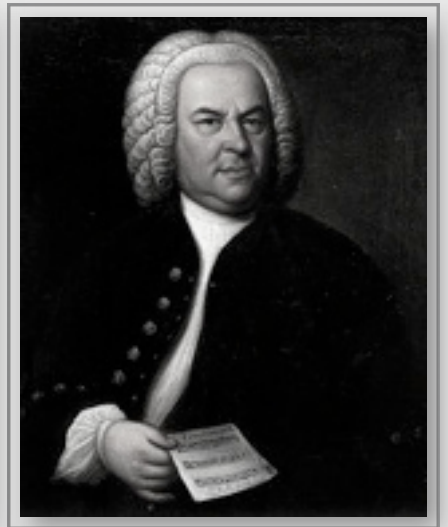


Bach on Luther: The Catechism Hymns



*A lecture and recital by Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary seniors
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Introduction

The high esteem in which Martin Luther held music has been well-documented. Luther especially valued music when it served the purpose of setting forth the truths of the faith in simple and memorable fashion. So Luther invested the hymns he wrote with didactic content. Luther, the theologian, set forth profound theological truths in simple language. These truths he wedded to melodies that made the words all the more memorable.

Johann Sebastian Bach, the eminent musician, held Lutheran theology in high esteem. He was well-grounded in the truths of the catechism, and he had been nurtured from little on with a steady diet of Lutheran hymnody, some of which came from Luther's pen. In Bach, Luther's hymns had served the intended purpose: they had impressed the truths of the faith on Bach's mind and heart. So it was only natural that Bach would invest his music with theological content.

The theologian who wrote music and the musician who "wrote" theology came together in a delightful confluence when Bach chose six of Luther's gems, the catechism hymns, to form the core substance of an organ masterwork.

Luther's catechism hymns were a natural place for the two to come together. They were Luther at his best. They were also likely one of the first places in which Bach had encountered Luther's work, while he was just a boy. So when Bach set out many years later to compose chorale preludes on the catechism hymns, he was working with familiar material. Bach was thoroughly acquainted not only with the melodies but also with the texts, a familiarity which is obvious in his careful treatment of each hymn.

The result is more than music for music's sake; it is music that confesses the truths of the catechism. Bach puts forth his confession in the musical forms and figures of his preludes. This presentation will examine some of those forms and figures and consider how Bach uses them to proclaim profound theological truths musically.

Unfortunately, Luther's catechism hymns are not as well-known today as they were in Bach's time. Perhaps this presentation will also serve the purpose of helping to introduce or re-introduce these treasures of Lutheran hymnody to more heirs of the singing church.

Luther's hymns and Bach's music, each in their own right, are paragons of the wealth of Lutheran church music. But when the hymns that are invested with teaching content are joined to music that is invested with theological content, the result is nothing short of remarkable.

Luther's Catechism Hymns

As Luther undertook the monumental task of reforming the church, he quickly understood an important part of that work meant a reformation of the worship rites that had developed in conjunction with the false teachings of Rome. Already by 1523, Luther had provided the church a new version of the Latin order of service, the *Formula Missae*. By removing the Canon of the Mass and other elements that smacked of work righteousness and other false doctrines, Luther had given the churches in Germany a doctrinally sound service they could use as they gathered for public worship.

To bring about a genuine reformation of the church, however, Luther knew he he needed to plant the truths of Scripture deep within the hearts of the people themselves. He needed to make the Word of God accessible to everyday people.¹ Making that a reality meant the end of worship in which the priests carried out worship while the common people were little more than spectators who could not even understand the words being spoken in Latin, a language foreign to them.

It took Luther only a few more years to provide the German people with a service that was entirely in their own language. In 1526, after much care and thought, he unveiled this new order of service, the *Deutsche Messe*. This service was a great success and became the standard worship rite among German-speaking Lutherans.

As the Reformer presented these new orders of service to the church, he also encouraged another element for worship in Lutheran congregations, the regular singing of hymns. So much value did Luther find in hymns that he encouraged the production of a larger corpus for use in German congregations. In his introduction to the *Formula Missae*, he wrote, "I also wish that we had as many songs as possible in the vernacular which people could sing during the mass...I mention this to encourage many German poets to compose evangelical hymns for us."²

The importance Luther placed on hymns derived not only from his personal love for music but also from his understanding that music helped instill scriptural truths in the hearts of the people. In his preface to the Large Catechism, he noted, "When these parts [of the catechism] have been well learned, one may assign them also some psalms or hymns,

¹ His greatest work in this regard was of course his monumental translation of the Old and New Testaments into German.

² Martin Luther, "An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg," in *Luther's Works: American Edition*, Vol. 53, *Liturgy and Hymns*, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1965), 36-37.

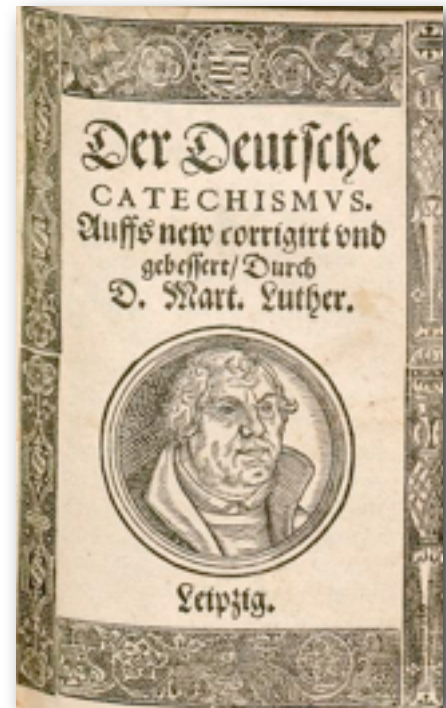
based on these subjects, to supplement and confirm their knowledge.”³ Beginning with Luther, therefore, hymn singing served a dual purpose among Lutherans: both as worship song and as catechetical tool. In other words, Luther understood that hymns could assist in removing the shroud of false doctrine under which the church of Europe had for so long languished.⁴

As Luther recognized the need for more hymns in the church, he did not just sit idly by and let others take up the work. Instead, he lost no time in composing hymns of his own. The Lutheran church and even those beyond are familiar with many of his contributions: *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, *Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word*, *From Heaven Above to Earth I Come*, and the list could go on. Note that not one of these hymns is without rich doctrinal content; all are of great catechetical value.

In addition to these well-known compositions, Luther penned numerous other hymns. Because their content so closely matched the subject matter of the six parts⁵ of the catechisms, a group of these began to develop an association with their respective parts of the catechism. In time, they became known as the “catechism hymns.” Table 1.1 provides the titles to these hymns with their corresponding parts in the catechism.⁶

The concept of the catechetical hymn proved wildly popular in Lutheran circles. Whereas early hymnals like Johann Walter’s 1524 *Chor-Gesangbuch* contained hymns in no discernible order, by 1529 a Wittenberg hymnal (*Geistliche Lieder*) laid out its hymns according to the church year and parts of the catechism. This pattern would become standard for other Lutheran hymnals to follow.⁷

Figure 1.1 A 1560 Leipzig copy of the Large Catechism



³ Robin Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 109.

⁴ In these matters, Luther displays an understanding of the old Latin adage *lex orandi, lex credendi*, “the law of praying is the law of believing.” In other words, what one believes determines how one worships, and likewise, how one worships has an effect on what one believes. With this in mind, Luther understood that true worship also demanded an understanding of the gospel. It was for this reason that in his introduction to the *Deutsche Messe*, he insisted on the publication of a “plain and simple, fair and square catechism.” Martin Luther, “The German Mass and Order of Service,” in *Luther’s Works: American Edition*, Vol. 53, *Liturgy and Hymns*, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1965), 64. This need he would personally fulfill with his Small and Large Catechisms of 1529.

⁵ When Luther first published his catechism, it consisted of only five chief parts because Luther organized confession and absolution as an extension of baptism. In short order, however, these two topics became separate, and the catechism had the six chief parts to which Lutherans have since been accustomed.

⁶ Also note that *Christian Worship* contains all the catechism hymns, but they are organized under their various themes, not under a “catechism hymn” section.

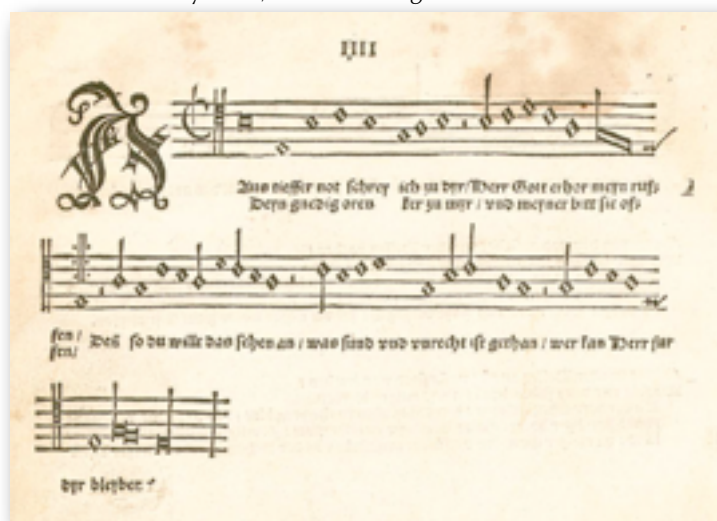
⁷ Leaver, 109-110.

Table 1.1 Martin Luther's catechism hymns

| Title | Date | Catechism Section | CW |
|--------------------------------------------|------|--------------------------|-----|
| <i>The Ten Commandments Are the Law</i> | 1524 | The Ten Commandments | 285 |
| <i>We All Believe in One True God</i> | 1524 | The Creed | 271 |
| <i>Our Father, Who from Heaven Above</i> | 1538 | The Lord's Prayer | 410 |
| <i>To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord</i> | 1539 | Baptism | 88 |
| <i>Jesus Christ, Our Blessed Savior</i> | 1524 | The Lord's Supper | 313 |
| <i>From Depths of Woe I Cry to You</i> | 1523 | The Ministry of the Keys | 305 |

In the decades after Luther and the other early reformers, the catechism hymns grew in their popularity to the point that they were in all likelihood the most well-known group of hymns among the majority of people. Much of that popularity would have come from the fact that these hymns were an expected part of catechism instruction. In fact, the various *Kirchenordnungen* (church orders) that governed the parishes of Germany prescribed just such a use for the catechism hymns in the instruction of the youth of the congregations.⁸

Figure 1.2 Luther's *From Depths of Woe I Cry to You* in Walter's 1524 hymnal, *Chor-Gesangbuch*



Influenced by this scenario, a school rector named Andreas Reyher developed a curriculum for the Latin schools in ducal Gotha. His curriculum prescribed that the children study a different part of the catechism six days a week, Monday through Saturday. Part of this daily instruction was to sing the associated catechism hymn. Interestingly, the town where Johann Sebastian Bach went to school was Eisenach, a town under Gotha's rule. In all likelihood, therefore, the great composer would have grown up as a boy singing the six catechism hymns every week.⁹

When Bach was deciding what hymns to include in his first publication of organ works, it should therefore come as no surprise that for his subject matter, he chose to include the catechism hymns as a central part of his composition. Not only were those hymns central to Bach's faith and life, but they would have been easily recognized and treasured by a majority of the church members of his day.

⁸ Leaver, 112.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

Third Part of the *Clavier-Übung*

Johann Sebastian Bach was not a prolific publisher of his compositions; in fact, the *Clavier-Übung* (“keyboard practice”) series constitutes his largest attempt at publication. Ultimately intended as “an encyclopedic survey of his artistry in the field of keyboard music,”¹⁰ the series includes four parts, covering the range of keyboard instruments available in the mid-eighteenth century: one and two-manual harpsichord, as well as organ.

The first appearance of the series came in 1726, with the release of a single partita for harpsichord. No doubt Bach, who was acting as his own publisher, was being financially cautious, as he continued to release the partitas one at a time, unwilling to take the greater risk of publishing an entire work until he had seen what kind of a reception he might expect.¹¹ The results convinced him to publish his six partitas as “Opus 1” in 1731, a title which indicated his intention to publish subsequent volumes.

Table 2.1 Overview of the *Clavier-Übung* series¹²

| Part | Date | Instrument | Contents | Goal |
|------|------|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| I | 1731 | One-manual harpsichord | Six partitas in suite form | Mastery of the suite form |
| II | 1735 | Two-manual harpsichord | The Italian Concerto and the French Overture | A contrast of the predominant national styles |
| III | 1739 | Organ | Prelude and fugue; 21 chorale preludes; 4 duetti | Comprehensive overview of styles for organ |
| IV | 1741 | Two-manual harpsichord | Goldberg Variations | Massive cycle of monothematic variations |

¹⁰ Christoph Wolff, *Bach: Essays on His Life and Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 191.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹² The Leipzig trade fairs would have been a natural occasion for the release of new music, especially since performances and recitals were no doubt often held during the festivities. In all likelihood, Part II was introduced at the 1735 Easter Fair, and Parts III and IV at the 1739 and 1741 Michaelmas Fairs, respectively. “From the twelfth century on, special imperial and papal privileges enabled the city to establish regular trade fairs, which by 1458 were held three times a year for a week to ten days each: The New Year’s Fair beginning on January 1, the Easter or Jubilate Fair in the spring (beginning on Jubilate Sunday), and the St. Michael’s Fair in the fall (beginning on the Sunday after St. Michael’s Day). By around 1710, Leipzig had surpassed Frankfurt-on-the-Main as “the marketplace of Europe,” the premier trade fair locale in the German lands, regularly attracting between six thousand and ten thousand exhibitors and visitors.” Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 238.

The Third Part of the *Clavier-Übung* was devoted to the organ, and as such was Bach's first publication of organ works.¹³ Bach's cousin, Johann Elias Bach, who functioned for a time as his private secretary, had announced its release in a letter written to the cantor in Ronnenberg, dated 10 January 1739:

Thus it happens also that my honored Cousin will bring out some clavier pieces that are mostly for organists and are exceedingly well composed, and they will doubtless be ready for the coming Easter Fair, and make some 80 folios.¹⁴

Difficulties with the engraving process slowed its release; it did not come out in time for the Easter Fair. However, it was ready by the time of the fall Michaelmas Fair, so that on 28 September 1739, Johann Elias Bach could write:

[T]he work of my honored Cousin, engraved on copper, is now ready, and may be obtained from him @ 3 rthl. [reichsthaler] per copy.¹⁵

Figure 2.1 Title page to the Third Part of the *Clavier-Übung*



"Third Part of the Keyboard Practice, consisting of various preludes on the catechism and other hymns for the organ. For music lovers and especially for connoisseurs of such work, to refresh their spirits, composed by Johann Sebastian Bach, Royal Polish and Electoral Saxon Court Composer, Capellmeister, and Directore Chori Musici in Leipzig. Published by the Author."¹⁶

¹³ Bach's *Orgelbüchlein* had not been published, but was doubtless in circulation in the form of copies made by students and other organists, in line with the practice of the day. Interestingly, the publication of the Third Part of the *Clavier-Übung* came at a time when Bach was no longer holding the post of an organist, nor particularly focused on composition for the organ. It is likely that some of the pieces were composed prior to 1739; Wolff even ventures the possibility that Bach performed the settings of the Kyrie and Gloria at a 1 December 1736 recital he gave in Dresden on the new Silbermann organ at the Frauenkirche, in connection with being named "Electoral Saxon court composer." At the time, Bach had taken increasing interest in composing settings of the Mass; for example, he composed the Kyrie and Gloria of the B minor Mass for the Dresden court in 1733. See Wolff, *Essays*, 207-208.

¹⁴ Christoph Wolff, ed., *The New Bach Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 202.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 205. An estimate of the cost in modern dollars suggests that 1 reichsthaler=\$72. Thus, the Third Part of the *Clavier-Übung* would have cost about \$216 in today's dollars. See *ibid.*, 529.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.

For his subject material, Bach did not follow his earlier practice in the *Orgelbüchlein*, which began with selected hymns based on the church year and then moved on to general hymnody.¹⁷ Rather, Bach chose to treat two liturgical hymns, the German Kyrie (*Kyrie, Gott Vater in Ewigkeit*, CW 266) and Nikolaus Decius' paraphrase of the Gloria (*Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr*, CW 263). He also chose the six hymns of Martin Luther based on the chief parts of the catechism.¹⁸ The chorale preludes were framed by six free compositions: the Prelude and Fugue in E-flat major and four duets.

Table 2.2 One view of Bach's choice of subject material¹⁹

| Luther's reformed liturgy | Luther's reformed doctrine |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| <i>Kyrie, Gott Vater in Ewigkeit</i> | <i>Dies sind die heiligen zehn Gebot</i> |
| <i>Christe, aller Welt Trost</i> | <i>Wir gläuben all an einen Gott</i> |
| <i>Kyrie, Gott heiliger Geist</i> | <i>Vater unser im Himmelreich</i> |
| <i>Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr</i> | <i>Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan kam</i> |
| | <i>Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir</i> |
| | <i>Jesus Christus, unser Heiland</i> |

That all of the hymns chosen by Bach were of Reformation or pre-Reformation vintage is not only indicative of Bach's preference for the classical Lutheran repertoire. It also reflects

the prominence these hymns enjoyed, as they ranked among the hymns most frequently sung and thus the most well-known.²⁰ Also, since the hymns were not *de tempore*, the chorale preludes would lend themselves to more varied and frequent use, rather than being limited to a day or a season of the church year. Finally, they also reflect the concerns central to Bach's life and work: Luther's reformed liturgy and Luther's reformed doctrine.

Bach employed a wide range of styles in setting the chorale preludes, ranging from old *stile antico* to contemporary Italian and French idioms. This conformed to his overall goal for the *Clavier-Übung* series of providing a comprehensive overview of the keyboard practice of the day.

¹⁷ The *Orgelbüchlein*, never completed, perhaps followed the arrangement of an extant hymnal. After the hymns for the church year the hymns are arranged topically, much as we find in our hymnals today.

¹⁸ Because of the inclusion of Kyrie, Gloria, and the Creed, the Third Part of the *Clavier-Übung* has sometimes been called the "German Organ Mass." But it would not make sense that the catechism hymns would all be sung at one service. Likewise, it is conjecture to assume that the duets would serve as music during communion distribution. In addition, the inclusion of both larger and smaller preludes would not make sense in a liturgical context, nor is it ever suggested by Bach that he was attempting to provide a liturgical order of service, especially one that did not follow the standard liturgical practice in Leipzig at the time. It is more accurate to avoid the term "organ mass."

¹⁹ Peter Williams, *The Organ Music of J.S. Bach*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: University Press, 1980), 180, adapted.

²⁰ Joseph Herl, *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 66, lists "The most popular German hymns, ranked according to the total number of times they are mentioned in the church orders." Among the top ten: *Wir gläuben all an einen Gott* (1); *Jesus Christus, unser Heiland* (3); *Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr* (6); *Vater unser im Himmelreich* (10). Since the Creed, the Gloria, and the Kyrie all functioned liturgically one has no difficulty imagining why they would have made the list. Concerning the catechism hymns, Robin Leaver notes how frequently they were sung: daily, Monday-Saturday, plus, no doubt, at the Sunday afternoon catechism sermons. See Leaver, 112-113.

Table 2.3 Contents of the Third Part of the *Clavier-Übung*

| BWV | Title | Subject | Form | Scale | CW |
|------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------|-----------|
| 552, 1 | <i>Praeludium</i> | E-flat major | pro organo pleno | Large | |
| 669 | <i>Kyrie, Gott Vater in Ewigkeit</i> | Liturgy: Kyrie | cantus firmus in soprano | Large | 266 |
| 670 | <i>Christe, aller Welt Trost</i> | Liturgy: Kyrie | c.f. in tenor | Large | 266 |
| 671 | <i>Kyrie, Gott heiliger Geist</i> | Liturgy: Kyrie | c.f. in bass, organo pleno | Large | 266 |
| 672 | <i>Kyrie, Gott Vater in Ewigkeit</i> | Liturgy: Kyrie | manualiter; 3/4 time | Small | 266 |
| 673 | <i>Christe, aller Welt Trost</i> | Liturgy: Kyrie | manualiter; 6/8 time | Small | 266 |
| 674 | <i>Kyrie, Gott heiliger Geist</i> | Liturgy: Kyrie | manualiter; 9/8 time | Small | 266 |
| 675 | <i>Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr</i> | Liturgy: Gloria | c.f. in alto, manualiter | Small | 263 |
| 676 | <i>Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr</i> | Liturgy: Gloria | 2 clav. e ped. | Large | 263 |
| 677 | <i>Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr</i> | Liturgy: Gloria | fughetta super; manualiter | Small | 263 |
| 678 | <i>Dies sind die heiligen zehn Gebot</i> | Catechism: Ten Commandments | c.f. in canone | Large | 285 |
| 679 | <i>Dies sind die heiligen zehn Gebot</i> | Catechism: Ten Commandments | fughetta super; manualiter | Small | 285 |
| 680 | <i>Wir gläuben all an einen Gott</i> | Catechism: Creed | organo pleno | Large | 271 |
| 681 | <i>Wir gläuben all an einen Gott</i> | Catechism: Creed | fughetta super; manualiter | Small | 271 |
| 682 | <i>Vater unser im Himmelreich</i> | Catechism: Lord's Prayer | c.f. in canone | Large | 410 |
| 683 | <i>Vater unser im Himmelreich</i> | Catechism: Lord's Prayer | manualiter | Small | 410 |
| 684 | <i>Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan kam</i> | Catechism: Baptism | c.f. in pedal | Large | 88 |
| 685 | <i>Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan kam</i> | Catechism: Baptism | manualiter | Small | 88 |
| 686 | <i>Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir</i> | Catechism: Absolution | organo pleno | Large | 305 |
| 687 | <i>Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir</i> | Catechism: Absolution | manualiter | Small | 305 |
| 688 | <i>Jesus Christus, unser Heiland</i> | Catechism: Lord's Supper | c.f. in pedal | Large | (313) |
| 689 | <i>Jesus Christus, unser Heiland</i> | Catechism: Lord's Supper | fuga super, manualiter | Small | (313) |
| 802 | <i>Duetto I</i> | E minor | | Small | |
| 803 | <i>Duetto II</i> | F major | | Small | |
| 804 | <i>Duetto III</i> | G major | | Small | |
| 805 | <i>Duetto IV</i> | A minor | | Small | |
| 552, 2 | <i>Fuga</i> | E-flat major "St. Anne" | a 5 con pedale pro organo pleno | Large | |

Various theories accounting for the organizational structure of the Third Part of the *Clavier-Übung* have been advanced. One cause of much speculation is the pairing of larger- (those which include pedal) and smaller-scale (manual only) pieces. This is most evident in the catechism hymns, leading to the conclusion that Bach was providing corollaries to Luther's two catechisms.²¹

While it is an attractive idea that Bach modeled his work on Luther's two catechisms, others have argued against this understanding, since it does not account for the existence of the same relationship between the various settings of the Kyrie and Gloria, or between the Prelude and Fugue and the smaller duets. It has been suggested that the smaller settings were reflective of instrumentation, written for smaller organs which lacked pedals.²² Since the large settings are quite demanding, the existence of the smaller settings would also make the work more accessible to less-skilled musicians. Peter Williams has proposed that the small settings address different aspects of fugal form and technique.²³

Numerological significances are evident in the arrangement of the Third Part of the *Clavier-Übung*. A reference to the Trinity can be seen in the overall structure: three settings of the Kyrie, followed by three more settings of the Kyrie, followed by three settings of the Gloria (3x3=9); the total work consists of 27 (3x9=27) pieces. An additional Trinitarian reference is found in the three smaller settings of the Kyrie, written in increasing time signatures of 3/4, 6/8, and 9/8, an obvious reference to the three stanzas of the hymn which address the three persons of the Trinity.²⁴

Musically, it appears that the catechism hymn preludes are arranged around the form of the large settings in two groups of three, with each group consisting of two cantus firmus settings surrounding a setting for full organ. In the first group, the cantus firmus is in canon, while in the second, it appears in the pedal.

Table 2.4 Arrangement of the catechism hymns by form

| BWV | Title | Form |
|-----|-------------------------------------------|----------------|
| 678 | <i>Dies sind die heiligen zehn Gebot</i> | c.f. in canone |
| 680 | <i>Wir gläuben all an einen Gott</i> | organo pleno |
| 682 | <i>Vater unser im Himmelreich</i> | c.f. in canone |
| 684 | <i>Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan kam</i> | c.f. in pedal |
| 686 | <i>Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir</i> | organo pleno |
| 688 | <i>Jesus Christus, unser Heiland</i> | c.f. in pedal |

Overall, the Third Part of the *Clavier-Übung* shows the absolute mastery of Bach in all the forms and styles of composition for the organ current to his time. The work includes some of his most profound and delightful works, as well as some of his most technically challenging.

²¹ See Leaver, 280, for example.

²² Wolff, *Essays*, 191.

²³ Williams, *Organ Music*, 179.

²⁴ The Father, the first person, is thus 1x3=3; the Son, the second, thus 2x3=6; the Holy Spirit thus 3x3=9.

The Ten Commandments

This hymn by Martin Luther is a metrical paraphrase of the Ten Commandments, which first appeared in the 1524 Erfurt *Eyn Enchiridion oder Handbüchlein*. It was set to the tune *In Gottes Namen fahren wir*, a German pilgrimage song dating to the 13th-century. The hymn was sung quite frequently in conjunction with preaching on the catechism; for example, the 1533 Wittenberg church order prescribed that it be sung prior to the catechism sermons.²⁵ In *Christian Worship*, 285, it appears as *The Ten Commandments Are the Law*.

Luther devotes a stanza to each commandment, with the ninth and tenth commandments combined and covered as one. Three additional stanzas provide solid theological commentary on the nature and purpose of the commandments. The first stanza introduces the historical setting in which God gave the law to Moses. Stanza eleven elaborates on the purpose of the law as mirror and as guide. Stanza twelve expresses the fact that the law cannot save, and presents Christ as the mediator to whom all must flee for forgiveness. Thus the hymn proclaims law and gospel.

Table 3.1 Selected stanzas from CW 285

| Stanza | Content |
|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | The Ten Commandments are the law Which Israel heard in holy awe. In smoke and fire from Sinai The voice of God shook the sky. <i>Have mercy, Lord!</i> |
| 2-9 | Commandments 1 through 8 |
| 10 | Commandments 9 and 10 |
| 11 | God gave these laws to show therein O child of man, your life of sin. And help you rightly to perceive How unto God you should live. <i>Have mercy, Lord!</i> |
| 12 | Our works cannot salvation gain; They merit only endless pain. Forgive us, Lord! To Christ we fly, Our mediator on high. <i>Have mercy, Lord!</i> |

The stanzas all end with “Have mercy, Lord!” a translation of “*Kyrieleis!*” This shortened version of “*Kyrie eleison!*” was brought to the hymn along with the melody. Concluding each stanza with this repeated cry for mercy was a common feature in pre-Reformation German songs, for which they were known as *Leisen*.²⁶ Selecting a tune that included the *Kyrieleis* allowed Luther to underscore “the need for the mercy of the Gospel with every itemized declaration of the Law.”²⁷

²⁵ C.T. Aufdemberge, *Christian Worship: Handbook* (Milwaukee: NPH, 1997), 310.

²⁶ Carl Schalk, ed., *Key Words in Church Music* (St. Louis: CPH, 2004), 377. Cf. CW 144, *Christ Is Arisen*

²⁷ Leaver, 119.

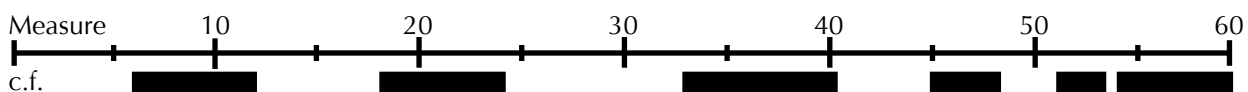
The Chorale Prelude - BWV 678

The first of the catechism hymn preludes, BWV 678 is also the tenth chorale prelude in the Third Part of the *Clavier-Übung*. Perhaps this placement is a nod to the subject matter at hand; as will be seen, other references to the number ten also appear in the piece.

The composition is marked *à 2 Clav. et Ped. Canto fermo in Canone*. It proceeds in five voices: the bass in the pedal, the melody in canon, and two upper voices. In standard Baroque form, the bass is the foundation on which the piece is built.²⁸ The upper voices function independently, like obbligato instruments in a cantata movement.

BWV 678 spans 60 measures, which are divided in half by a return to the slow eighth notes of the opening measures at measure 30. In the first half, there is a rigid structure based on six measure segments: six measures of introduction or interlude, followed by six measures in which the melody is presented. This is repeated two-and-a-half times to make 30 measures (that is, there are five six-measure sections). The second half of the piece is not as consistent; it is divided into three sections of ten measures, and the cantus firmus is not as evenly distributed.

Figure 3.1 Graph showing the distribution of the cantus firmus



The piece opens with a pedal point on G. Above, the upper two voices paint a picture of serenity; it has led some to see a “pre-Fall quietness.”²⁹ The voices engage in imitation, though it is not slavish. Perhaps Bach did indeed have in mind the kind of relation man had with God before sin entered into the world, when man delighted to live in line with God. Of course, this did not last long, and neither does it in Bach’s composition: by measure 5, the serenity has vanished. Whether or not Bach had Eden in mind, the motifs on which the entire piece is built are all introduced within the first seven measures.³⁰

Example 3.1 Measures 1-4: upper voices, showing serene imitation



²⁸ The bass moves triadically throughout much of the piece, perhaps as a “dramatic symbol of God the Father.” See Bruce R. Backer, “Chorale Preludes of Johann Sebastian Bach: A Study in Stylistic Diversity” (unpublished lecture notes, presented at Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato, 2004), 27. Backer notes that this occurs in all or part of 25 measures, out of a total of 60 measures--not quite 50% of the time.

²⁹ Williams, *Organ Music*, 202.

³⁰ Peter Williams, “Suggestions for Playing the Works of Bach VI: The Larger Chorales of *Clavier-Übung III*,” *The American Organist* 19:2 (February 1985): 57, says, “the whole piece, almost to every note in it, is founded on a few motifs first heard in the opening measures. I have no doubt that this tour de force was what the composer had in mind.” See also the discussion of the Passion motif below.

It is also telling that Bach made frequent use of canon when treating another subject: Christ's Passion. In the *Orgelbüchlein*, for example, four of the seven Passion chorales are canonic.³³ In these cases, the canon proclaims Christ's perfect obedience to the Father, and/or that Christ was *led* like a lamb to the slaughter.³⁴ In *The Ten Commandments Are the Law*, then, the canon could also bring to mind the One who did perfectly keep every command of the Father, the One who also suffered and died for those who did not.

This final point leads in to a discussion of the upper voices, which are independent of the chorale melody.³⁵ The upper voices make widespread use of two important musical figures: chromaticism and the Passion or suffering motif. Both of these elements are introduced in measures 5 and 6.

Example 3.3 Measures 5-6: Passion motif in the upper voice; chromaticism in the lower



The use of chromaticism throughout the piece is representative of man's sorrow over sin and his suffering because of it. This is man's response to seeing himself in light of the perfect law of God. It is what Luther expressed in the final stanza of the hymn:

Our works cannot salvation gain;
They merit only endless pain.

For this reason, God's people cry out in anguish: *Kyrieleis!*³⁶ Lord, have mercy! Indeed, nowhere is chromaticism more evident than in the treatment of the *Kyrieleis*. After the upper voice of the canon completes the melody, it extends into a painful, protracted chromatic descent, as if to express the endless pain that Luther mentioned and underscore the great anguish with which that cry is uttered.

³³ BWV 618: *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig*; BWV 619: *Christe, du Lamm Gottes*; BWV 620: *Christus, der uns selig macht*; BWV 624: *Hilf, Gott, dass mir's gelinge*. See Johann Sebastian Bach, *Orgelbüchlein*, Robert Clark and John David Peterson, eds., (St. Louis: CPH, 1984), 74.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 87, also notes that BWV 624 has a very unusual canon: "first at the fifth and later at the fourth, [it] may refer to the words "help me force these syllables into rhyme"--the forcing of the melody into a contrived canon could allude to the manipulation of words into rhymes." This is further evidence that Bach was intentional in his use of canon to reflect the text of hymn which he was setting.

³⁵ One interpretation is that, as the melody in canon represents order, the upper voices represent disorder. See Williams, *Organ Music*, 202. Also, if the voices are independent of the chorale, they are still governed by it, since, as Williams notes, 203, the cantus firmus could be played even against the first four bars.

³⁶ Backer, 27. Backer points out that the tension of chromaticism may also be representative of Christ's suffering, as it is in the *Orgelbüchlein* prelude on *O Mensch beweine*, BWV 622. Also, Backer notes the similarity between Bach's treatment of the *Kyrieleis* here and the "*eleison*" in BWV 671, an intriguing comparison that merits further exploration.

Example 3.4 Measures 54-60: canonic treatment of *Kyrieleis*, followed by extended chromatic descent

Musical notation for Example 3.4. The top staff shows the vocal line with lyrics "Ky - ri - e - le - is" and the bottom staff shows the basso continuo line with lyrics "Ky - ri - e - le - is". The music features a canonic treatment of the text, followed by an extended chromatic descent.

Man's sorrow over his failure to keep the law and his subsequent outcry for mercy are not, however, the primary focus of the prelude. Even more prominent in the upper voices is the use of the Passion or suffering motif. As it appears in the piece, this motif is characterized by three sixteenth notes followed by four eighth notes. It is also used in two variant forms, which fill in the eighth notes with passing notes.

Example 3.5 Passion motif and variants. Arrows show notes corresponding to eighth notes in the motif³⁷

Musical notation for Example 3.5. The top staff shows the "Passion motif" and "Passion motif inverted". The bottom staff shows "Variant 1", "Variant 2", and "Variant 2 inverted" with arrows pointing to notes corresponding to eighth notes in the motif.

The Passion motif calls to mind Jesus' suffering and death. This is God's answer to man's anguished cry: he sends his Son to suffer and die as the sacrifice for sin.³⁸ Therefore our cry for mercy is directed to Christ, our mediator, who forgives us our sins. As Luther concludes in stanza twelve:

Forgive us, Lord! To Christ we fly,
Our mediator on high.

³⁷ Adapted from Backer, 28.

³⁸ Significantly, a similar motif is found in Bach's prelude on the Passion chorale, *O Lamm Gottes*, BWV 618.

By repeatedly returning to this Passion motif in the upper voices, Bach makes a profound theological statement musically. He literally covers the demands of the Law,³⁹ laid out in the canon, with the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. As a whole, therefore, the piece proclaims the same catechism truths that Luther expressed in the final two stanzas of his hymn, words which Bach no doubt had in mind as he composed the chorale prelude.

Example 3.6 Measures 7-9: the Passion motif covers the first entrance of the cantus firmus in each voice

Example 3.7 Measures 54-57: heightened use of Passion motif covering the *Kyrieleis*

LISTEN FOR:

- The **cantus firmus in canon**, representing God's perfect law which no one can keep
- **Chromaticism**, a reminder that we must therefore constantly cry out, "Lord, have mercy!"
- The **Passion motif**, proclaiming Jesus' suffering and death on our behalf
- How the Passion motif **covers** the canon: Jesus' blood covers our failure to keep the law

³⁹ I owe this phrasing to Professor Backer, from a personal letter, dated 2 November 2011.

The Creed

This hymn by Martin Luther, a free treatment of the Nicene Creed, first appeared in Johann Walter's 1524 Wittenberg *Geystliche gesangk Buchleyn*. Luther had retained the first two lines of an older German versification of the Creed; he adapted the melody from a 14th or 15th-century Gregorian chant, *Credo IV*.⁴⁰ Luther's hymn was almost universally prescribed in the German church orders: following the example of the *Deutsche Messe*,⁴¹ it was to be sung every Sunday following the gospel (and, where applicable, after the Latin Creed). Its frequent use made this hymn the most popular of all hymns in the Reformation era.⁴² In *Christian Worship*, 271, it appears as *We All Believe in One True God*.

The three stanzas correspond to the three articles of the Creed.⁴³ The first stanza confesses God the Father as the creator of all and the one who continues to "richly and daily provide" for his people on earth. The second stanza confesses that Jesus is both true God and true man, who came to earth to give eternal life to sinful mankind by his crucifixion and resurrection. The third stanza quite succinctly summarizes the third article. Beginning with the Holy Spirit and his work, the stanza moves on to mention the Church, the forgiveness of sins, and then concludes with a beautiful reference to "the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

Table 4.1 Selected stanzas from CW 271

| Stanza | Content |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | We all believe in one true God |
| 2 | We all believe in Jesus Christ |
| 3 | We all confess the Holy Ghost, Who, sweet hope and comfort giving, Now with the Father and the Son In eternal light is living, Who the Church, his own creation, Keeps in unity of spirit; Here forgiveness and salvation Daily come through Jesus' merit. All flesh shall rise, and we shall be In bliss with God eternally. |

The sturdy melody remains a challenge for singers, given its wide range and long melismas that are reminders of its origins in Gregorian chant. It was no less challenging to sing in Luther's or Bach's day, which makes it all the more remarkable that it came to enjoy such widespread popularity.

⁴⁰ Aufdenberge, 298. For *Credo IV*, see *Liber Usualis*, 71-73.

⁴¹ Luther, "The German Mass," 78.

⁴² Herl, 66.

⁴³ Prior to Luther, the Creed was divided into 12 articles. Luther treated it in three articles "for the sake of teaching children." What is most interesting is that this hymn precedes the Small Catechism by five years. Its content is strikingly similar, however, an "example of Luther's theological consistency especially when the teaching of children was concerned," Leaver, 126.

Example 4.2a Final line of the melody

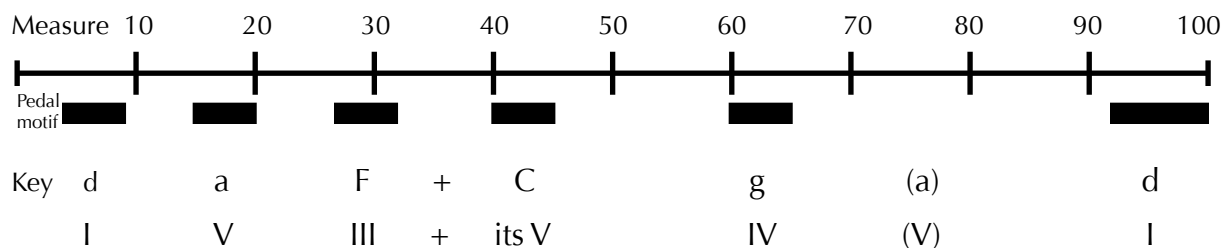


Example 4.2b Measures 92-100: showing the final line of melody in the tenor (bottom staff)



One unique feature of the piece is that it is structured around six appearances of a pedal motif and not around the presentations of the fugue subject. The sturdy pedal motif, which also makes an appearance on the manuals in the tenor at measure 75, moves through an orderly progression of keys. Bach uses the fugue subject in episodes between the pedal entrances to modulate from one key to another.

Figure 4.1 Graph showing presentation of pedal motif and key progression



Often described as a “striding bass” line, the pedal motif gives the impression of strength. Perhaps it is an allusion to the strong conviction of one who confesses the Creed.⁴⁵ More convincingly, it seems that it is a reference to God himself, the one true God, as the first line of the hymn states:

We all believe in one true God

Supporting this interpretation is the triangular shape of the pedal motif.⁴⁶ Not only does the entire motif create the shape of a triangle, but any three adjacent notes also create a triangle--a reference to the Triune God.

Example 4.3 Measures 4-9: the triangular pedal motif



Although the pedal motif provides the structure of the piece, the fugue subject and the other two layers of counterpoint that are above the pedal are not unimportant. The many entrances of the fugue subject proper, which evokes the first line of the chorale, are the most immediately evident feature. This gives the impression of many voices joining together to confess their faith.⁴⁷

It is also probably not coincidental that Bach chose to use three layers. If the pedal motif is a stirring symbol of the one true God, then the three layers serve as a reminder of the three coequal persons confessed in the three stanzas of the hymn, especially as they are freely exchanged into a variety of configurations above the pedal motif.

Table 4.2 Chart showing arrangement of the layers of counterpoint over the pedal motif⁴⁸

| Measures | 4-9 | 15-20 | 27-32 | 40-45 | 60-65 | 91-100 |
|--------------------|---------|---------|---------|--------------|---------|--------------|
| Soprano | --- | Layer 1 | Layer 2 | Layer 3 | Layer 2 | Layer 1, alt |
| Alto | Layer 1 | Layer 3 | Layer 3 | Layer 1, alt | Layer 3 | New |
| Tenor | Layer 2 | Layer 2 | Layer 1 | Layer 2 | Layer 1 | Melody |
| Pedal motif | #1 - d | #2 - a | #3 - F | #4 - C | #5 - g | #6 - d |

⁴⁵ Williams, *Organ Music*, 206.

⁴⁶ See Backer, 32.

⁴⁷ Williams, *Organ Music*, 206.

⁴⁸ Adapted from Backer, 32.

Example 4.4 Measures 13-20: three layers of counterpoint over the triangular pedal motif

The image displays a musical score for measures 13-20 of a fugue. The score is written in 2/4 time and consists of three staves. The top staff is the soprano, the middle staff is the tenor, and the bottom staff is the bass. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The score is annotated with three layers of counterpoint: Layer 1 (fugue subject) in the soprano, Layer 2 in the tenor, and Layer 3 in the alto. The triangular pedal motif is indicated by a box labeled 'Layer 2 in the tenor' and an arrow pointing to a specific note in the tenor staff. The score shows the intricate interweaving of these three layers over the pedal motif.

As a whole, the *Affekt* of the composition is one of strength and conviction, quite fitting not only because of the sturdy chorale melody, but especially because of the content of the hymn. It is possible that Bach used this prelude as an introduction to congregational singing of the hymn; if so, it would be a powerful call to stand up and heartily confess the true Christian faith in the one true God.

LISTEN FOR:

- The **opening line of the melody**, heard 14 times, as if many voices joining in to sing
- **Three layers of fugue** intertwined above the pedal motif
- Six presentations of the powerful triangular **pedal motif**, a symbol of the one true God
- The overall impression of **strength** and **conviction** that comes with confessing the Creed

Baptism

During the week of Easter 1540, Luther preached two sermons on Jesus' baptism from Matthew chapter 3. In them, he instructed the people on the import of baptism in the Christian life. These sermons undoubtedly provide the theological backdrop to Luther's baptism hymn, *To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord*. It is likely the last of the catechism hymns Luther composed, and perhaps the last he ever wrote. Originally composed in seven stanzas, five appear in translation in *Christian Worship*, 88.

Ever since its composition, it has served as the Lutheran church's primary baptismal hymn, and for good reason. Not only does the text retell the story of Christ's own baptism at the River Jordan, but it goes on to explain the significance of baptism for all believers. In his Small Catechism, Luther explained baptism by using simple questions and answers. Table 5.2 illustrates the close relationship between these questions and answers and the content of Luther's hymn.

Table 5.2 Catechism questions and answers

| Questions from the Small Catechism | Answered in CW stanza(s) |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| What is baptism? | 1, 3, 4 |
| What Word of God? | 5 |
| What are the blessings of baptism? | 1, 3, 4 |

Table 5.1 Selected stanzas from CW 88

| Stanza | Content |
|--------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4 | All that the mortal eye beholds Is water as we pour it. Before the eye of faith unfolds The pow'r of Jesus' merit. For here it sees his precious blood To all our ills bring healing, The wonders of that crimson flood The love of God revealing, Assuring his own pardon. |
| 5 | To his disciples spoke the Lord, "Go out to ev'ry nation And bring to them the living Word And this my invitation: Let ev'ryone abandon sin And come in true contrition To be baptized and thereby win Full pardon and remission And heav'nly bliss inherit." |

For this hymn, Luther employed an already extant melody, almost certainly composed by Johann Walter. Interestingly, Walter had composed it for another of Luther's hymns, *May God Bestow on Us His Grace* (CW 574). However, Luther decided to compose his own tune for that hymn, the one with which we today are familiar. But Luther apparently did not want Walter's fine tune to fall into disuse, so when he authored his baptism hymn, he wrote in such a meter that he could set it to Walter's tune. Commentators have suggested that, in addition to simple practicality, Luther may have made this decision for a theological reason. As *May God Bestow on Us His Grace* is a hymn calling for God's grace on people in a general sense, so his baptism hymn describes the special outpouring of his grace his people receive at the font.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Leaver, 138.

The Chorale Prelude - BWV 684

Bach prescribes two manuals and pedal for his chorale prelude on Luther's baptism hymn. The piece features the three voices of a trio-like ritornello in the manuals while the melody appears in the pedal as a solo. The use of two manuals serves to contrast the distinct musical lines in each of the trio parts.⁵⁰

As Bach does elsewhere in the Third Part of the *Clavier-Übung*, he chooses to use three voices to accompany the one solo melody. This seems intentionally symbolic of the three-in-one Trinity, which would be quite natural considering the appearance of all three persons of the Triune God at Jesus' baptism. Luther makes reference to this event in his hymn, first mentioning the Father's voice in stanza two:

These truths on Jordan's bank were shown
By mighty word and wonder.
The Father's voice from heav'n came down...

Then in his original stanza four, omitted in *Christian Worship*, he notes the appearance of the Holy Spirit (and therefore that this is a revelation of the Triune God):

There stood the Son of God in love,
His grace to us extending;
The Holy Spirit like a dove
Upon the scene descending;
The Triune God assuring us,
With promises compelling,
That in our baptism he will thus
Among us find a dwelling
To comfort and sustain us.⁵¹

Example 5.1 Measures 38b-40: three voices accompanying the hymn tune in the pedal

That in our bap - tism

⁵⁰ Williams, *Organ Music*, 215-216. Williams offers fascinating insight into how the accompanying lines foreshadow the hymn tune throughout the piece. Bach does a masterful job of weaving small motifs from the melody throughout the accompanying lines.

⁵¹ Aufdemberge, 110.

Commentators have also suggested Trinitarian symbolism in the voicing Bach selected for the melody. By placing the cantus firmus in the pedal with an accompanying trio, the right hand plays above the melody, while the left hand plays below it. In this way, the hymn tune itself becomes the “tenor,” that is, the middle voice, in the same way Jesus is the second (in other words, the “middle”) person of the Trinity.

Example 5.2 Measures 6b-9: the pedal melody in the tenor voice (see especially measures 8-9)

One might imagine this occurrence to be mere coincidence; however, a consideration of the other places in the Third Part of the *Clavier-Übung* where Bach employs this usage makes a convincing argument that this arrangement is more than just by chance. The melody first occurs in this position in the middle movement of the Kyrie (BWV 670) which is addressed to Christ, second in this prelude, and finally in the communion prelude, *Jesus Christ, Our Blessed Savior* (BWV 680). Indeed, it would not be out of character for the great composer to display such strokes of genius in his work.

Another distinctive feature of the prelude is the pattern of running sixteenth notes that weave in and out of the accompanying parts. As listeners hear these notes, they might well imagine waves of water flowing through the River Jordan where John baptized Jesus.⁵² The articulated breaks in these passages evoke thoughts of that water trickling against the rocks of the river bed.

⁵² Philipp Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, Vol. 2 (New York: Dover, 1951), 345.

Confession and Absolution

As Luther encouraged hymn writing among others and undertook the task himself, he was quick to point out the usefulness of the psalms, the Old Testament’s “hymnbook,” in the preparation of new hymns. Many of his hymns, therefore, are paraphrases of the psalms. Perhaps his most well-known hymn, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, is, for example, a paraphrase of Psalm 46.

Luther wrote another of his “psalm hymns” based on the penitential Psalm 130. The result, *From Depths of Woe I Cry to You* (CW 305), remains one of the Lutheran church’s finest hymns of confession and absolution. In its beautiful poetry, this hymn expounds many doctrines central to the Reformation. Luther does a masterful job, for example, of dividing the law that condemns the sinner before God and the gospel that proclaims God’s forgiveness in Christ. Furthermore, sinners do not earn that salvation by any of their “merit” but rely entirely on God’s “faithful Word.”

Because its subject matter touches on the chief articles of the Christian faith, Luther’s hymn gained widespread popularity across the churches of Germany. Not only did editors include it in nearly every hymnal, but it became a regular part of various services and even funerals (it was sung at the funeral of Luther’s protector, Frederick the Wise, and later at the funeral of Luther himself).⁵³ Sometimes it was made to function liturgically, as an introit to begin the service or as a gradual sung between Scripture lessons.

Luther composed the tune associated with the hymn. Its austere, somber character fits the text exceptionally well, though it may come as somewhat of a surprise that in the text’s first publication, Luther had not yet added the tune. Instead, it was probably sung to another hymn tune, one perhaps less fitting to the text, *Salvation unto Us Has Come!*⁵⁴

Table 6.1 Selected stanzas from CW 305

| Stanza | Content |
|--------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | From depths of woe I cry to you; Lord, hear me, I implore you. Bend down your gracious ear to me; My prayer let come before you. If you kept record of my sin And held against me what I’ve been, How could I stand before you? |
| 2 | Your love and grace alone avail To blot out my transgression. The best and holiest deeds must fail To break sin’s dread oppression. Before you none can boasting stand, But all must fear your strict demand And live alone by mercy. |
| 3 | Therefore my hope is in the Lord And not in my own merit; It rests upon his faithful Word To them of contrite spirit. That he is merciful and just This is my comfort and my trust. His help I wait with patience. |

⁵³ Leaver, 149.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

The Chorale Prelude - BWV 686

Though Bach treated this melody in one of his cantatas (BWV 38) in 1724, the musical ingenuity and complexity of this piece overshadows it. In some respects, it represents Bach's crowning achievement in the Third Part of the *Clavier-Übung*.

For this prelude, Bach employed *stile antico* (the "old style") that reflected the musical style of the late Renaissance era. This form was common among composers of the century before Bach and was modeled after the human voice (one should think of it like a choral motet). Composing in this chorale-motet form, Bach wove six separate voices together in a complex counterpoint, an achievement even for Bach, the master of the fugue!

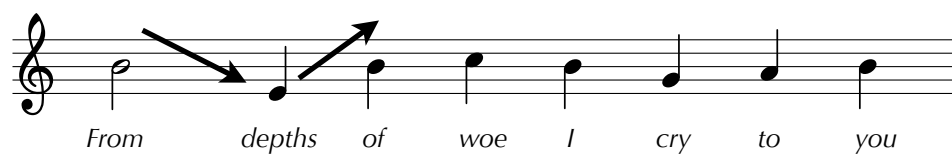
The manuals play four of these voices, while the pedals play a double part, meaning that both hands *and* both feet must function independently, a challenging feat. Two distinct musical lines in the pedal was not, however, unprecedented in the organ music of Bach's day. Even in his homeland of Germany, other well-known composers like Scheidt and Senfl had made use of this technique from time to time. Nevertheless, Bach's composition was still quite noteworthy because it featured two independent musical lines in the pedal from beginning to end. Most earlier double pedal parts had appeared only intermittently throughout a piece.

Example 6.1 Two independent lines played in the pedal



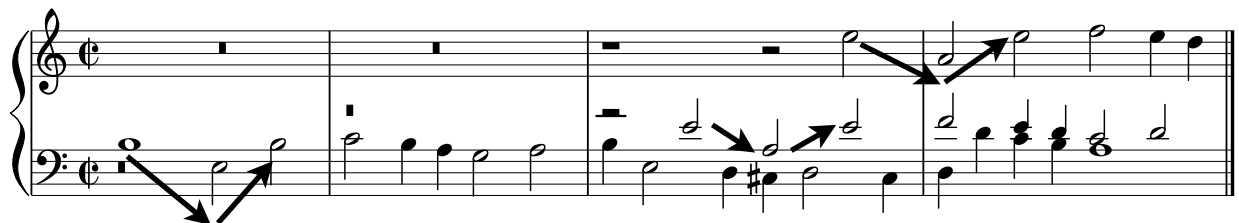
Bach's mastery of the form produces a chorale prelude that reflects well the theology of Luther's hymn, though some of the musical symbolism must be ascribed to the composer of the tune, Luther himself. Observers frequently note that the "depth" mentioned in the first line of the hymn is pictured musically in the opening phrase of the hymn tune.

Example 6.2 The opening phrase of the tune reflects the text, portraying the "depths"



Since it is found in the opening line of the melody, it is not surprising that this same depth motif appears in Bach's chorale prelude multiple times as it is introduced in the various voices.

Example 6.3 Measures 1-4: the depth motif from Luther's hymn tune is introduced in several voices



Bach's piece also evokes feelings of depth in his use of six voices. Especially when the two voices of the pedal are speaking simultaneously, listeners can almost feel the depth of the sound. The Phrygian mode in which it is written and the frequent chromatic passages further portray the sorrow of the confessing sinner that Luther expressed:

If you kept record of my sin
And held against me what I've been
How could I stand before you?

Example 6.4 Measures 9-13: the six separate voices of counterpoint also evoke depth



But Luther does not leave the sinner in despair. As the hymn progresses, the joy of forgiveness becomes increasingly evident:

Though great our sins and sore our woes,
His grace much more aboundeth;
His helping love no limit knows,
Our utmost need it soundeth;
Our kind and faithful Shepherd, He
Who shall at last set Israel free
From all their sin and sorrow. (Stanza 5, omitted in CW)⁵⁵

Bach achieves a similar result through his ornamentation of the hymn tune. One feature he makes extensive use of is the “joyful dactyl.” Musicologists suggest that the pattern of a long note followed by two short notes expresses feelings of joy. (Handel’s famous Hallelujah Chorus from *Messiah* opens with two good examples of such dactyls).

Example 6.5 Dactyls, a rhythmic expression of joy



Bach uses this feature throughout the piece. At first, they fall more into the background. By the end of the piece, however, these dactyls become the most prominent feature. With this construction, Bach does a masterful job of portraying not only how the Christian carries a heavy load of sorrow over sin, but also how God changes that sorrow to joy through his forgiveness in Christ.⁵⁶

Example 6.6 Measures 51-53: at the end of the piece, the use of joyful dactyls becomes quite obvious

Musical score for measures 51-53. The score is written for three staves: a treble clef staff at the top, a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) in the middle, and a bass clef staff at the bottom. The music features complex counterpoint with many dactyls (long note followed by two short notes) in the upper staves, while the lower staves have longer, more sustained notes.

LISTEN FOR:

- **The depth** portrayed by the six voices of the prelude
- The **dual quality** of the piece that portrays the sorrow of sin yet the joy of forgiveness
- The rich and complex counterpoint Bach employs

⁵⁵ Aufdemberge, 327.

⁵⁶ Williams, *Organ Music*, 219.

Concluding Remarks

Listening to and studying Bach's chorale preludes on the catechism hymns more than likely reveal a telling fact: most of us do not know Luther's catechism hymns very well, if at all. In an age that looks for brevity in its hymns, Luther's texts seem rather long and include more stanzas than most congregations care to sing. In an age that often appreciates simpler hymn tunes aided by foot-tapping rhythms and catchy melodies, the catechism hymns seem rather intricate and present a challenge greater than most worship planners are willing to undertake. These realities mean the catechism hymns are rarely heard or sung even among life-long Lutherans.

Perhaps Lutherans should not trouble themselves with these facts. After all, never did Luther himself nor his followers after him demand adherence to a strict corpus of hymns. On the contrary, they understood that in such things Christians are free from the demands of any rule or law. Perhaps we can quietly treasure these hymns as fine contributions from the past but nevertheless relegate them to a lesser place in our churches and lives.

On the other hand, a survey of the use of the catechism hymns in historical Lutheranism may encourage another perspective. Luther did suggest that catechism instruction include hymn singing as a way to review and inculcate the lessons learned from Scripture. So seriously did Lutherans take this encouragement that children in the days of Bach sang these hymns on a daily basis. Appreciating these facts may encourage Lutherans not to dismiss the catechism hymns too quickly.

Such an appreciation may instead spark a renewed interest in these hymns. It is notable that the formulators of the Wisconsin Synod's current hymnal, *Christian Worship*, chose to include all six of these hymns. That decision in itself demonstrates an appreciation for the potential benefits of these hymns. The fact nevertheless remains that despite their inclusion in the hymnal, they remain far from the mainstream in WELS. Are other avenues open to broaden an appreciation for them? Elementary and Sunday schools, for example, could make fine places to foster an appreciation for these hymns. Pastors and other worship leaders could consider exposing these hymns to congregations, perhaps with the assistance of a choir. Perhaps it is also time to consider whether the church could benefit from the work of gifted composers who might reinvigorate Luther's magnificent texts with new melodies that may find broader appeal in the twenty-first century church.

Answers to these questions and others will be the work of the church and its leaders in the near future. May their decisions lead us, like the Lutherans who have gone before us, to find all glory and comfort in the pure gospel. ✠

Tables, Figures, and Musical Examples

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About the Presenters



Jacob Behnken, born and raised in South Dakota, is a fourth-year student at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Recognizing Jacob's interest and gifts already at age 12, his father, a pilot, began to fly him to New Ulm, MN, for lessons with Dr. Edward Meyer of Martin Luther College. Jacob soon became a regular organist at his home congregation, St. Martin Lutheran Church in Watertown. Upon graduation from high school, he enrolled at Martin Luther College where he continued his organ studies under Dr. Wayne Wagner and served as an adjunct organ instructor during his senior year. Jacob competed at two Young Artists' Competitions hosted by the Twin Cities Chapter of the American Guild of Organists (AGO). One of the highlights of his senior year was to participate in a master's class led by organist Paul Jacobs of the Juilliard School. In the summer following his graduation, Jacob performed in the AGO's Sioux Trails Chapter summer recital series and at the WELS National Worship Conference. While at the Seminary, Jacob serves as a regular organist at Grace Lutheran Church, Milwaukee.



Philip Moldenhauer, born in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, is a fourth-year student at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. While enrolled at Martin Luther College, he studied organ with Dr. Wayne Wagner and took coursework in the contributions of the early Lutheran musicians, culminating, of course, in the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. In addition to his regular chapel duties at the Seminary, he also plays for services at St. Peter Lutheran Church and Christ Lutheran Church, both on the south side of Milwaukee, and Trinity Lutheran Church near West Bend.

Specifications for the Chapel Organ

Martin Ott - Opus 54 - 1991

Hauptwerk

| | |
|-------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Pommer | 16' |
| Prinzipal | 8' |
| Rohrflöte | 8' |
| Octave | 4' |
| Nachthorn | 4' |
| Octave | 2' (half draw with Mixtur III) |
| Waldflöte | 2' |
| Quinte | 2 $\frac{2}{3}$ ' & 1 $\frac{3}{5}$ ' (half draw) |
| Mixtur III | |
| Trompete | 8' |
| Tremulant | |
| Zimbelstern | |

Schwellwerk

| | |
|-------------|-------------------|
| Salicional | 8' |
| Holzgedackt | 8' |
| Spitzflöte | 4' |
| Prinzipal | 2' |
| Quint | 1 $\frac{1}{3}$ ' |
| Krummhorn | 8' |
| Tremulant | |

Pedalwerk

| | |
|-----------------|------------------------------------|
| Subbass | 16' |
| Flötenprinzipal | 8' |
| Choralbass | 4' |
| Rauschbass | 2' & 2 $\frac{2}{3}$ ' (half draw) |
| Fagott | 16' |

Couplers

Hauptwerk to Pedalwerk
Schwellwerk to Pedalwerk
Schwellwerk to Hauptwerk

25 ranks, 23 voices, 21 stops, and 1009 pipes