

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

Interpreter of the Faith

Psalm 150; Colossians 3: 23,24

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Union Church of Cupertino

Art Domingue, Interim Minister

PART I - The Man

Samuel Sebastian Wesley, a church organist, the son of Charles Wesley and nephew of John, was, in 1800, introduced to the work of Johann Sebastian Bach. Since his death 50 years before, Bach had been all but forgotten but as Wesley learned more and more about Bach's music his enthusiasm for the composer developed into a passion. In a letter to another organist, Benjamin Jacob, in 1808 he wrote:

I often exclaim when working at him, "...none but a good man could have written thus;.... - *Samuel Wesley's Famous Bach Letters*, pg. 7.

Unfortunately, Samuel Wesley was mistaken. Yes, Bach was a brilliant keyboard technician. Yes, Bach was an accomplished composer in a wide variety of musical forms. But few were those who thought of him as a "good man." Most of his contemporaries considered him an obstinate crank.

The basic problem was that Bach never learned the art of suffering fools, gladly, or in any other manner. In his very first job as organist at Arnstadt, Bach called one of the instrumentalists a "Nanny goat bassoonist," and the bassoonist came after Bach with his cane, demanding an apology. Bach drew his sword and refused - what was an organist doing with a sword? (Susan have you ever felt the need of carrying a sword?) Others had to pull them apart. Both received a reprimand for "fighting in the streets."

Some say Bach was an opportunist always alert for his big chance. A second reprimand came when, having been given a leave of one month, Bach stayed away for three. He had gone to study with the master, Buxtehude and discovering that Buxtehude was about to retire, Bach hung around to see if he could get the job. Indeed, he got it, but then he hurried back to Arnstadt as soon as he read the fine print in the contract that said the new organist (if unmarried) would marry the old organist's daughter. Fraulein Buxtehude has since been described as "an unattractive woman, nine years Bach's senior."

A third reprimand, and probably the one that led to Bach's resignation, stated that he "was in the habit of making music with a strange maiden in the organ loft of the empty church." That the "strange maiden" would soon become Bach's first wife and the mother of the first portion of his 23 children, appeased no one. Bach resigned. Soon after he became church organist at Muhlhausen, 50 miles away.

The Lutheran Minister at Muhlhausen distrusted music. He believed it aroused passions in the

human breast. As did John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli before him, he believed that church music must remain simple, unadorned. He explained all this to his new organist. Bach's first composition written to be performed in the church in Muhlhausen was a cantata for soloists and chorus, supported by strings, woodwinds, trumpets and timpani. Bach didn't last a year at Muhlhausen.

Bach's third position came to an end when his employer had him jailed. The fourth ended in a dispute with his employer's wife.

Bach's last and longest held position was that of organist and cantor for the city of Leipzig. He held this position for 27 years until his death. Bach was under contract to train the boy's choir, play at all regular services plus weddings and funerals, and to produce new compositions that could be performed at worship each week. The creative accumulation was tremendous - 1112 original compositions survive. But lest we think that Bach had transformed himself into a gentle tactful person please know that these 27 years were one, long, drawn-out dispute with the city council. So exasperated did these public servants become that when word of Bach being seriously ill they immediately began to interview for his successor. Obstinate, Bach lived on for 12 months more. When, at last, the composer died, the council had disparaging remarks about his talent written into the official record. They voted to deduct from his widow's pension a 22 year old debt that they had been in dispute and let Bach's widow finish her days as a pauper in the poorhouse.

Bach's public life was a public relations disaster. His employers found him opinionated and obstinate. They answered him in kind.

To be fair to Bach, he seems to have been a very different man at home. Both his first and second wives adored him, as did the 9 of his 23 children that survived infancy, as did the numerous music students who came to live in the Bach home. The family had their own in-house orchestra and the frets of the world were offset by household harmony. There were five pianos in the Bach house. Bach's concertos for three pianos were written for himself and two of his sons to play. Solo music was written for his second wife's voice. Seven of the 9 surviving children became gifted musicians.

I have read that Bach was an imposing teacher, assigning hour after hour of finger exercises, and refusing to continue until these were done. But, if a pupil survived the initial drudgery, she/he became Bach's friend forever. To every complaint Bach would reply: "You have five fingers on each hand fully good as mine." To every groan he would say: "I was obligated to be industrious, whoever is equally industrious will succeed equally as well."

Perhaps. Perhaps not. But this was not false humility. Albert Schweitzer, writing about Bach, pointed out the initials he invariably wrote at the beginning of each musical manuscript: "J.J." from the Latin, *Jesu juva*, meaning "Jesus, help!" and at the end "S.D.G.," *Soli Deo Gloria*, "to God alone the glory." Schweitzer insisted that these were not empty formulas but indications of a creed which lay behind all of Bach's work, namely that his musical talent was a gift from God and, as such, must be used in God's service. Bach had a deep sense of vocation. Cautious Lutheran Ministers, fearful City Councilmen were not his masters. Bach was responsible to God

and, by God, he would use his gifts for the increase of majesty and wonder. “To God alone (be) the glory!”

PART II - A Story

In 1747, Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, hired Bach’s son, Carl Phillip, as a musician in the King’s personal orchestra. King Frederick was fond of music and played the flute very well. He had long hoped that Bach, the father would visit the castle, and offered invitations but to no avail. Now the King pressured Carl Phillip to invite his dad. One evening when there was to be a concert the King called for the list of people who had arrived at the castle that day, who would be attending the concert and spending the night. Suddenly the King caught his breath: “Old Bach has come!” Immediately he cancelled the concert. Who would dare play before the master? He asked that Bach be brought to him and once they had met the King took Bach on a personal tour of the castle’s 15 pianofortes. It was showing off, of course, but two could play that game. Bach asked the King to sit down at one of the pianofortes and set a theme. Then he went from one keyboard to the next, at each extemporizing a new variation upon King Frederick’s theme ending up with one for six voices. The King was ecstatic: “There is only one Bach!” he cried. “There is only one Bach!”

PART III - The Music

Johann Sebastian Bach was a confessing Christian craftsman. He did not compose to entertain but to raise the esteem of God and Jesus. In one of his treatises he wrote:

The purpose of music is none other than to minister to the honor of God and refreshment of the spirit. If it does not take heed to do so, it is no proper music but devilish din and discord.

A child of the Reformation, Bach looked to Martin Luther for his understanding of the role of music in the Christian Church. Luther was not afraid of musical enthusiasm or passion. He believed that music was a gift from God and second in importance only to God’s gift of the Word. Luther taught that there were three main purposes for music within the church and I believe Bach bought them all.

First, Luther maintained that music, joined with word, was the most effective means of proclaiming the grace of God. Grace (God’s undeserved, unconditional love) isn’t something that cannot be grasped by the mind alone. The heart needs to concur and music can approach the heart in ways words will never find. Bach read extensively in the Bible and the catechism. He hired others to search the scriptures for him looking for texts which, once set to music, would give grace wings. Music must refresh every part of the human spirit. Anything else is “devilish din and discord.”

Secondly, Martin Luther taught Bach that music was the best means by which the Christian community could celebrate Christ’s victory over sin and death. And this good news must be accessible to everyone. For his hymns, Luther employed tunes from the tavern, so that the people could sing them. So too Bach. The tune we will sing in a moment to the words “O Sacred Head

Now Wounded,” was originally from a popular love ballad: “My peace of mind is shattered by a young maiden’s charms.” Bach wove this tune into his ‘Saint Matthew’s Passion’ five different times. It appears in four of his cantatas and twice in the “Christmas Oratorio.” Luther once said: “We mustn’t leave the best tunes to the Devil.” And Bach bought it. He believed that the celebration of God’s great gift in Jesus deserves the most engaging music that can be found.

Finally, Martin Luther believed.... and I believe that Bach was his disciple... that music is a glad reminder of God’s presence in everything.

The cellist and composer, Pablo Casals, who died in 1973 once wrote:

For the past 80 years I have started the day in the same manner. It is not a mechanical routine but something essential to my daily life. I go to the piano, and I play two preludes and fugues of Bach. I cannot think of doing otherwise. It is a sort of benediction on the house. But that is not its only meaning for me. It is a rediscovery of the world of which I have the joy of being a part. It fills me with awareness of the wonder of life, with a feeling of the incredible marvel of being a human being. The music is never the same for me, never. Each day it is something new, fantastic and unbelievable. That is Bach, like nature, a miracle! - *Joys and Sorrows*, pg. 17.

Johann Sebastian Bach was a skilled interpreter of the Christian faith who, by his music, made belief more possible, grace more believable, Christ more accessible. By Bach we are a people blessed.