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Table of Contents

The Trinity in the Bible	195
Robert W. Jenson	
Should a Layman Discharge the Duties of the Holy Ministry?	207
William C. Weinrich	
Center and Periphery in Lutheran Ecclesiology	231
Charles J. Evanson	
Martin Chemitz's Use of the Church Fathers in His Locus on Justification	271
Carl C. Beckwith	
Syncretism in the Theology of Georg Calixt, Abraham Calov and Johannes Musäus	291
Benjamin T. G. Mayes	
Johann Sebastian Bach as Lutheran Theologian	319
David P. Scaer	
Theological Observer	341
Toward a More Accessible <i>CTQ</i>	
Delay of Infant Baptism in the Roman Catholic Church	

Book Reviews	347
<i>Baptism in the Reformed Tradition: an Historical and Practical Theology.</i>	
By John W. Riggs	David P. Scaer
<i>The Theology of the Cross for the 21st Century: Signposts for a</i>	
<i>Multicultural Witness.</i> Edited by Albert L. Garcia and A.R.	
Victor Raj.....	John T. Pless
<i>The Arts and Cultural Heritage of Martin Luther.</i> Edited by Nils	
Holger Peterson et al.	John T. Pless
<i>Fundamental Biblical Hebrew and Fundamental Biblical Aramaic.</i> By	
Andrew H. Bartelt and Andrew E. Steinmann.....	Chad L. Bird
<i>Intermediate Hebrew Grammar.</i> By Andrew Steinmann..	
Chad L. Bird	Counted Righteous in Christ. By John Piper
Peter C. Cage	<i>The Contemporary Quest for Jesus.</i> By N. T. Wright, Charles R. Schulz
<i>The Free Church and the Early Church: Bridging the Historical and</i>	
<i>Theological Divide.</i> Edited by D. H. Williams	
Paul G. Alms	<i>Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition.</i> By Andrew Purves
.....	James Busher
<i>Music for the Church: The Life and Work of Walter E. Buszin.</i> By Kirby	
L. Koriath	D. Richard Stuckwisch
<i>Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization.</i>	
By Alvin J. Schmidt.....	James Busher
<i>Participating in God: Creation and Trinity.</i> By Samuel Powell	
.....	Timothy Maschke
<i>Doing Right and Being Good: Catholic and Protestant Readings in</i>	
<i>Christian Ethics.</i> Edited by David Oki Ahearn and Peter Gathje	
.....	John T. Pless
<i>The Human Condition: Christian Perspectives through African Eyes.</i>	
By Joe M. Kapolyo	Saneta Maiko
<i>Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism.</i>	
By Philip Benedict.....	Cameron MacKenzie
<i>The New Faithful: Why Young Christians Are Embracing Christian</i>	
<i>Orthodoxy.</i> By Colleen Carroll	
Armand J. Boehme	
 Indices for Volume 68	 381

Johann Sebastian Bach as Lutheran Theologian

David P. Scaer

Bach at the Apex

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) represents the high point of a period noted for its musical productivity. Even had the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries not seen the outpouring of scientific advancements that it did, the music of that period would sit aside as a special one. Take Bach out of the musical equation and that period would still have been extraordinary in terms of musical productivity. Heinrich Schütz, Georg Philipp Telemann and Dietrich Buxtehude were in Germany, and Henry Purcell and William Boyce were in England. Standard fare for suburban mall Christmas music is Bach's contemporary *Landsmann*, Georg Friedrich Händel's familiar "Hallelujah Chorus" from *Messiah*. Bach's sons left an amazing legacy, but they could not emerge from their father's shadow. They were great, but their father was the greatest.

With the Reformation attention to hymn singing, towns and princes soon supported their own organists, music directors known as Kantors, and choirs for their churches, courts, and special occasions like marriages and funerals. From the mid-1500s up through much of the 1700s rivulets flowed from small towns and courts into brooks, and brooks merged into streams and rivers, and the rivers flowed into an ocean, which ocean was a *Bach*, the German word for "brook." Johann Sebastian Bach, however, was an ocean in whose music we are drowned in God's own majesty. In the *Kyrie* and the *Sanctus* of his *Mass in B Minor*, we are dropped

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into the depths of God, dragged down by the waves into an ocean without shores.

Music is better described by its characteristics and its effects, rather than defined. Martin Luther said music was the handmaiden (*Frau*: wife) of theology, but it is not her only role. At times she can be tyrannical and take control of our whole being. Music can convert ordinary words into a force that captures our intellects and involves us in causes for which we otherwise have no moral commitment. It enters our being through the emotions and, like an invading army, it transforms our intellect and will. Many conversions made at evangelistic rallies result from music's effect on the emotions through which the will is stirred to make decisions for Christ. Remove the music and commitment soon evaporates. Music's ability to stir the emotions is not lost on high school and college administrations. Marching bands produce that elusive school spirit, which evolves into memories that later give birth to the school's loyal and generous alumni. It reinforces memories and in some cases makes memory possible. We remember a catchy song or hymn, but we would be hard pressed to produce the words without the music. Music gives content to nostalgia, engages our minds and intellects, and through its rhythms can take our bodies captive and has the potential to create exhaustion in both the performer and the hearer. Using biblical language, music makes it possible to love things with all our heart, soul, and mind. Over indulgence in music can only be cured by abstinence, but this only sharpens our desire for the pleasure of hearing it again. Music does not inform the intellect, but it can raise the intellect to heights of awareness and consciousness that raw thoughts by themselves cannot do.

Music is the theology's *alter ego*, or to go one step further, its better half. Cold theological statements become alive through music. This is certainly the case with Johann Sebastian Bach whose music preserved the older Lutheran

theology, which was being surpassed by Rationalism and Pietism in eighteenth-century Germany. Bach's music is the embodiment of the man and his faith. Through it we confront him in his inner soul.

All disciplines involve our intellects, wills and emotions in one way or another. Sciences like physics and chemistry address the intellect. Religion or faith involves our intellect and our emotions, but it approaches us through our wills where unbelief is conquered and faith created. Music cannot create faith, but in addressing our emotions, it shapes our religious sensitivities and raises faith to levels beyond the reach of the spoken or the silently read word. Words, sentences, and phrases are released from the mundane and the prosaic to levels of excitement, enjoyment and even dread. Mysteriously the same words attached to different kinds of music produce different effects and more mysteriously the same music played in different ways and tempos creates different outcomes. By itself music is not a source for pure intellectual ideas, but it transforms our intellects and often provides the same words with different and perhaps even diametrically opposing meanings.¹

The Mass: A Common Language for Different Faiths

The idea that the same words can have different meanings is recognizable when Bach's *Mass* is compared to those of others. A Mass consists of liturgical parts of the service of Holy Communion, which remain the same Sunday after Sunday in all churches with little or no variation. With occasional exceptions, a full Mass consists of a *Kyrie*, a *Gloria in Excelsis*, a *Credo*, a *Benedictus* with a

¹Klaus Eidam writes (*The True Life of J. S. Bach*, trans. Hyat Rogers [New York: Basic Books, 2001], 161): "Without a doubt, music is a mysterious thing: We cannot eat it, cannot wear it, cannot prove anything by it—considered purely as phenomenon, it is strictly useless.... The preoccupation with it has even given first to a whole branch of learning, musicology, though no music is produced through its efforts."

Hosanna, and an *Agnus Dei*. George Bernhard Shaw supposedly said that the Americans and British were two different peoples separated by a common language. Paraphrasing Shaw, the Mass is one set of words expressing different faiths. Identical texts set to different music by different composers create different interpretations and correspondingly different responses in the listeners. So theoretically Roman, Anglican (Episcopalian), and Lutheran Masses all use the same words, but because of religious traditions of their composers or their intentions, the music of each provides different interpretations of the same words. Though Bach wrote several masses, perhaps in hopes of improving his lot with his prince elector of Saxony who had converted to Catholicism to become king of Poland, their distinctively Lutheran character remains evident. Bach's ambition could not camouflage what he was.² He could not pass himself off as a Catholic. In his hands his great *B Minor Mass* delivers a distinctively Lutheran message which is quite different from one written, for example, by Mozart.

Things were not always like that. Masses sung according to Gregorian chant often have no known composers. Gregorian chant has its origins in Hebrew chant, a form with ancient roots still used in synagogues. This form may have provided the vehicle in which David composed the Psalms. Words were not set to music and music did not search for lyrics, but words and music emerged in one moment. In a Gregorian Mass words and music form a natural unity. Liturgies of the Eastern Orthodox Churches also demonstrate a similar unity of word and music. Their Divine Liturgy sung in the ancient Slavonic or modern Romanian, Russian, Bulgarian and Greek tongues will sound similar to the ear untrained to recognize these different languages. Since the chant remains the same,

²Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach* (New York and London: Norton, 2000), 367.

listeners do not come face to face with the ancient composers who remain anonymously hidden in the mysterious music. Like the Psalms of David, something is lost when the ancient liturgies are spoken and not sung.

The individualism of the West allows the person and character of the composer to find a place in his works from which he emerges when they are played. It does not take too long for the uninitiated to distinguish Bach from Handel. Though Bach's *Mass* uses words of ancient liturgy, it is recognizably Lutheran in distinction to the restrained Psalms tunes of the Reformed (which have no Masses) or the triumphal exuberance of the Anglican tradition, which reflects seventeenth, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British imperialism. Roman Masses cover a wider period of space and time and hence exhibit a greater variety from the grim and solemn to the operatic. Place the medieval hymn, *Dies irae*, into a Mass, and the afterlife becomes gloomy, murky and smoky like the ancient Greek Hades.³ Faure's *Requiem* breaks away from this tradition in picturing souls being released from the shades of death to a higher glory, but uncertainty remains until this happy conclusion. Mozart's *Requiem* is in parts grim and despairing, but his *Coronation Mass* is exuberant.

In something so standard as the Mass, the music places itself along side of the words and takes control. Music is no longer theology's handmaiden but its queen. Bach's *B Minor Mass* exhibits a wide range of experiences. In the *Kyrie* or *Sanctus* the listener views the vast expanse of the deity and finds himself falling into transcendent depths. Bach expresses a reality beyond himself, so that he too must step back in awe when confronted with God's "God-ness" in his own composition. In the *Expectio resurrectionem mortuorum*, he becomes the believer who confidently awaits the resurrection of the dead.⁴

³The *Requiem Mass* structure makes use of the *Dies Irae*.

⁴Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, 440.

Bach's Complexity

Most music, including religious music, delivers the messages of their authors and composers in single, almost immediately recognizable melodies. A Gregorian Mass lacks musical range and imagination, but we can follow it and sing it, because only one voice carries the weight of the words and message. We like to sing the melody, because we recognize it. This is the way we sing hymns. Singing any of the other subsidiary parts of alto, tenor, and bass requires a trained ear and the capability to match our voices to what our ears hear. Failing in this, we sing along with the melody in the soprano, realizing that the ability to sing in harmony is not a gift all possess.

Bach presents a different challenge. He understands the power inherent in melody, but in many of his orchestral pieces, he assigns the thematic motifs to the other voices, a somewhat democratic approach in a declining medieval world. His music exhibits a complexity that addresses different parts of our emotional, intellectual and religious lives, if not at the same time, at least sequentially, so that we do not know where he has left us. In his *Saint Matthew Passion*, which, with the *Mass in B Minor*, can be considered one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, he uses two choirs and two organs in addition to the orchestra. Our attention is diverted from one choir to the other, from one voice to the other. In the *Kyrie* of Bach's *Mass* we find ourselves lost in the magnificence that can only be God himself and then in the *Christe eleison*, God becomes accessible in the sweet revelation of his Son. Then in the second *Kyrie eleison*, we confidently approach God, but now at a respectful distance. Bach does something similar in the *Gloria in Excelsis*. God's majesty is followed by a serene peace that envelops the world in the *Pax hominibus*. In one moment we are on earth as separated from our Creator by creatureliness and sinfulness and the next moment we are in heaven at God's right hand.

A diversified emotion brought on by one piece of music is comparable to waiting on a platform in Europe for the train. It slows in approaching, but does not stop. To get on the train we have to make a quick decision of what compartment door to open. As it passes the platform, we are uncertain through which door to board. Each compartment has its own attraction, but if we open one door, we have deprived ourselves of opening the other doors to see what they have to offer. So while Bach's music draws us mystically into a world which is uniquely his, it leaves us frustrated in knowing that at any one time we have not grasped its full significance. His music grasps us, before we can grasp it. When we do grasp it, we are uncertain whether we have grasped his intentions. When we listen to the same piece again, we hear something which we did not hear the first time and so we have to reappraise our first responses. Bach invades our insular world through different doors, often at the same time. We are at a loss at which entrance to greet him.

This experience resembles hearing and rehearing the Scriptures. No one hearing of any section exhausts its meaning. There is no re-hearing of the sacred texts, because each hearing uncovers something not heard before. We know the general plot of this or that biblical account or story, but each time we confront something which was not previously comprehended.

Similarly in listening to Bach, our intellects lose their self-confidence. What we thought we knew we really did not. Our minds are constantly adjusted and readjusted and frustration gives way to exhaustion and then to a heavenly pleasure, even in his secular works. Though his music and faith reach an unmatched union on earth (*and* perhaps even in heaven), most Bach devotees are captivated by his genius, not by his faith or at least they do not share it; however without his faith his devotees cannot count themselves among his disciples. They know him but not really. Musicologists can analyze his genius. Biographers attempt

to understand him in terms of the first half of the eighteenth century⁵ and he emerges an ordinary man, but in this ordinariness resided in miniature the mathematical harmonies of the universe in still unmatched musical complexities which he "turned into a glorious representation of heavenly music. Measure for measure, from beat to beat, one phrase to another, one complementary contrapuntal passage to another, heaven and earth are joined. Perhaps in heaven time will not be swallowed up into eternity and there will be time after all at least in terms of our music coming from the redeemed who are a part of the new creation."⁶ His compositions are as fixed and varied as the stars themselves, unity and diversity without contradiction. His mind was the universe in miniature. His *Mass* is the introduction to heaven and is heard there.

A combination of mathematical and musical genius still does not explain the man, because these characteristics by themselves might only produce advanced mechanical technique. Without coming to terms with his Christian faith as inherited from Luther's Reformation, our understanding of him cannot go beyond amazement at a technical genius. Leave his faith out of the equation and he is given to us without his soul and he remains remote. Keep his faith in the equation and Bach speaks to our inner being. Even the faithless, who have pushed the idea of divinity to the outer perimeters of their existence, can recognize the divine element in Bach. His music appeals to the universal

⁵Eidam notes that Bach's second marriage took place at home and not in the local Lutheran church. *The True Life of J. S. Bach*, 145. Whatever inconsistency may have driven him to this action, he may have been sensitive to the Reformed faith of his prince and his Pietistic wife who had no love of Bach and his music. There are reasons why people take the actions they do.

⁶Paul W. Hofreiter, from a communication by e-mail, December 17, 2001.

dilemma that cannot escape the questions of human misery and whether God really exists. Those who understand life only in terms of this world—what they can see, hear and touch—see even in Bach's most ordinary works something of the transcendental. Those for whom there is no God stumble over the divine clues in his compositions. So one who understood himself as a believer in Christ attracts non-Christians, simply because he opens the door to the *other* reality, the one not measured by space and time.⁷ This is even a great mystery as to why those who have not found God are drawn to the music of a man who found God in

⁷Two articles on Bach appeared side by side in *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (Spring 2002). The first is by the highly respected Bach scholar Robert A. Leaver, "Johannes Sebastian Bach and the Lutheran Understanding of Music" (21-47). Leaver identifies certain motifs in Bach's compositions within the range of Lutheran theology. A second essay is by the equally erudite Michael Marissen, "On the Musically Theological in J. S. Bach's Church Cantatas" 48-64. In his conclusion, Marissen's notes that if we neglect either the words or the music in the cantatas, we have a diminished understanding of him. Agreed! "Accepting the idea that Bach's musical setting can theologically expand upon and interpret his librettos and need not involve downplaying the aesthetic splendor of his works. I would suggest, on the other hand, that insisting on exclusively aesthetic contemplation of Bach's music potentially diminishes its meanings and actually reduces its stature" (60). In another article Robert A. Leaver notes the contribution Walter E. Buszin made to the revival of Bach's music in the Lutheran church in well researched and deep felt article, "Walter E. Buszin and Lutheran Church Music in America," *Lutheran Quarterly* (Summer 2002): 153-94. Leaver includes a quotation from Buszin that without understanding the religious dimension in Bach's music, appreciation for it will soon be lost. "The world may enjoy Bach for aesthetic reasons only. For that reason Bach's days are likely numbered among the children of the world, for if the Gospel is foolishness to them, then in the end, Bach's proclamation of this Gospel, the 'new song,' will be but foolishness to them." Happily Buszin was more pessimistic than he had to be. Bach is more successful than ever; however sadly this success is more often outside Lutheran churches than in them. The hymnal currently in use in the Episcopal Church has a wide range of Bach arranged hymns which are totally lacking in their Lutheran counterparts.

everything and attributed his genius to God alone. When he penned S.D.G., *Soli Deo Gloria*, at the end of compositions, he meant it.

Bach as Distinctively Lutheran

In assuming his post as the cantor of St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, the great composer had to submit to a rigorous examination on Lutheran Orthodoxy. Town and church authorities were stridently opposed to Calvinism and Pietism, but after he died Leipzig fell under the pall of Rationalism. From his library it is evident that he was knowledgeable about the Lutheran faith in a way which few Lutheran clergy are today. This explains the breadth of his religious knowledge, but more than cold intellect was at work in assimilating facts. He enveloped the Reformation faith in a way that the professional theologians rarely do. If Luther had been given Bach's musical genius, the great Reformer would have been Bach. Perhaps the Reformation heritage today reaches more people through Bach's music than Luther's writings, though it is often unrecognized, discounted, or ignored by the scholars. Bach's world embraces God and Satan, heaven and earth, despair and joy, life and death, precision and ecstasy, but it is not one of dialectical uncertainty between irreconcilable forces. Precision does not translate into woodenness. Ecstasy does not evolve into uncontrolled fanaticism. Faith finds no room for unbelief. God offers Satan no armistice. Heaven ultimately will win and destroy hell. There is a "must" in God which requires that he will reign and reign alone. He shares his glory with no one—*Soli Deo Gloria*. Bach knew personal tragedy in losing his young wife and ten of his twenty children in death. Then came the disappointments of being denied prestigious positions. Fully aware of his genius, rejection was for him an additional burden. Even though Christians see no evidences of this victory in their own lives, they have no doubt that God will succeed and

vindicate the faithful. In this Bach has the Lutheran understanding of a Christian who knows himself as *simul iustus et peccator*. Like Luther, Bach is the man caught between heaven and hell, with an awareness of his own wretchedness for which relief can only come from God in Christ. It is almost as if Bach were the reincarnation of Old Testament Psalmists who struggled within the realities in which they know themselves as sinner as they waited for God to vindicate them. The Lutheran understanding of life contrasts with other options offered by the majority of Christian options, in which believers find satisfaction in their moral accomplishments and in measuring them, they are able to find the certainty of salvation. In the Lutheran view the real dilemma is not in the external world, which the Creator has made his own again in redemption, but the world as we meet it within ourselves. Bach is trapped within a Lutheran definition of himself. He cannot deny this definition out which he produces his music. In contrast, Mozart is not tied to his world. Bach is, and so he cannot help being Bach. Even in his so-called secular music, he is never detached from what he composes and so he is encapsulated in what he writes. He is rarely on the outside looking down upon a manuscript with his quill dipped in ink. His music is his autobiography. In the arias, he is the sinner who cannot escape the dilemma of his own sin and death, but he is at the same time he is the believer confident that God will come to his rescue. As much as Bach's music represents who he is and what he believes, it remains outside of him, scaffolding on which he can approach the glories of heaven and through its gates see Christ on the throne of his judgment. Thus in approaching death, he reworks and re-titles an older organ fugue into *Vor deinem Thron tret ich hiermit*, "Before your throne I now appear."

For Bach God is never a theological abstraction, but always the God-Man, Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Mary, a faith which is expressed in the *Incarnatus est* and the ensuing *Crucifixus* of his *B Minor Mass*. Encapsulated here is the misery of human agony that can be felt by all who have

been brought down to the depths of sorrow. In the *Mass* this agony is experienced by the transcendent God who suffers under his own wrath so that his creatures may experience the joys of heaven. This agony is taken down to the level of every believer in *Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi*. Here the focus is on Christ as the sin bearer, but with the total awareness that the believer is responsible for this suffering. *Et sepultus est* is rendered inoperative by the unexpected *Et resurrexit* in which God accomplishes the victory for himself in Christ. In the *Expectio resurrectionem mortuorum*, the agony of the believer caught in his sin and his own death gives way to personal confidence that he will be raised from the dead with Christ whose resurrection becomes theirs.⁸ A Lutheran theology can be gleaned and has the power to create and confirm faith, but ironically the majority of his devotees and chief interpreters are not Lutheran and some not Christian.

Bach No Pietist or Rationalist

Luther initiated the era in which the modern world at last emerged from the medieval one. Bach lived as this process was coming to completion. With the Enlightenment giving birth to the French Revolution, the modern world was here to stay. Part of the developing modern age was a religious movement known as Pietism. At the August 2000 Bach Festival in North Conway, New Hampshire, a high school, college, and church music director introduced Bach's *Coffee Cantata* by saying that the strict Lutheran composer could let his hair down occasionally. He had confused Lutheranism with Pietism, which was widespread in Bach's Germany, and its Anglo-Saxon expression especially in New

⁸Of Bach's treatment of the Creed Leaver writes that it "is as much a significant theological statement as it is a profound musical one, symmetrically arranged around the center-pint of the *Crucifixus*, literally the theological *crux* of Christian, Trinitarian theology" (35).

England Puritanism from which it spread into the American psyche. Pietism is an internally directed form of Christianity resulting in an individualism and subjectivism in which believers rest their confidence in themselves and not Christ.⁹ In the wake of the Thirty Years War, which brought a devastation to Germany that was not known again until World War II, the Pietistic emphasis on Christian life and not its teachings offered a relief from the religious wars. It never denied the old Lutheran faith, but required stern behavior from its adherents. Pietists wallowed in the misery of their holiness and had no use for organ preludes and rarely used chorales and so were among Bach's opponents. While he could have been drawn into the Pietistic orbit, he remained safely outside of it and so he suffered from none of their religious self-absorption. Bach's alleged Pietism has been supposedly detected in his use of personal pronouns and possessives, "I," "me," "my," and "mine," especially in the arias of his cantatas and passions, in which he reflects upon his condition as sinner. Self-reflection over sin and death also characterizes the Psalms and is also part of the Lutheran view of Confession and Absolution. Bach never sees faith of the believers as a source or reason for salvation. Believers are never saved because of their holiness or piety as the Pietists proclaim, but because God has come to their aid. Bach had to contend with Pietistic rulers and clergy, but Pietism bridged the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, though it was submerged into private practice of religion and was not a dominant force in Germany's intellectual life. It gave way to the then emerging Rationalism which still dominates Western thought, especially in Germany. Not unexpectedly East German Communist authorities attributed Bach's genius, especially his mathematical precision in his music, to the influence of

⁹Though it is widely held that Bach absorbed Pietistic influences into his music, he demonstrates none of the self-absorbed life styles of the Pietists who had little use for the cantatas he produced. *The True Life of J.S. Bach*, 163-65.

the Rationalistic Enlightenment of which they saw themselves as the rightful heirs. What of Bach's heritage survived Pietism was ignored by Rationalism, which had no use for the older religion. Their theologians and philosophers had a natural explanation for every supernatural event. Bach's view that man was estranged from God and could only be saved by him also had no place in the Enlightenment's optimistic assessment of humanity.¹⁰ At the time of his death, a once dominant Lutheran Orthodoxy was losing its grip on the church, state, and university and would soon fall completely out of favor and never recover. Still, within Orthodox Lutheranism's declining years in Germany, Bach developed a unique musical form in which the Lutheran heritage is still preserved.

The Eternal Bach

Bach's biographers do not agree in their understanding of him and thus their scholarship has produced contradictory results.¹¹ He can be explained within the dimensions of his time, but not by them, and so he may qualify as a universal man. This may explain how his greatness only began to be appreciated about a century after he died. Like St. Paul, Bach was "born out of due time." Certain aspects of his genius, especially his technical organ skill, were recognized by his contemporaries, but now, three centuries later, societies honor him by preserving and presenting his music. Without interpretation, his music attracts and without translation, his music speaks in various languages to many nations and cultures. As I get older, I

¹⁰Eidam shows that Leipzig remained a haven of Lutheran Orthodoxy during Bach's life and that it was hardly a haven for Enlightenment thought which was gaining entrance in other parts of Germany at that time. *The True Life of J.S. Bach*, 163-65.

¹¹Eidam surveys these different interpretations. *The True Life of J.S. Bach*, xv-xviii.

think of family members, friends and acquaintances whom death has taken, but whose personalities were so compelling that in some sense they continue to live on and must live on. In listening to Bach, I feel I have met this extraordinary personality which was a unique combination of genius, technique, emotion and faith. *Something* as grand as this just does not appear and then vanish, but must be eternal. Nearly all theological systems beginning with Thomas Aquinas pay some attention to proofs for God's existence. These proofs are philosophical logarithms that impress only those with the intellect to discern them, but it is doubtful that they ever produce faith. Perhaps a better proof for God's existence would be Bach and his music. Listeners are ushered into the existence of a supernatural world over which God reigns unchallenged. His music is created on earth, but listeners find themselves lost in the depths of God as in the case of the first *Kyrie* or the *Sanctus* of his *B Minor Mass*. However, we are not permitted to remain submerged in divine solemnities. Like the old parachute jump at Coney Island, we are dropped into the depths of human misery in hearing the *Crucifixus* and *Et sepultus est*. Bach's *Mass* is unmatched in plummeting the depths of the opposing different realities found in human and divine experiences. Whereas his *Mass* fluctuates over the full range of human experiences from desperate wailing in the face of death to heavenly ecstasy in which life reigns forever, the *Saint Matthew* and *Saint John Passions* rarely escape the agony of human existence. In the *Credo* of the *Mass* release and relief from the *Crucifixus* and *Et Sepultus Est* are found in the exuberance of the *Et resurrexit*, but in Bach's *Passions* there is no divine intervention from human misery. Relief does not come from heaven, but in the word which God offers only to faith now. In contrast to the *Mass* in which believers are taken into heaven, the world of the *Passions* is for the most part the one-dimensional world which all, even unbelievers, know. Even for believers there is no light from a glorious heaven pointing the way to God's ultimate victory in the resurrection. Bach's hearers view the suffering

of Jesus and confess their own responsibility for it. Jesus' entombment is the final act. Mourners have no assurance other than what was given the Old Testament believers. Like Abraham and Moses, Jesus is sleeping with his fathers and so believers sing to him in the sleep of death. Bach is no agnostic, but believers must be content with God's word. Essential to his Lutheran understanding of life is that the severity of death and our despair cannot be mitigated. As much as we want closure to our problems and put the unpleasant behind us, we must wait for God's time. This fixation with the human condition may account for the appeal his music has for non-Christians. Of course, this is the mystery: Bach's genius is recognized, accepted, honored and even celebrated, but his faith which could see beyond the grave and which gave form to this genius is often unrecognized.

This faith propelled his genius to extraordinary heights and still gives his listeners a taste of the divine. At one point in his *Saint John Passion*, the gloom of death is broken with an announcement of God's victory in the rendering of the temple curtain and the opening of the tombs with the bodies of the saints coming out. Though this account does not appear in the Gospel of John, Bach extracts the passage regarding the earthquake from Matthew's account. In his presentation of Jesus as Judah's conquering lion with triumphal music to accompany the narrative, Bach interprets these events as God's victory over sin, death, and Satan. However, Bach does not proceed from victorious death to victorious resurrection, as might be expected, but instead lapses to the tomb of Jesus at which believers are left weeping. Many biblical interpreters avoid saying anything about this unique event at all, simply because they do not see how the *Christus victor* theme fits in with the events surrounding Jesus' death. Even with the horrible events of September 11, 2001, the contemporary person runs away from the reality of death. He/she would like to shun

funerals, pretend that he/she will not get old, and does all in his/her power to retard the ravages of old age with a proper regimen. Christians are not immune from this secular attitude to life. A majority celebrates Christmas and Easter but avoid Lent and Good Friday. Christmas is the birth of life and Easter its recovery. We can face life, but death is the insoluble enigma. Christian life defined must first be defined by the crucifixion. Removing death from any definition of our human existence creates a fanaticism. In his *Passions* Bach does not take the listeners beyond the tomb where Jesus' body is placed. We are left as weeping mourners at the grave with little more than the promise that God will in some way vindicate the dead Jesus. In the art world, the counterpart would be Michelangelo's *Pieta* in which Jesus' sorrowing mother holds the dead body of her son in her arms. All this is pathetic, but how better can we define ourselves and our world?

Summarizing Uniqueness

First, there is Bach's mathematical genius, which reached its apex in the *Goldberg Variations*. His musical scores appear in combinations that reveal a complex mind that ordinarily might only be acquired by advanced mathematical studies, but he was not trained in mathematics. Second, he challenges us by our trying to find out to what in the piece we should listen. Where is Bach taking us now? Each time we listen we hear something not heard before. On this account what we have already heard remains fresh and challenging. Third, in setting the biblical texts to music, Bach becomes our teacher. Interpretations of familiar Bible passages not previously obvious to us are uncovered.

Bach and Mozart: A Study in Contrasting Genius

Contrasting Bach with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) permits us the opportunity to approach the genius of each, but the character of the Masses of each can hardly be confused. Mozart's music obviously contains

different characteristics because he belonged to the classical era and Bach to the baroque era. Other differences are profoundly theological. This becomes evident by the persons drawn to it. The late Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth, who strode across the twentieth century theological world like a colossus, made public his devotion to Mozart public, in a book later translated into English.¹² When I arrived in Germany in 1960, the table talk among theological students was Barth's obsession with the Salzburg musician. Barth's choice was amazing, since Mozart's commitment to Christianity is questionable. To commemorate the 200th anniversary of Mozart's death, his *Requiem Mass* was broadcast throughout the world. In the sermon, the Prince Archbishop of Salzburg paid him tribute, but concluded that the Roman Catholic church could not be certain of the composer's salvation. He was not alone in being more certain of Mozart's genius than his faith. He was baptized and died a Catholic, but he was also a Freemason, which, at that time, meant that he held that no one religion could claim a conclusive revelation of God. Mozart had given the church every excuse to excommunicate him, but in an enlightened age the church no longer did those kinds of things. He was born into a century of Reason, Enlightenment, and Revolution, but his commitment to these ideologies was no more than it was to Christianity. His Masses offered no conclusive evidence that he was a faithful son of the church. To him the greatest theologian of the twentieth century was drawn.

One may ask why Barth—who was neither a Catholic nor a Freemason—but a Reformed cleric and theologian, was attracted to Mozart. It may be that Barth found that Mozart's music made no claim on its listeners among whom Barth found himself. In the freedom of Mozart's music,

¹²Karl Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, trans. Clarence K. Pott, foreword by John Updike (Grand Rapids Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986).

Barth had found a kindred spirit. Neither man had a commitment to their innate geniuses. Mozart's masses are no more statements of his faith than his *Magic Flute*, *Figaro* and his *Così fan Tutte* are statements of his political or philosophical leanings. Here was musical enjoyment for the sake of itself.¹³ Going from one form of music to another or to one activity or another was almost as if he was changing clothes. He wore them, but they were not part of him. He cared for his family, but he was not a family man. He was Catholic, but not really. In these inconsistencies a clear consistency is detectable. Who he was and where he was in life had little or perhaps nothing to do with the music he produced. Here is pure, unadulterated genius. His genius was virtually autonomous from the man who possessed it. It was as an object detached from his person rather an integral part of it. Demands of his genius took precedence over all his other devotions, but this detachment allowed gave him immunity from exhaustion. Musical genius belonged to Mozart, but he was not indebted to what was uniquely his or to a God may have endowed him with it. His compositions were neither a moral enterprise nor a religious crusade. For Luther music was the handmaiden of theology. For Mozart it was was his courtesan or lover, a favored mistress, with whom he was as free as she was to him. It was an "open marriage." His music reveals the man's genius, but not the man himself.¹⁴ Robert Frost composed a poem for the 1961 inauguration of John F. Kennedy. He described the first English colonists like this: "the land was theirs before they were the land's." New England was their

¹³Barth notes that, "the *Requiem* is not his personal confession and neither is *The Magic Flute*." *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, 49.

¹⁴So Karl Barth (*Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, 37): "Mozart's music is not, in contrast to that of Bach, a message, and not, in contrast to that of Beethoven, personal confession. He does not reveal in his music any doctrine and certainly not himself."

new address, but it was not home. So in Mozart person and genius could live detached from the other and often did.¹⁵

Bach is an entirely different creature. He was aware of his genius and that it was given by God to whom he returned it in faith.¹⁶ On this account his music is never detached from who he is and the God he serves. The mathematical harmony of his music belongs to the harmony of the universe over which the Creator God rules. Angst and faith struggle with each other and form a unity of contrasts. For the Rationalists the universe was a machine, something that it never was for Bach for whom it is the revelation of God, but always in the context of his own sin for which Christ is the only solution. Librettos with abridged biographies of the great man distributed at the playing of his music say little, if anything, about the demands that his Lutheran faith made on his life. Thus hearers are left to search these mysteries by themselves. Sadly many never

¹⁵Barth's observations about Mozart might be an attempt at autobiography. In his admiration for Mozart Barth was telling us something about himself. He could immerse his genius in the study of theology without a commitment to the historical Jesus of Nazareth and also perhaps with a religious commitment, which is characteristic of so many scholars of religion. Ignoring the larger question of how theology and history came together—which is after all what *Incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria Virgine* of the Creed is all about—he gave himself a freedom which biblical scholars would or could not claim for themselves. Barth did not fashion his theological genius after Mozart's musical genius, but he saw in how Mozart did music a parallel for his own theological enterprise. Because Barth raised himself above the critical analyses of history that were in vogue since the Enlightenment and had raised so many problems for other theologians, he was able to pursue a pure theology unencumbered with issues which bogged down other theologians.

¹⁶Buszin's assessment of Bach sums up matters modestly but well. "I insist ... that Bach's music is filled to the brim with the Lutheran Geist" Quoted in Robin Leaver, "Walter E. Buszin and Lutheran Church Music in America," *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (Summer 2002): 179.

find them.

Barth's dictum that when the angels play for God, they play Bach, but when they play for their own enjoyment, they play Mozart, is flawed. Angels never play for themselves and they never will. Those angels who did that kind of thing went to their doom. God's angels only play for him, because apart from him they have no existence. Neither do we.¹⁷

¹⁷During the discussion following the presentation of this essay at the Good Shepherd Institute for Pastoral and Liturgical Studies on November 4, 2002, the Reverend Richard W. Berg asked whether Bach's cantatas, rather than his *Passions* and *B Minor Mass*, reflected Bach's Lutheran ethos. In preparing the manuscript I considered engaging his cantatas theologically, but soon came to the end of the page limitation. Pastor Berg is right. Berg noted that Bach's cantatas were written for the Lutheran church year and so they centered in the appointed Gospel, which provided the topic for the sermon. Bach's *Passions* and *Mass* have to do more specifically with how God confronts Christians and thus often portray the universal human dilemma which even non-Christians can experience.