

J. S. BACH'S ORTHODOX LUTHERAN VIEW OF THE BIBLE IN THE AGE OF
ENLIGHTENMENT

by

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During the 18th century “Age of Enlightenment” the Bible came under attack. There is little dispute in that fact.¹ The advent of higher criticism, the rise of deism and atheism, and a general disdain for authority led many intellectuals and philosophers to ridicule the long held view of the Bible’s authority and inerrancy. At the same time, there was a reaction to the perceived spiritual deadness of the Orthodoxy of the 17th century, especially in the German Lutheran church. This reaction of Pietism stressed, among other things, the study of the Bible.² There was, however, a different attitude toward the central focus and purpose of the Bible.³

In this age of growing rationalism and skepticism regarding the claims of the Bible and the beginnings of a higher critical approach to Scripture, Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 – 1750) and a remnant of Orthodox Lutherans stand out in sharp contrast by their approach to the Bible as inspired and inerrant. On the other side, Bach also stood in contrast to Pietism in the German Lutheran church of the 18th century. While Pietism had a high view

¹See John Woodbridge and Frank James, *Church History, Volume Two: From Pre-Reformation to the Present Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), for an overview of the advent of biblical higher criticism in the 18th century.

²Philipp Jakob Spener (1635 – 1705) is general considered to be the “father of Pietism” with his writing of *Pia Desideria* (1685), which was really a preface to a publication of Johann Arndt’s (1555 – 1621) famous and popular devotional book *Wahres Christentum* (“True Christianity”). Spener laid out a program for the reform of church life and individual piety in the church with a stress on Bible study, a personal spiritual experience and increased attention to pious living. His chief concern was that the teaching of justification by faith alone led people to carnal security.

³Heinrich Schmid, *The History of Pietism*, tr. by James Langebartels (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2007), lays out the development and focus of German Lutheran Pietism. Robert Koester, *The Spirit of Pietism* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2013), is the most recent detailed critique of Pietism. He bases his critique primarily by analyzing and commenting on the 18th century critique of Pietism by the orthodox Lutheran Valentin Loescher, *The Complete Timotheus Verinus*, tr. by James Langebartels and Robert Koester (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1998). Robin Leaver, “Bach

of Scripture, there was a different spirit from the Orthodox Lutheran church of the 16th and 17th centuries in regard to the emphasis and role of Scripture.

In the 264 years since his death, no composer has been studied and scrutinized more than Bach.⁴ His musical genius is undisputed. But the purpose and plan of his music and the forces driving him have been debated.⁵ While Bach may not have been appreciated or popular during his own day⁶, he is an example that Lutheran Orthodoxy was neither dead in the 18th century nor a spiritually dead theology, especially as it pertains to the view of Scripture. This paper will demonstrate the Orthodox Lutheran view of Scripture held by Bach as seen in his personal library, the choice of texts for his music especially in light of the context of his work (the Sunday liturgy and the church year), and the interpretation his music gave to the texts. There are lessons for the church today, especially churches striving to be orthodox and confessional Lutheran.

An Overview of the Orthodox Lutheran View of Scripture

A brief overview of the view of Scripture taken by Orthodox Lutherans of the 17th and 18th centuries is in order. There are three key points about the Orthodox Lutheran

and Pietism: Similarities Today,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 55:1 (Jan 1991).

⁴Some famous people have taken up the task. Albert Schweitzer wrote a comprehensive biography of Bach.

⁵Robin Leaver, in his introductory chapter to *J.S. Bach and Scripture: Glosses from the Calov Bible Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985), 13-16, gives an overview of some of those debates.

⁶Friederich Blume, *Two Centuries of Bach: An Account of Changing Tastes*, tr. by Stanley Godman (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), provided a nice summary of the “re-discovery” of Bach and his music throughout the latter decades of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century.

view of Scripture which set Orthodox Lutheranism apart from either the rationalism and higher criticism of the Age of Enlightenment or German Pietism. First, Orthodox Lutheranism clearly taught that the Scriptures are the divinely and verbally inspired and inerrant Word of God. While the Lutheran Confessions⁷ do not specifically address this issue because it was not an issue in the 16th century, the Orthodox theologians of the 17th century clearly and thoroughly articulate that the Orthodox Lutheran church believes that the Bible is in the inspired and inerrant Word of God. For example, Johann Gerhard,⁸ in his *Theological Commonplaces: On the Nature of Theology and Scripture*, goes into great length about the divine authority and divine authorship of Scripture.

Scripture taken materially is nothing other than God's Word. But God is also the great author of his Word, and in this sense, too, Scripture is called the Word of God. Therefore God also is the great author of Scripture. Scripture is nothing other than the divine revelation reduced to sacred writing, for the revealed Word of God and Holy Scripture really are not different because holy men of God reduced into the Scripture those actual divine revelations.⁹

Since the Bible has a divine author, it is "credible in itself and trustworthy."¹⁰ This logical progression of thought can be found throughout the writings of the 17th century Lutheran

⁷The Lutheran Confessions were gathered in the 1580 *Book of Concord* and consist of the three ecumenical creeds (Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian) and a collection of writings by Luther, Melancthon and other 16th century Lutheran reformers. The translation used in this paper is *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert; tr. by Charles Arand, Eric Gritsch, Robert Kolb, William Russell, James Schaaf, Jane Strohl, Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

⁸Johann Gerhard (1582 – 1637) was a professor of theology at the University of Jena. He is generally regarded as the preeminent Orthodox Lutheran theologian of the first half of the 17th century.

⁹Johann Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces: On the Nature of Theology and Scripture*, tr. by Richard J. Dinda (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 49.

¹⁰*Ibid*, 68.

dogmaticians. Since God is the divine author of the Bible, it is entirely his Word and it is entirely true. This is in clear opposition to the growing rationalism of the 18th century.

Second, the Orthodox Lutheran view of Scripture saw the central message of Holy Scripture as God's revelation of himself and his plan of salvation as promised and carried out by Christ.¹¹ Gerhard states simply:

The goal of Scripture is the salutary knowledge and glorification of God. It is for this purpose that God revealed himself in his Word that was first spoken orally and later was committed to writing. So people, having understood him correctly according to his essence and will, might praise him in this life and in the life to come.¹²

It is important to understand that "the will" of God is his saving plan for fallen humanity.

This central message is proclaimed and applied in Scripture within the dynamic of the two primary teachings of Scripture: the law and the gospel. This is opposed to the deists and other rationalists of the 18th century who wanted to reduce Scripture to tenets of morality by removing anything miraculous or what they deemed superstitious.¹³ This view also opposed Pietism which tended to see the central message of Scripture as the law which needed to be followed for increased piety.¹⁴

The third key point of Orthodox Lutheran's view of Scripture flows from the previous one. The central message of Scripture is God's revelation of himself and his plan to

¹¹Eric Chafe in *Analyzing Bach Cantatas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) provides a good overview of this aspect of the Orthodox Lutheran view of Scripture. However, he errs when he comments that God reveals himself in two very different forms in the Old and New Testaments (4).

¹²Ibid, 329.

¹³Woodbridge and James address this in several chapters.

¹⁴Loescher and Koester offer critique on this.

save fallen sinners. The Word of God, therefore, also has the power to work his saving plan in the heart of individual sinners by giving and strengthening faith in Christ. The Augsburg Confession expresses this succinctly.

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel. It teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our merit but through Christ's merit, when we so believe.

Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that we obtain the Holy Spirit without the external word of the gospel through our own preparation, thoughts, and works.¹⁵

Orthodox Lutheranism stressed that God has revealed that his Spirit only works through the Word (and the sacraments, which are the Word attached to outward elements). Where the Word is proclaimed, there the Spirit is at work. But the Spirit does not work apart from the Word. Pietism tended to downplay the power of the Word, instead focusing on internal, spiritual struggles of the individual to produce a spiritual experience and growth in piety.¹⁶

All three of these aspects of the Orthodox Lutheran view of Scripture are seen in what Bach composed, the purposes for which he wrote the majority of his works, and how Bach treated the texts he chose.

¹⁵ Augsburg Confession V. This is also expressed and expanded upon in numerous other places in the Lutheran Confessions, especially the Formula of Concord (1577) which frequently emphasizes the power and role of the Word of God in the salvation of the individual.

¹⁶ Again, Loescher and Koester expand on this critique at some length.

Bach's Orthodox Lutheran View of Scripture as Evident in His Library

But first one has to consider Bach's orthodoxy. There has been much debate among Bach scholars and historians over whether or not Bach was simply a secularist and rationalist who had to work for the church in order to make money.¹⁷ Others have pointed to the emotional and personal nature of many of Bach's texts, as well as a frequent encouragement and appeal for piety and discipleship, and concluded that he was really a Pietist in Orthodox garb.¹⁸

There are several aspects of Bach's life one could examine to demonstrate that he was firmly in the Orthodox Lutheran camp.¹⁹ But a brief glance at his personal library gives interesting evidence of his orthodox Lutheran view of Scripture.

Walter Buszin provides a rundown of key books in Bach's library. He possessed two complete sets of Luther's works, Chemnitz's *Examination of the Council of Trent*, and three folios by renowned 17th century Lutheran theologian Abraham Calov (1612-1686). In addition,

¹⁷ Several authors in the bibliography summarize the debate. In more recent times, it has originated from an essay/lecture by Friederich Blume in 1962 where he raises the question of Bach's faith-life. Leaver in *J.S. Bach and Scripture: Glosses from the Calov Bible Commentary*, summarizes Blume's line of reasoning (14).

¹⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Bach Among the Theologians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), and Leo Schrade, *Bach: The Conflict between the Sacred and the Secular* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), see Bach heavily influenced by Pietism.

¹⁹ For example, he was required to pass an examination and take an oath that he would be faithful to the Lutheran Confessions when he took the post as cantor and church musician in Leipzig. At the time of Bach, Leipzig was still a bastion of Lutheran Orthodoxy, characterized by sacramental piety and lively preaching. See Günther Stiller, *Johann Sebastian Bach and Liturgical Life in Leipzig*, tr. by Herbert Bouman, Daniel Poellot and Hilton Oswald, ed. by Robin Leaver (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984), for a fascinating treatment of Lutheranism in Leipzig at the time of Bach.

... his library included H. Mueller's *Lutherus defensus*; Neumeister's *Tisch des Herrn*, which was directed against all unionistic endeavors and attacked the Pope as a plunderer of the Christian church; likewise the sermons of Johann Tauler, the mystic; August Hermann France's *Hauspostille*; Joh. Arndt's *Wahres Christentum*; Stenger's *Grundfest der Ausgburischen Konfession*; Klingius' *Warnung vor Abfall von er lutherischen Religion*; and A. Pfeiffer's *Anticalvinimus*.²⁰

While it is true that there were some Pietist writings in Bach's library, this is not so surprising because they were popular books among all Lutherans of the early 18th century. What is stunning is two full editions of Luther's works, as well as the numerous and diverse polemical Orthodox Lutheran writings, including some that were very contemporary with Bach.²¹

Perhaps even more interesting is the presence of a Bible commentary by Calov with underlining and marginal notes in Bach's hand.²² This six volume set in three folios is really a compilation of Luther quotations on the entire Bible. If Luther did not have anything to say on a passage, then Calov would supply his own thoughts. It was the kind of resource a serious student of the Bible would possess.

The markings Bach made in the Calov commentary demonstrate a man who took the Bible seriously and was a serious student of Scripture. Christoph Trautmann noted several examples.

²⁰Walter Buszin, "Lutheran Theology as Reflected in the Life and Work of J.S. Bach" in *Concordia Theological Monthly* 21:12 (December 1950), 902.

²¹Erdmann Neumeister (1671 – 1756) is one example. He was a staunch defender of Lutheran Orthodoxy, as well as a respected poet who wrote numerous hymns and several cantata texts employed by Bach.

²²This volume now resides at the library of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. Robin Leaver in *J. S. Bach and Scripture* and Christoph Trautmann relates the fascinating story of its rediscovery in a farmhouse in Frankenmuth, Michigan, in 1933.

[Bach] (1) ...entered candid personal notes, (2) supplied missing Bible texts, (3) amplified or commented on the commentary, and (4) corrected typographical errors in the Bible text and the commentary. In addition he provided many *nota benes* and underlined texts of both the Bible and the commentary or marked them in the margin, sometimes with red ink, sometimes with black.²³

These are signs of a man who knew his Bible, was comfortable with his Bible, and read his Bible not just for professional purposes but devotionally. He also saw in Scripture applications for his calling as a church musician. Leaver draws attention to Bach's markings of the commentary of 1 Chronicles 25 where David sets apart the musicians for service in worship at the Jerusalem temple. Bach's marginal note reads: "This chapter is the true foundation of all God pleasing church music."²⁴ Leaver points out how this matches up with what Bach had written at different times of his life about his desire for "a well-regulated church music, to the Glory of God."²⁵ As will be noted in the next section, for Bach "a well-regulated church music" meant music which proclaimed the Word of God for the edification, comfort and strengthening of God's people. But his library certainly gives evidence of an Orthodox Lutheran man.

Bach's Choice of Texts in Context

One of the key reasons that Bach is sometimes seen as having a Pietist bent is because of the highly subjective and emotional content of some of the texts he employed.

²³Trautmann, 92.

²⁴Leaver, *J. S. Bach and Scripture*, 93.

²⁵Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, eds, *The Bach Reader* (revised edition) (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 60. This was in Bach's letter to the town council of Mühlhausen announcing his departure.

Many of them speak about a person's response of faith and works to the gospel and joy in the gospel. These are seen as "Pietist" in nature because that does not follow the caricature that Lutheran Orthodoxy is spiritually "dead."²⁶ This caricature fails to note the individualistic and emotional nature of devotional works, sermons and hymnody of the 17th century.²⁷ These writings and poetry express an emotional response to the good news of God's saving grace and Jesus' sacrificial victory while also calling for a lively Christian faith and life. They are often very pastoral in nature as they seek to edify and comfort Christians who are facing the temptations and trials of life.

It was many of these texts that Bach chose for use in his church music. The context for his music, however, is a key to understanding how Bach had an Orthodox Lutheran view of Scripture. Unlike Pietism which downplayed the liturgy and the use of music in worship and the growing rationalism which did not understand the theology of the Lutheran chorales or appreciate their place in the Lutheran liturgy,²⁸ Bach followed Luther's lead in seeing the value of music for proclaiming the Word in worship in the liturgy. The liturgy offered the opportunity for Scripture to be read, sung and preached. The Christian church year allowed the message of Christ's work and what it meant for the church and the

²⁶ Pelikan and James Gaines, *Evening in the Palace of Reason: Bach Meets Frederick the Great in the Age of Enlightenment* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), are among those who perpetuate this caricature of the 17th century Age of Lutheran Orthodoxy. While it was certainly a time of polemics and a highly organized systematizing of doctrine, to say it was a time of spiritual "deadness" is inaccurate.

²⁷ Consider the sermons and devotional works of Johann Gerhard and the hymns of various hymn writers of the 17th century, including Philipp Nicolai (1556 – 1608), Paul Gerhardt (1607 – 1676), and Erdmann Neumeister. All of these men were known for their orthodoxy. Bach employed hymns of Nicolai and Gerhardt in several cantatas and Passions.

²⁸ Stiller, 201-2.

Christian to be repeated on an annual basis. Bach's cantatas, motets and Passions find their place in the context of the Lutheran liturgy and church year.²⁹

In particular, Bach's cantatas provide a key to understanding how he upheld an Orthodox Lutheran view of Scripture. The cantata was a multi-part choral piece usually lasting 15-30 minutes. It was typically based on a hymn that reflected and expounded on the appointed Gospel reading for that particular Sunday of the church year. Paul Hofreiter describes the typical cantata having an opening chorus (usually one of the stanzas of the hymn) followed by one or more arias (more free flowing poetry or recitative based on one or more of the hymn stanzas or the Gospel lesson itself). One or more stanzas of the hymn might be sung between the arias. The cantata usually concluded with another stanza of the hymn which underscored the main point of the Gospel for the day.³⁰ In Bach's day, the cantata was situated between the Gospel and the sermon.³¹ Its purpose was to be a sermon in song. It drew out the meaning of the Gospel and prepared the way for the sermon. It was not music for music's sake. Leaver notes, "It is devotional music in the truest sense; it is not merely 'mood' music but rather 'word' music: it is, like preaching, the word applied."³²

²⁹ Stiller's book is a thorough analysis of this concept.

³⁰ Paul Hofreiter, "Johann Sebastian Bach and Scripture: 'O God, from Heaven Look Down,'" in *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 59:1-2 (Jan-Apr 1995), 72.

³¹ Both Stiller (116ff) and Leaver, "The Liturgical Place and Homiletical Purpose of Bach's Cantatas," in *Worship* 59:3 (May 1985), 195, point out that sometimes the second part of the cantata or a portion of a different cantata would often be sung during the distribution of Holy Communion. Stiller goes into great detail regarding the order of worship for the main Sunday service in Leipzig in Bach's day.

³² Leaver, "The Liturgical Place and Homiletical Purpose of Bach's Cantatas," 198.

Bach was especially masterful at this in his use of Lutheran chorales for his cantatas on particular Sundays of the church year.³³ The chorales were a direct result of the Lutheran Reformation and Luther's understanding and use of music in the proclamation of the Word.³⁴ Luther himself penned numerous popular hymn texts (and even a few hymn tunes). He encouraged many poets to write hymns for congregational singing. The first Lutheran "hymnal" appeared already in 1524. The writings of Lutheran chorales increased throughout the 16th and 17th centuries so that by Bach's days there was a sizable corpus of hymnody with which most Lutheran congregations were familiar. It was from this corpus that he selected chorales to use in his cantatas—chorales which were chosen specifically to reflect and expound on the Gospel for the day.

Numerous writers have evaluated the texts of many of Bach's cantatas and demonstrated the Orthodox Lutheran understanding of Scripture.³⁵ For example, Eric Chafe examines Bach's Cantata 9, "Es ist das Heil uns kommen hier" ("Salvation unto Us Has Come.")³⁶ This hymn is an excellent exposition of law and gospel, as well as an explanation of how the law and gospel function. Bach turned the thoughts of the "law" stanzas of the hymn into an aria expounding the law's purpose and function.

³³Bach wrote five complete sets of cantatas for the entire church year (*The Bach Reader*, 346).

³⁴See *Luther's Works*, volume 53, for his primary writings on liturgy, music and hymnody.

³⁵Eric Chafe, Robin Leaver, Jaroslav Pelikan, Paul Hofreiter, Günther Stiller, Gerhard Krapf, Roland Chia, and Walter Buszin are among those who analyze one or more of Bach's cantatas.

³⁶Chafe, 8-10. An English translation of this entire hymn can be found in *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941) 377.

God gave us the Law
But we were too weak
To be able to keep it;
We walked only in the ways of sin,
And no one could have been called pious.³⁷

The second recitative then proclaims the gospel, both Christ's saving work and the need for the Christian to trust solely in Christ's work.

Yet the Law had to be fulfilled;
Therefore the Savior of the earth came,
The son of the most high, Who fulfilled it Himself
And stilled the Father's anger.
Through His innocent death
He enabled us to attain help.
Whoever, then, trusts in Him,
Whoever builds on His sufferings,
He will not be lost.
Heaven is appointed for the one
Who brings true faith with him
And wraps himself firmly in Jesus' arms.³⁸

Paul Hofreiter's analysis of Bach's Cantata 2, based on Luther's hymn, "Ach God, vom Himmel, sieh darein," ("O Lord, Look Down from Heaven, Behold"), gives further evidence of Bach's Orthodox Lutheran view of Scripture.³⁹ In the second movement, through a tenor recitative, Bach emphasizes the result when people turn away from the Word.

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.

³⁷ Chafe, 9.

³⁸ Ibid, 9.

³⁹ Hofreiter, 76ff. An English translation of this entire hymn can be found *The Lutheran Hymnal* 260.

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.⁴⁰

Bach could have been addressing the rationalism of the Age of Enlightenment directly with these words. In the fourth movement, he expounds on the Lutheran view of the power of the Word, this time with a bass recitative.

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.⁴¹

Strength and comfort are not found in a person's inner struggles, spiritual experience or outward piety, as Pietism would direct the troubled sinner. Rather, the Word alone revives, strengthens and gives life—a definite emphasis of Lutheran Orthodoxy. Bach's choice of this Luther hymn fits well with the Gospel for the Second Sunday after Trinity, Luke 14:16-24, the Parable of the Great Banquet, where the master sends out the invitation and many find

⁴⁰Hofreiter, 77.

⁴¹Ibid, 79.

excuses to decline. Then the invitation goes out to the highways and byways, to the “poor ones.”

The law/gospel proclamation, the emphasis on the truthfulness and power of the Word and the liturgical context of Bach’s cantatas demonstrate that Bach was clearly a student of Lutheran Orthodoxy in his view of Scripture. This places him in sharp contrast to both Pietism and the rationalists of the Age of Enlightenment.

Bach’s Musical Interpretation of Biblical Texts

Bach’s Orthodox Lutheran view of Scripture is also evident in how he musically interpreted the biblical texts he employed in his sacred works. His combination of musical genius and theological acumen are on display in his cantatas, oratorios, Passions, *Mass in B Minor*, and even his organ works. This final section will highlight just a few examples which serve to demonstrate the high value Bach placed on Scripture as God’s revelation of himself and his truth.⁴²

First of all, it should be noted that Bach employed numerous musical styles and influences in his compositions. Even though he was not university educated, he researched different musical styles that were in use during his day: French, Italian, and Dutch, as well as the German counterpoint style. He had the gift of making use of these various musical styles in service to the Word and the people for whom he was composing.

⁴² Again, numerous authors undertake this task. Among them: Eric Chafe, Paul Hofreiter, Robin Leaver, Günther Stiller, Noelle Heber, Gerhard Krapf, Richard Caemmerer, James Engel, Jacob Behnken and Philip Moldenhauer. The latter two authors are 2012 graduates of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary where they gave a fascinating lecture and organ recital about Bach’s organ preludes on Luther’s Catechism hymns.

Bach used different musical elements to highlight different biblical truths and concepts. For example, he often emphasized the Trinity by arranging musical elements in threes, whether it was the arrangement of a series of organ preludes⁴³ or in the three-voiced fugal arrangement of the German *Kyrie*.⁴⁴ Bach also found different ways to underscore the key teachings of law and gospel. Leaver points out that this was intrinsic to the basic structure of many of his cantatas.

The theological distinction between law and gospel frequently provides the ground plan for a good many of Bach cantatas. In the opening chorus the problem is stated, often in biblical words, that we humans are afflicted in some particular way by the dilemma of sin and stand under the condemnation of the law. Succeeding recitatives and arias explore some of the implications of the impasse. Then a movement, often an aria, presents the gospel answer to the law question. Thereafter, the mood of both the libretto and the music take on the optimism of the gospel, which is further expressed in succeeding movements, the final chorale being an emphatic endorsement of the gospel answer.⁴⁵

Another way he demonstrated the law/gospel dynamic was by presenting the law message in a strict fugue or canon⁴⁶ and the gospel message in a more free setting.

Noelle Heber, in her Master's Thesis on the presentation in Paris of Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*, points out some of the musical elements Bach uses to interpret the text.

For example, a descending scale when Jesus and the disciples are going down from the

⁴³Jacob Behnken and Philip Moldenhauer, "Bach on Luther: The Catechism Hymns," (Lecture and recital at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Chapel, 2/1/2011), 6-8, make mention of how Bach did this in the arrangement of the third section of his keyboard series, *Clavier-Übung*, as well as in the time signatures of the three small settings of the *Kyrie* (3/4 to 6/8 to 9/8—growing multiples of three).

⁴⁴Robin Leaver, "Motive and Motif in the Church Music of Johann Sebastian Bach," in *Theology Today* 63:1 (April 2006), 43.

⁴⁵*Ibid*, 44.

⁴⁶This would be a play on words since "canon" also means "rule."

Mount of Olives, or an ascending scale when Jesus speaks of his resurrection and ascension.⁴⁷ She also points out that, while concert goers today may not have the interest in the text or the background knowledge to recognize the chorale tunes and make the association with the texts, the intriguing aspects of Bach's music may arouse the curiosity of the listener to take a look at the text. "From a theological and missiological standpoint, the music has not only provided the potential for *attracting* a wider audience; it has also *reached* a wider audience with the account of Christ's atoning death."⁴⁸ This would be in keeping with Bach's Orthodox Lutheran view of Scripture. He was using his musical gifts and genius to unleash the power of the Word on his hearers.

Conclusion

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—*solī Deo gloria*.⁴⁹

Would Bach have agreed with such an assessment of himself? That is obviously a difficult question to answer. But judging from the fact that he wrote the initials "J. J.," "Jesu, juva,"⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Heber, 51 (emphasis author's).

⁴⁸ Ibid, 58.

⁴⁹ Hofreiter, 84.

⁵⁰ "Jesus, help."

at the beginning of most of his compositions and “S. D. G.,” “soli Deo gloria,”⁵¹ at the end would point to his recognition that he was engaged in a high and holy calling.⁵² He recognized that he was in the business of proclaiming the Word of God, holding to the tenets of Lutheran Orthodoxy that the Word is inspired and inerrant, centers on Christ’s saving work, and is the power of the Spirit to change hearts and lives—all to the glory of God. He followed the example of Luther in understanding that music is God’s gift to carry the proclamation of the Word to people in a unique way. While he was living at the front end of the Age of Enlightenment and certainly made the most of his musical genius by employing a variety of musical styles and striving for the best, he did not succumb to a higher critical view of Scripture but continued to see the Bible as God’s holy Word.⁵³ Likewise, while he was surrounded by the ever-increasing emotionalism and austerity of Pietism which eschewed musical embellishment and the liturgy, Bach found the liturgy and church year to be the proper context for proclaiming law and gospel in song and music for the edification of God’s people and to the glory of his Savior.

There are certainly lessons in this today for Lutherans (and all Christians) who recognize the value and place of music in the church’s worship life. Bach’s use of the cantata as a proclamation of the Word in the context of the liturgy and church year is

⁵¹“To God alone be the glory.”

⁵²Hofreiter, 71. Bach even inscribed these initials on his secular compositions, showing that, for Bach, even his secular music had a sacred aspect to it. This was all part of his Christian vocation as a musician.

⁵³James Gaines in *Evening in the Palace of Reason: Bach Meets Frederick the Great in the Age of Enlightenment* relates in a fascinating way Bach’s musical and composing skills at their height when he had an encounter with the Prussian King Frederick the Great toward the end of his life. Gaines juxtaposes

certainly worth considering by worship planners and choir directors. Bach's example of using music to underscore and highlight key truths of Scripture is worth emulating by Christian composers today, making music truly a devotional proclamation of the Word (very Orthodox Lutheran) rather than simply setting the mood for worship. Jaroslav Vajda, a late 20th century Lutheran hymn writer, paid tribute to Bach's music in his hymn, "Begin the Song of Glory Now."

Begin the song of glory now:
the Son has risen from His grave!
The night of mourning long is past;
Life has a purpose after all.
Our Samson smashed the gates of hell,
And we are free at last, at last!
Begin the song of glory now:
The Son has risen from our grave!

Prepare the song of glory now:
The Son has risen from His grave!
*Composers, players, find new sounds
For every instrument and voice:
A note, a chord, an aria
A Kyrie, a Gloria.*
Prepare the song of glory now:
The Son has risen from our grave!

Repeat the song of glory now:
The Son has risen from His grave!
Complete the Easter overture,
And join the Alleluia choir
*"In Jesus' name" the song begin,
and end: "All praise to God alone!"*
Repeat the song of glory now:
The Son has risen from our grave!⁵⁴

Bach's "old Orthodoxy" with Frederick's "new Enlightenment thinking."

⁵⁴Jaroslav J. Vajda, *Sing Peace, Sing Gift of Peace: The Comprehensive Hymnary of Jaroslav J. Vajda*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 48 (emphasis mine).

The songs and music prepared by Bach in the Age of Enlightenment to proclaim the good news of our risen Savior deserve to be prepared and repeated anew in 21st century garb. In a world beset by a postmodernism that still reflects some of the same issues of Pietism (emotional experientialism) and Enlightenment rationalism (higher critical and skeptical view of the Bible), Bach's Orthodox Lutheran view of Scripture in the way he employed music is at the very least worth considering by 21st century believers who strive to hold to the inerrancy of Scripture and endeavor to proclaim Scripture's truths.

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