press, 1984).
 23. A study of symbolism, including numerical symbolism, in Bach's music will reveal a strong theological and devotional attitude as well as a good knowledge of Scripture. In volume 1, for example, of *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier*, one finds in the Fugue in C Minor a main subject which forms the shape of a cross turned sideways; and in the *Mass in B Minor*, one discovers, in the "Agnus Dei," a pregnant pause at measure 33, representing the significance of the "eternal sacrifice" in the atonement. For further insights into Bach's symbolism and his use of numerical symbolism, readers may see Christa Rumsey, "Symbolism in the Music of J. S. Bach," *Lutheran Theological Journal*, 25 (March 1991).
 24. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Bach among the Theologians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p. 26.
 25. Readers may see Karlfried Froehlich, "Luther's Hymns and Johann Sebastian Bach," *The Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin*, 66:1 (Winter 1986), p. 16.
 26. For a thorough and illuminating study of "Bach's Bible," readers may see Robin A. Leaver, *J. S. Bach and Scripture: Glosses from the Calov Bible Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985).
 27. Leaver, *J. S. Bach and Scripture*, p. 27, quoting H. Werthemann, *Die Bedeutung der alttestamentlichen Historien in Johann Sebastian Bachs Kantaten* (Tübingen, 1959), p. 31.
 28. Bach was a true theologian in the sense of adhering to a *habitus practicus theosdotos*. Bach learned his theology through repetition. He engaged himself with God's word, imbibing it through constant and disciplined study. He also saw his theology

as practical. His music reflects this goal in that it seeks to bring men to conversion and salvation and the enjoyment of God. And finally, his theology was God-given. He recognized this truth in the course of his composing by constantly imploring the Lord for help (J.J., i.e., *Jesu Juva*) and giving the glory to God alone (S.D.G., i.e., *Soli Deo Gloria*). (A discussion of true theology as a *habitus practicus theosdotos* may be found in Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House], I., pp. 46-51.)

29. Perhaps those of critical spirit could find examples of language or conceptualization which would be considered awkward today. One would, however, be hard-pressed to find more than a few examples of uninformed or careless exposition of Scripture in the cantatas of Bach. He had an uncanny insight into the proclamation of the word of God.
30. Readers may refer back to the relevant discussion in section I.
31. Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, p. 269.
32. See Joanne Eva Lindau, "Luther's Influence on Bach: Musical Theologian and Theological Musician," *Crux*, XXII:3, p. 17.
33. Readers may see Paul S. Minear, "Bach and Today's Theologians," *Theology Today*, 42 (July 1985), pp. 205-206. Minear, Professor Emeritus of New Testament in Yale University Divinity School, quotes from Wilifred Mellers, *Bach and the Dance of God* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 87. While Mellers is an avowed agnostic, he concedes that Bach was one who had genuine religious beliefs and demonstrates the same by analyzing various instrumental and choral works of Bach and their symbolism, including the *Mass in B Minor*, the *Solo Cello Suites*, and *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier*. Mellers' postulation is that one may find intrinsically embedded in the music, in the very notes which Bach composed, the "Dance of God."
34. Readers may see the introduction to *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), p. 6.
35. Readers may see Psalms 12 and 2, the translation of Bach's Cantata *BWV 2* provided in the course of this article, and the appendix which provides a translation of the text of Luther's paraphrase of Psalm 12.

36. Alfred Durr, in the notes included in the record-album of volume 1 of *Bach: Das Kantatenwerk* (Telefunken 6.48191, 1971). The reference to Luke 14:16-24 is appropriate, considering the overall message of Psalm 12, Luther's paraphrase, and Bach's cantata. Those who expect to be "invited" to the final supper will in fact be rejected. Jesus was dealing with the Pharisees, who in their role of authority were guilty of false teaching. The poor, lame, and blind, whom the Pharisees despised because of their "sin," would instead take their places at the great feast.
37. Readers may see J. Geoffrey Scheffhelm, "Luther, the Hymn-writer," *The Bride of Christ*, VII:4 (November 1983), p. 10.
38. Durr, *Bach: Das Kantatenwerk*, volume 1.
39. The phrase "imitative counterpoint" is used to describe a layered texture of sound produced by successive entrances of the same melodic material. Simple forms would include the "round"; increasingly complex techniques would include the "canon" and "fugue." Bach frequently used this technique to emphasize a particular word or phrase.
40. A "mode" (deriving from the Latin *modus*, meaning "manner" or "tune") is a patterned order of successive ascending and descending pitches used in medieval church music. The Western major and minor "scales" (deriving from the Latin *scalae*, meaning "ladder") are two varieties of mode. Each mode has a characteristic flavor depending on how wide or narrow is the distance between the pitches in any given ascending or descending sequence. Some modes, therefore, are considered bright (e.g., the Lydian) and others dark (e.g., the Phrygian and the Locrian).
41. A "recitative" is a text sung in a conversational manner without measured pulses and rhythms.
42. Diminished seventh chords are "slippery" in that they cause the tonal center to fluctuate.
43. The term "chromaticism" indicates the use of close successive half-steps or semi-tones. In the period in which Bach composed chromaticism could symbolize anything from death to the devil.
44. The "basso continuo" in the baroque ensemble normally included a keyboard instrument with solo cello and sometimes a double bass. In the case of church music, the keyboard instrument was

the organ. The organist typically improvised the music from a given bass line and series of numbers called a "figured bass," which indicated the sequence of chords and suspensions which occurred in the music.

45. The word "aria" means an "air" or, one may say, a song.
46. A fascinating musical representation appears in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*. In Act II, Scene 28, the two armoured men sing what amounts to a hymn to Isis. The tune employed is nothing other than the chorale *Ach Gott! vom Himmel Sieh Darein!* The opera is replete, of course, with Masonic imagery; and the text provided by Mozart's librettist, Emanuel Schikaneder, exudes the spirit of the very heresies which Psalm 12, Martin Luther, and Johann Sebastian Bach identify as perversions of the true word. The text runs as follows: "Whoever walks along this path so full of troubles is purified by fire, water, air, and earth. If he can conquer the fear of death, he will soar from the earth up to heaven! Enlightened, he will then be able to devote himself wholly to the mysteries of Isis" (the translation deriving from the notes included with the compact-disc by Philips [422 543-2, 1984, 1991]). The direction is noteworthy: man soars up to heaven (to be like God) instead of God coming down to man. The use of the accompanying chorale-tune is irony indeed.
47. A "melisma" emphasizes a word by way of elongating various syllables in a sequence of pitches.
48. Another conception of exaltation occurs in the final chorale of the cantata (the sixth movement of *BWV 2*).
49. It is important to keep in mind that Bach knew the significance of the place of his cantatas within the context of the Divine Service. The cantata was generally presented after the readings and before the sermon. The cantata, therefore, most frequently pointed to the preaching of the word of God and the sacramental meal within the context of Lutheran worship.
50. John, after the crucifixion, said of himself: "his testimony is true" (John 19:35).
51. The translation derives from Alfred Durr, *Bach: Das Kantatenwerk*, volume 1, with only minor alterations.

52. *Psalms with Introductions by Martin Luther*, trans. Bruce A. Cameron (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), pp. 18-19.
53. Hebrews speaks of "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).
54. The translation derives from George MacDonald, revised by Ulrich S. Leupold, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 53, pp. 226-228.

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