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Law, Gospel and Faith: Tracing the Influence of Martin Luther's Theology on a Few Sacred Cantatas by Johann Sebastian Bach

Introduction

In our time, the music of J.S. Bach is sometimes elevated to the status of an “ars perfecta” - “perfect art” - the way Josquin’s music was during the Renaissance. The preludes and fugues are perhaps the best representation of the precise mathematical logic that characterizes his music. Yet it is Bach’s sacred works, mostly written while he was a cantor in Leipzig churches that Bach is most well known for. To this day, his cantatas, passions, and the stately B Minor Mass are regularly heard in churches and concert halls alike. Although many say that listening to these compositions inspires a close connection with the divine, people who don’t regularly attend church might not know what exactly inspired Bach to write these pieces. In fact, some might wonder whether Bach himself was a religious man, or whether he wrote these works simply because this was his job. This is an important question to consider, because if he didn’t hold deep religious convictions, it might not be theologically sound to use his music in church services. In this paper, I will show that Bach’s sacred music was indeed heavily influenced by the thinking of Martin Luther, a theologian and priest who was a major figure in the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century (Mullet, 2015). However, because this is a brief paper, my focus will be on a few sacred cantatas - works written weekly for different events of the liturgical year (Chafe, 2000). It would be very interesting to investigate how Luther’s influence extended to the passions and the Mass - however this is discussion for another paper.

Some Background on The Lutheran Theology of Music

It is in Martin Luther's Tischreden - also known as the "Table Talk" that one finds most of his theological ideas about music. Tischreden is a collection of Luther's conversations that were recorded by his many students and some colleagues during the last twenty years of his life. The text was compiled and published in 1566 by Johann Aurifaber (Leaver, 2002). Reading this text, it becomes clear that Luther's view on music was very positive, as illustrated by this quote - "I place music next to theology, and give it highest praise. And we see how David and all saints put their pious thoughts into verse, rhyme and song."¹ Here Luther asserts that music is inextricably linked to theology, basing himself on the examples of great saints like the biblical King David, known for writing the psalms. Further in Tischreden, Luther explains why he holds this view: "God has preached the Gospel through music, too, as may be seen from the songs of Josquin..."² As scholar Robert A. Leaver (2002) elaborates, music is so theologically important to Luther because its "primary function is the proclaiming of the gospel...music is...the living voice of the Gospel". Leaver's analysis reveals another crucial aspect of Luther's theology - which is his dedication to the words of the scripture. As Bach scholar Jaroslav Pelikan (1986) writes, one of the main Reformation principles was called "*sola Scriptura*...insisting that only through the Divine revelation contained in the Bible was it possible to learn the truth about God." Essentially, Luther's ideas about the theological importance of music stem from his conviction that music brings life to the Scriptures, the text of which contains the secrets of Divine revelation.

¹ This quotation is taken from Robert A. Leaver's article, "Johann Sebastian Bach and the Lutheran understanding of Music", published in the Lutheran Quarterly in 2002. According to Leaver, the translation is based on the second volume of Ewald M. Plass's *What Luther Says Anthology*, which contains the text of Tischreden.

² The translation is taken from the same article as the above quotation.

The consequences of this philosophy of music were very far reaching, perhaps being most evident in Lutheran education. In another paragraph in *Tischreden*, Luther asserts that music should be a crucial part of schooling, and that a preacher should only be allowed to hold his post if he is well-versed in music. Specifically, Luther writes, “We should teach music in schools, a schoolmaster ought to have skill in music, or I would not regard him, neither should we ordain young men as preachers, unless they have been well-versed in music.”³ In his article, Leaver (2002) then documents the tradition of Lutheran church musicians who were also teachers in the schools that were attached to their churches. As Leaver writes, cantors (lead musicians) were expected to know in detail Leonard Hutter’s 1610 *Compendium of Lutheran confessional theology*⁴ - because they were to teach the Small Catechism in their role as cantor and teacher. This requirement was still present when Bach became the cantor in Leipzig in 1723 (Leaver, 2002). Before he assumed that role, however, Bach was examined by Johann Schmid, a professor of theology, and deemed competent not only in music, but also in biblical and theological principles that needed to be mastered by someone who would then teach them in school (Leaver, 2002).

Thus far, I have shown not only how important music was for Luther’s theology because it helped enunciate the holy words of the Scriptures, but also how theologically conscious Lutheran musicians had to be in order to perform their duties properly. In the subsequent sections of this paper, I will examine how Bach incorporated some core Lutheran principles into his music.

³ I have taken this quotation from the William Hazlitt translation of *Tischreden* (2004), which I felt was a more effective translation than the one in the Leaver article.

⁴ Hutter’s *Compendium* stressed the Augsburg Confession (written by Lutheran theologians in 1530 in order to explain their theological convictions to the Emperor Charles V), and the Small and Large Catechisms. Both were written by Luther, and while the small Catechism was a way to teach children the 10 commandments, the Large Catechism focused on aiding clergymen in leading their congregations by helping them understand core theological principles (Leaver, 2002).

The Doctrine of Justification by Faith Rather Than Good Works

The Augsburg Confession is a seminal text in Lutheran theology, written in 1530 by Lutheran princes and theologians with significant input from Martin Luther himself in response to the Emperor Charles V's order to appear at a diet and explain their theological convictions. In article 4, the following is written: "Our Churches also teach that human deeds cannot be justified before God by their own power, merits or deeds. Rather, they are freely justified for Christ's sake through faith"⁵ (The Unaltered Augsburg Confession A.D 1530, Article 4). As Glen Thompson, who edited this text, explains, what Luther is saying is that reward and salvation does not come from performing good deeds, rather it stems from faith that "they [humans] are received into God's favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake" (Article 4 continued). This doctrine is known as Justification through Faith. Bach scholar Eric Chafe (2000) has elaborated on this aspect of Luther's thinking, by defining "the Circle of Lutheran Theology" - the Law, Gospel, and faith, as being "a dynamic process" within the believer. Chafe then explains that "the Law is a measure of human sinfulness, for which God's punishment since the Fall of Adam is death, whereas the Gospel offers eternal life as the believer's reward for his faith." Here, Chafe is clarifying Luther's belief that human beings have an inherently sinful and "contaminated" nature, because they are descendants of the sinful Adam. Therefore, no good works can be enough to offer salvation - it is only through faith that God's merciful side (represented by the Gospel) can reward the sinful believer with eternal life.

⁵ This quotation is taken from The Unaltered Augsburg Confession A.D. 1530, edited by Glen L. Thompson. However, as Thompson himself states, this translation is simplified from the 1921 translation done by F. Bente and W.H.T. Dau, which is published in the *Concordia Triglotta*.

This concept is perhaps most strikingly found in Bach's cantata BWV 9, *Es ist das Heil uns kommen her* (Salvation Has Come to Us Here). This cantata is based on a chorale by Paul Separatus, and was written for the sixth Sunday after the Trinity (Young, 1989). The first verse of the Chorale opens with the following words, "From grace and pure goodness,/ Works, they never help,/ They cannot possibly protect,/ Faith looks towards Jesus Christ,/ He has done enough for all of us;/ He has become our Mediator."⁶ To accompany this opening, Bach uses a full, majestic instrumental accompaniment, and choral singing, which can emphasize the feeling of complete faith that are present in the opening lines of the chorale. Using Chafe's (2002) model of "Law, Gospel, and Faith," we can study the three recitatives of this cantata, which are all given to the bass, an unusual gesture by Bach. According to some, this could possibly represent a preacher's sermon (Young, 1989). The first bass recitative describes the purpose of Law - to show man's sinful nature and his inability to follow the commands given by God. The text of the first recitative goes as follows: "God gave us the law, but we were unable to keep it;...Of his own strength, no one was capable of abandoning the evil of sin."⁷ In the fashion of a typical recitative, the orchestral accompaniment is very sparse, and the bass intonation is reminiscent of a preacher chastising his congregation. The second bass recitative centers on the idea of salvation which can only come from Christ, if one believes in him (Young, 1989). Consequently, Bach writes music whose melodic line mostly trends upward, as if mimicking a hopeful upward glance towards the heavens. The final bass recitative ties both aspects of the Law and the Gospel together, to show that if one can recognize their sins, as demonstrated by the inability to keep God's Law, one should feel dejected. Yet, one can still find comfort in the "Gospel, which will restore our happiness and strengthen our belief in God's goodness. He will know when to help us, if we only

6 Translation taken from W. Murray Young's book *The Cantatas of J.S. Bach: An Analytical Guide* (1989), pg.106.

7 Translation taken from Eric T. Chafe's *Analyzing Bach Cantatas* (2000), pg.9.

trust in Him” (Young, 1989). Bach uses music that combines both the reproaching, dissonant themes from the first recitative, and the consoling, hopeful upward trending melodic line of the second recitative.

Another aspect of this cantata that emphasizes the power of faith is the fifth movement of the cantata - the duet between the soprano and the alto. They sing in a canonical format, emphasizing the German word for faith, “Glaube”, in three successive lines of the text: “On the strength of **faith** in the heart/Only **faith** do You accept/Only **faith** justifies/Everything else glows too weakly to be able to help us.”⁸ This is also the only movement of the cantata which abandons the third-person format of the sermon, and addresses God personally (Chafe, 2000). Perhaps Bach is trying to show how close one can become with God if one believes in Him wholeheartedly.

The Importance of Faith in the Lutheran Approach to Death

In the previous section, I have described Luther’s emphasis on faith as the sole way to achieve salvation, and a particular instance in Bach’s music where this is reflected. The importance of faith, however, also had a significant impact on Luther’s idea of what it means to die a good death.

To understand Luther’s theological approach on this matter, it would be helpful to look in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2, where one is told the story of Simeon, a righteous man in Jerusalem who had been told by the Holy Ghost that he would not see death before he had seen the Messiah. The Scripture further describes that when the infant Jesus was taken to the Temple in Jerusalem and Simeon sees him, he proclaims: “Now Master, you may let your servant go in

⁸ Translation from Chafe’s *Analyzing Bach Cantatas* (2002), pg. 9.

peace according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in sight of the nations, in light of revelation for the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel.”⁹ These sayings by Simeon are now known as the *Nunc Dimittis* canticle, used regularly in the Lutheran Church service. Luther, in his sermon for the Purification (1526), focuses on the joy that Simeon felt when he saw Jesus and recognized him as the Messiah. However, as the scholar Scott Milner (2000) clarifies, what Luther means is that Simeon felt great joy from transcending the fear of death - which is considered punishment for sinners. As Luther states, “...were we to see him who has born under the Law and know him as he who helps us?, it is not possible that we would not be joyful and unafraid before death.”¹⁰ To reiterate Milner’s point, it is when Simeon recognizes Jesus as the Messiah that he feels profound faith in the power of God and no longer feels afraid of death. Returning to Chafe’s (2000) model described previously, we can view this as a triumph of the merciful side of God (Gospel) that absolves the sinner of his punishment - death, and the fear of it - because he has faith. In summary, Luther’s philosophy that faith is the only source of salvation also manifests itself in requirement to be unafraid of death, because being afraid is the mark of a sinner.

This theme is present in a number of Bach’s cantatas, two of which I will analyze here. The first is *Christus, der ist mein Leben* (Christ, He is my Life), BWV 95. In the tenor recitative of this cantata, the singer states that “he is ready to depart from the world with joy, if he is called today...He has composed his death song and is ready to sing it” (Young, 1989). This is a clear depiction of the Lutheran idea that having faith must extend to a readiness to give oneself up to Christ at any moment. Musically, Bach cuts off the orchestral accompaniment to this recitative towards the end, leaving the tenor to finish the recitative accompanied by the continuo only. This

⁹ Quotation from the *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Bible* (2011).

¹⁰ Translation taken from Scott C. Milner’s article, “*Sube Todesstunde* or *Mit Fried und Freud*: Reformation Theology and the Lutheran “Art of Dying in Two Bach Cantatas.” (2000), pg. 37.

lends a very intimate feeling to this section of the cantata - where the singer is declaring his full commitment to Christ. Immediately following this recitative, there is a Chorale, which repeats the same themes, as seen with the following lines, “According to God’s Will;/My heart and mind are comforted, /calmly and quietly.../As God has promised me/Death has become my sleep.” (Young, 1989). As W. Murray Young (1989) writes, although this is a funeral hymn, there is a certain feeling of joy in this chorale. This can also indicate the joyous, peaceful faith in Christ that Bach is trying to convey in the cantata.

Another, perhaps more striking example of the importance of having faith in the face of death is the cantata BWV 127 *Herr Jesu Christ, ‘wahr Mensch und Gott* (Lord Jesus Christ, True Man and God)¹¹. Based in part on a chorale by Paul Eber, Bach wrote this cantata for the Sunday before Lent. He was inspired by that day’s gospel, which comes from Luke, chapter 18: 31-43, where two major events happen - Jesus heals a blind man, and foretells his own betrayal in Jerusalem. When Jesus heals the blind man, he says, “Receive your sight, your faith has saved you.” Although this theme is present in the entire cantata, it is especially poignant in the soprano aria. She begins with the words “My soul is at rest in the hands of Jesus,” and Bach intentionally puts a long note on the word “*rests*”, emphasizing the complete faith in Christ. Additionally, throughout this aria, the strings and oboes play pizzicato-like sounds at regular intervals, almost metronomically, and the soprano sings the words “Ah call me soon, O funeral bells, I am unafraid of dying, for Jesus shall wake me again.” The metronomic pizzicatos could represent the funeral bells themselves, or a complete calm and faith in the face of death. Another way that the theme of faith appears in this cantata is through the words that open the cantata, and also give it its name, “Lord Jesus Christ, true man and God.” Bach takes the melody from these words and

¹¹ The material presented in this paragraph is based on my takeaways from a pre-worship discussion, and subsequent performance of this Bach cantata that I attended at Marsh Chapel (Boston University) on February 10, 2019. The orchestra director who gave the presentation is Scott Allen Jarrett.

places them throughout the cantata, namely when the bass sings his aria on the theme of the Last Judgement. The prevalence of this melody provides a constant reminder of the importance of Jesus Christ and faith therein.

Bach does something very interesting musically in the bass aria. Until this aria, which comes at the end of the cantata, the trumpets are mostly reticent. However, as the topic turns to the Last Judgement, Bach gives the trumpet a part in order to emphasize the magnitude of what he wants to convey. The theme of faith in Jesus as a savior from death also appears here, with lines such as “Believers shall survive forever, they shall not be judged and shall not taste eternal death.”

Emphasis on the Trinity and Anti-Catholic Views

Let us return to the text of the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession AD 1530* that I presented above. In the very first article of the *Confession*, Luther writes as follows, “Our Churches are united in teaching what the Council of Nicea Agreed...it is true that there is only one divine being...yet there are three persons - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (Unaltered Augsburg Confession, Article 1). In this quotation, Luther is making the case for the importance of worshipping Jesus Christ, in addition to God. Although this doesn’t seem like a groundbreaking idea, according to Jaroslav Pelikan (1986), this was the important aspect of trinitarian Orthodoxy: “...an integral component of trinitarian orthodoxy was the legitimacy of addressing prayer and worship not only to God the Father but also to the Trinity, and therefore also the Son and the Holy Ghost. During his time, Luther considered the principal enemies of this view to be Roman Catholics, who had raised their Pope up to a level of authority he

considered to be irreverent to Christ. In the words of Luther himself: "...the pope is the real Antichrist who has raised himself over and set himself against Christ" (Pelikan,1986).

During Bach's time, this same doctrine of the trinity was under attack, this time by Enlightenment thinkers, who felt that supposed proofs of the Trinity's existence, such as the plural "Let us make man in our image" in Genesis, or the threefold Aaronic blessing found in the Book of Numbers, were reading the orthodox Christian approach into the Hebrew Bible (Pelikan, 1986). Interestingly, Bach echoes Luther's warlike view against those who he felt challenged this doctrine, composing the cantata BWV 80 - *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott* (A Mighty Fortress is Our God), known as the "battle hymn of the reformation" (Pelikan, 1986). Indeed, not only was the basis for this cantata a hymn that Martin Luther himself wrote, but Bach composed it for the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the Augsburg Confession (Young, 1989). Within this cantata, the tenor recitative is perhaps the most significant expression of the war-like attitude described above. The tenor portrays the following image, "So stand under Christ's blood-stained flag and banner...and trust that this thy head betrays thee not, His victory E'en thee the way to gain thy crown prepareth! March Gladly to war! If thou but own God's own word, Obey as though harken..."¹² Although Luther's hymn that inspired this cantata, and consequently the rest of this cantata, speaks about war against Satan, it is possible to view this cantata as being sung in defense of the divinity of Christ, and against the pope and Roman Catholic thinkers because of the emphasis on fighting for the word of Christ (Pelikan, 1986).

Conclusion

Throughout this brief discussion of some tenants in Luther's theology, one common theme can be seen - that for Luther, the person of Jesus Christ was of utmost importance.

¹² Translation taken from Jaroslav Pelikan's *Bach Among the Theologians* (1986). Pg. 51.

Whether it be his belief that faith in Jesus is the only way to achieve salvation, and therefore eternal life, or whether it was his war-like attitude against the pope, the figure of Christ is central to his theology. We have also seen a number of examples in Bach's sacred cantatas which have been influenced by this reverence to the figure of Christ, not only in the librettos that Bach chose for these works, but also how he reflected the words in the music. It is my hope that after having engaged in this discussion that we (both the reader and myself) now attend a performance of a sacred piece of music by Bach more prepared to understand the deeper meanings behind the composition.

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