CONSTRUCTING BACH: EXAMINING THE MAN BEHIND THE MUSIC

A Thesis

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Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) is considered one of the greatest composers in Western music. He spent over half of his life in the service of the church composing religious works, the quality of which has been unmatched by any other composer. What is it about Bach that scholars and musicians alike hold him in such a high esteem?

Bach was the final composer in what is known as the Baroque period, which occurred from about 1600-1750. Music historians mark this endpoint with the death of Bach. Up until this point, Western music and church music were closely tied together. This relationship changed dramatically with the dawn of the Enlightenment and classical music.

Until the classical period in music (1750-1810), musicians made their livings in one of two ways: working in the court of the aristocracy or working for the church. Even in the classical period, only a few composers, such as Mozart and Beethoven, worked as free-lance composers. Bach was typical of baroque composers who worked in both the courts and in the church.

During the last years of Bach's life, the Enlightenment arose and affected the culture of Europe, including music. Enlightenment thinkers valued individual faith and practical morality more than the church as an institution.[1] Also, Bach was very rooted in the traditional ways of contrapuntal church music from the days of Palestrina.[2] The new musical and theological ideas developed in the Enlightenment were very different from the traditional ways of the church and the Enlightenment did not affect Bach as much as other composers of the time. This is part of the reason why he is considered the last composer of the Baroque era.

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[1] Donald J. Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, A History of Western Music, 6th ed. (New York: Norton, 2001), 420.

[2] Derived from the word "counterpoint" defined as the technique of combining two different, independent melodies to create one logical, musical texture.
Palestrina (1525-1594) is the most noted composer to apply the idea of counterpoint in church music and his rules of contrapuntal practice is a basis for all future church musicians.

Bach was not only an excellent musician who wrote masterful works, but many scholars also believe that Bach was a theologian who expressed theology in his musical works. But this immediately raises a number of questions: what do these scholars mean by "theologian," and are their usages the same? It appears from their scholarship that they understand the term "theologian," to mean a Christian who faithfully studies and reflects on God and the Scriptures. If Bach was indeed a theologian by these standards, the texts of his works were most likely planned out in great detail to illuminate his theological concerns.

A few scholars argue that Bach was only a musician in service of the church and wrote his sacred works as part of his duties. That is, study of these theological texts was part of his compositional duties for the church. This conflicting view raises the question: did Bach willingly compose these sacred works because he was a theologian or because it was his job to do so? Does his theological perspective have a bearing on his musical compositions?

Each side presents evidence for their case based on Bach's life influences, career choices, his works, and other personal effects from his life, such as his copy of the Calov Bible. To understand these arguments, Bach's background and place in music history needs to be examined. It is also important to examine the legacy of Bach that has been created by his biographers and how it shaped the image of Bach today. After examining the arguments, I will examine one his major sacred compositions, the *St. Matthew Passion* to see whether his works can be called "theological".

Not only was Bach the last traditional Lutheran church musician, he also took the genres he composed to their highest form through his masterful technique. Regardless of whether he was a theologian, his pieces are looked upon today as some of the greatest compositions ever created, religious or secular.

I. Bach's Background

It is important to examine Bach's childhood to see how theology played a role in his life. Bach lived and worked in an area that was still rooted in the Reformation ideals of Martin Luther two hundred years after the Reformation. The theological influences of Bach's childhood may have shaped his ideas and character throughout the rest of his life. The Reformation ideals were still very important to German society of the times, but were they important to Bach himself?

Eisenach (1685-1695)

Johann Sebastian Bach was born in Eisenach, Germany in 1685 to Johann Ambrosius Bach and Maria Elisabeth Lämmerhirt. He was the youngest of eight children and was part of a very musical family in Germany. His father, Johann Ambrosius Bach came to Eisenach in 1671 to become the director of town music. Although he was primarily a string player, he was also the town piper and court trumpeter. Johann Sebastian Bach was of the seventh generation of musicians in his family that worked as town musicians, church organists, and cantors.[3]

Eisenach had also been the home of Martin Luther (1483-1546) and was still deeply rooted in Lutheran theology some two hundred years after his death. As a result, Bach was exposed to Lutheranism at a very early age. He was also baptized in St. George's, the main church in Eisenach, which was at base of the Wartburg castle, where Luther had translated the Bible into German.

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[3] Oxford University Press, "Johann Sebastian Bach" Grove Music Online ed. L. Macy (Accessed 4 March 2004), <http://www.grovemusic.com>.
In Germany, the cantor was the director of music in a Lutheran church and usually also the musical head of a Gymnasium, Lateinschule or other educational establishment connected with the church. From the Reformation until the mid-18th century the post of cantor at a large city such as Hamburg or Leipzig (where Bach was cantor of the Thomasschule from 1723 until his death) was one of the most highly esteemed in Germany; in addition to composing and directing sacred music the duties often included training the choir, teaching practical and theoretical music and other subjects, and taking part in civic secular music. (Grove Dictionary)

Religious instruction in the Bible, hymnal, and catechism dominated the German and Latin schools in Germany at that time.[4] Bach attended German school from ages 5-7 and at 8 he was old enough to attend the more prestigious Latin school in Eisenach (which was also attended by Luther when he was a boy). The school was rooted in humanistic and theological education.[5] By the time he was ten years old, Bach was reading the New Testament in Latin.

Ohrdruf (1695-1700)

In 1694, Bach's mother died and the next year his father followed her, leaving young Bach an orphan when he was just ten years old. He and another brother went to live with their eldest brother Johann Christoph Bach in Ohrdruf. Johann Christoph had been the organist at St. Michael's church since 1690 and gave Bach his first formal keyboard lessons.

Bach continued school at the prestigious *Lyceum*, which drew students from all over the province of Thuringia. It was a preparatory school for the university and focused on religion, reading, writing, arithmetic, singing, history and natural science.[6] Theology was the primary subject and taught with a Lutheran approach to the study of the Bible. The Bible, hymnal and catechism were the most important texts taught.[7] Music instruction was second to theology, often taught by the same teacher, particularly when the music teacher had learned theology at the university.[8] Bach spent four to five hours a week studying music as part of the curriculum.

His stay in Ohrdruf in his brother's house lasted for five years. When he became fifteen, it was time for Bach to lift the financial burden off his older brother and his family. One of his teachers managed to get him a scholarship to *Michaelisschule* (St. Michael's school) in Lüneburg.

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[4] Christoph Wolff, Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician (New York: Norton, 2000), 26.
[5] Grove, <http://www.grovemusic.com>.
[6] Grove, <http://www.grovemusic.com>.
[7] Wolff, The Learned Musician, 26.
[8] Jan Chiapusso, Bach's World (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 13.

Lüneburg (1700-1703)

Although Bach only stayed in Lüneburg for two years, they marked the beginning of his formal relationship with the church. Bach sang in the St. Michael's church choir as a soprano soloist in exchange for tuition, room, board and a small allowance.[9] However, he could only have his scholarship as long as he had his soprano voice. Two years later he went through puberty, his voice changed and he played accompaniment to finish out his school year.[10]

At the *Michaelisschule*, Bach continued a similar education to the one he pursued in Ohrdruf. He studied orthodox Lutheranism (doctrine of the Lutheran church), logic, rhetoric, Latin and Greek, arithmetic, history, geography and German poetry.[11] Although Bach's intellectual interests were broadening, theology and orthodox Lutheranism were still predominant subjects.

The excellent schools that Bach attended devoted much time to studying theology. There is no doubt that he knew and understood theology and the Lutheran interpretation of the time. Whether or not he truly believed what he had learned, these ideas are incorporated into his sacred music.

Bach's career – sacred vs. secular

Arnstadt (1703-1707)

Bach had a short stopover in Weimar as a violinist in the court orchestra for a few months after completing his education in Lüneburg. He was there as a servant of the Duke and his job was not very serious. He was soon called to Arnstadt to inspect the new organ in the Neue

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[9] Günther Stiller, Johann Sebastian Bach and Liturgical Life in Leipzig, trans. Herbert J.A. Bouman et al. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1984), 16.
[10] Timothy A. Smith, "Bach's World," The Cannons and Fugues of J.S. Bach, 1996, <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~tas3/life.html> (2 March 2004).
[11] Grove, <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

Kirche.[12] Bach had obtained organ-building skills while living in Eisenach, Ohrdruf and Lüneburg and at eighteen was quite an expert in the field. He was the first person to play the new organ and give a recital on it and was immediately offered the job of organist at the church.

In 1703 he moved to Arnstadt, a small town with only 3,800 people. It had little to offer in the way of further education in terms of books and libraries. However, it did offer connections to some of his relatives, including a second cousin, Maria Barbara, who later became his wife in 1707. He also received an unusually high salary given his age, experience and the size of the town.

Bach trained a choir of schoolboys, even though it was not part of his specific duty. He was given the roughest group that had no discipline. Only eighteen years old himself and not a schoolmaster, Bach was not prepared to handle this unruly group. Part of the problem was that he was actually younger than some of his students.[13] In one incident he was in a street brawl with one of his bassoonists after he called him a "Zippelfagottist."[14] This did not put him in a very good light with the city Consistory (town council), which employed him.

There was more trouble with the Consistory when Bach went to visit well-known organist Dietrich Buxtehude. Bach originally asked for a one-month leave of absence, found a suitable replacement (yet another relative), and walked two hundred miles to Lübeck.[15] However, Bach ended up staying four times as long. He also picked up more virtuosic techniques in his organ playing from Buxtehude, such as elaborate accompaniments to chorales, which were too much for his congregation in Arnstadt.[16] Between his overstay in Lübeck,

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[12] meaning "New Church." The old church had burned down in a fire.
[13] Grove, <http://www.grovemusic.com>.
[14] "dumb bassoonist."
[15] This was the claim of his son, Carl Phillip Emmanuel Bach, however modern scholars doubt whether he walked all that way based upon dates and distance.
[16] Grove, <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

church members unhappy over his new style, and their belief that he was not performing his duty in training the boys choir, Bach needed to find new employment.

Mühlhausen (1707-1708)

Bach became the new organist at the church of St. Blasius after the death of the previous organist. Many of Bach's relatives tried to dissuade him from accepting this position because of the church's pietistic nature. Music was not a high priority within pietism because the pietists wanted to get rid of the liturgy and elaborate music. The young Bach did not think that this would be a problem. However, he soon realized that instead of enriching the music of the church, the pastor (a pietist) of St. Blasius wanted to diminish the role of music.

During his time in Mühlhausen, Bach wrote his first cantata entitled *Gott ist mein König* (God is my King). It was written for the city leaders of Mühlhausen. The town was so excited that they went to the expense of publishing the cantata so they could learn and perform it.[17] This was the only of his cantatas that was published during his lifetime.

Although Bach tried to encourage "well-regulated church music" (i.e liturgy, hymns, cantatas and other works associated with the church) in Mühlhausen and the surrounding villages, he met with much opposition, specifically from the church.[18] The town council was reluctant to let him leave, but it was clear that he was in opposition with the pietist church and found a new position in the court at Weimar.

Weimar (1708-1717)

Bach moved back to Weimar and entered the service of the court of the two dukes from 1708-1717, his longest employment yet by far. He was appointed court organist and chamber musician and his duties were light. After he was offered a job in church in Halle, the court

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[17] Smith, <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~tas3/life.html>.
[18] Grove, <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

doubled his salary and gave him the title of *Konzertmeister* (director and player of the court orchestra) to entice him to stay. His new position also stipulated that he had to compose a new composition each month.

During his stay in Weimar, he was encouraged to compose for the organ. He composed most of his well-known organ pieces, including his *Orgelbüchlein* along with a plethora of cantatas.[19] The *Orgelbüchlein* is a collection of chorales for the church year. His only secular pieces were the first and last of his Brandenburg concerti.[20]

Bach became frustrated with his position when he was not appointed to *Kapellmeister* (chapel master) when the position opened up. In order to stop Bach from leaving the court, Duke Wilhelm put Bach in jail for a month to change his mind. He was later released and allowed to work for the Duke's hated nephew in Cöthen.

Cöthen (1717-1723)

In Cöthen, Bach entered the service of Prince Leopold, who was a generous supporter of the arts and music. The town itself was Calvinist and had no instrumental music as part of the church service. The organs were also not up to Bach's standards. His salary did double from that of the court in Weimar, making this his highest paying job in his career. He was also held in high esteem by the court.[21]

Since Bach could not compose for the churches, he spent most of his time composing for the Prince's band. Along with the band music he wrote a considerable amount of chamber music. He also finished his Brandenburg concerti that he began in Weimar. Virtually all of his music from this period is secular.

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[19] Bach's *Orgelbüchlein* (little organ book) contains his chorale prelude arrangements for the church year. This is a standard organ repertoire book for most organists today.
[20] Smith, <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~tas3/life.html>.
[21] Grove, <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

During this time, Bach applied for a church job in Hamburg. He was attracted by the wonderful organ and traveled there to perform for the committee. He was immediately their favorite, however they wanted him to contribute a substantial amount of money to the church in return. Bach declined and went back to Cöthen to perform for the prince's birthday.

In 1720, his wife Maria Barbara, whom he married in 1707, died of a sudden illness. Bach remarried eighteen months later, to Anna Magdalena Wilcken, a professional singer at the court. The same year Prince Leopold married a woman who was not sympathetic to the arts. Between her influence and the Prince's new fascination with the army, Bach found himself in need of a new position. The prince allowed him the freedom to travel to find a new position, which he found in Leipzig.

Leipzig (1723-1750)

Bach's move to Leipzig was the final move of his career. Part of the reason for moving to Leipzig was that he wanted a better education for his children and the university in Leipzig was the best in the German-speaking world.[22] In some respects, it may not have been the wisest move. For Bach, this position was a step downwards in the social scale, and he had little respect for his employers. To the council, Bach was third-rate in comparison to the other candiates.[23] They perceived him as a mediocre player who would not do what they expected a cantor to do: to teach Latin and organize the city church music.[24] As Cantor of the *Thomaskirche* (St. Thomas Church), his salary was also one-fourth of what he was making in Cöthen and his wife also lost her stipend as a singer.

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[22] Chiapusso, 179.
[23] Bach was their third choice for the job behind Georg Philipp Telemann and Christoph Graupner.
[24] Grove, <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

As part of the application process, Bach was tested on his knowledge of Lutheran dogma.[25] He was pronounced, "theologically sound" by theologian Dr. Johann Schmid and given the position after he signed the Formula of Concord.[26] His responsibilities were also much heavier than in any other position he had. Not only did he have to write a cantata a week and have rehearsals with the singers and instrumentalists for it, he was also in charge of training the choirboys.

The first few years in Leipzig were the most productive of his career. He wrote five yearly cantata cycles (59 in each cycle) and also performed his *St. John Passion*, composed his *Magnificat* (1723), and the *St. Matthew Passion* (1727). Although only a little over half of his cantatas exist today, all three of the larger works survived.

From 1723 to 1730 Bach had many quarrels with the town council. As cantor of the *Thomaskirche*, his position allowed him the title of music director of the university. Unfortunately, the university favored another musician over Bach and pulled their support away from the *Thomaskirche*. This made it hard for Bach to recruit musicians to play and sing for his cantatas, since the university students were the musicians. The University eventually quit commissioning Bach for pieces and Bach lost another source of income.

Bach became frustrated with his position financially and artistically. In 1729, however, he was appointed director of the *Collegium Musicum*, an orchestra of students and professionals. Bach was also a guest performer on harpsichord and wrote many chamber ensemble pieces.

In 1734, Johann August Ernesti became the new headmaster at the *Thomaskirche*. Bach had never gotten along with any of the previous headmasters and this continued. Ernesti had many ideals of the Enlightenment and felt that the music in the *Thomasschule* needed to be

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[25] Chiapusso, 184.
[26] The Formula of Concord contained the official articles of the Lutheran church.

diminished in respect to the other subjects. The Enlightenment focused on individual intellect and wanted to move away from theology and music and toward other subjects. Bach and Ernesti battled over who would appoint the prefects (leaders) in the choir. Although it was Bach's right, Ernesti felt that it was his duty to do so. This dispute went on for two years before the court in Dresden ended it.[27]

Bach wrote a few small cantatas and four other oratorios after 1730, but after 1735, his writing of religious cantatas began to slow dramatically. He had created a substantial repertoire of cantatas, which he could reuse. From 1735 until his death in 1750 he was more withdrawn and mainly composed keyboard works. However, in 1736 he was also appointed court *Kapellmeister* and composer in Dresden for the Elector of Saxony. The last religious work he wrote was his *Mass in B Minor* for Dresden. The other works he composed for them were secular.

Despite all the trouble he had, Bach stayed in Leipzig for the rest of his life. In 1749, the town council in Leipzig sought a replacement for Bach, most likely because Bach was not active in his duties any longer. He had trouble with his eyesight and saw a British doctor early in 1750 for his condition. Bach died later that year from a stroke.

Bach was a very versatile composer: he composed in every genre of his time except for opera (although oratorios and passions are the sacred counterpart to opera). For the most part, his output reflected on his position in each town where he worked. Arnstadt, Mülhausen and Leipzig were all positions associated with the church and his output there was sacred church music.

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[27] Grove, <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

Even though his position in Weimar was with the court and not directly with the church, his primary output there was also church music. It is interesting that when Bach was allowed to compose anything at the court in Weimar he chose to compose some of his best organ music. While Bach was at the court in Cöthen, he primarily composed secular music because there was no outlet for sacred works. One wonders if Cöthen had been a more Lutheran town, would Bach have composed more sacred works?

As a career move, the switch from Cöthen to Leipzig was a big step backwards for Bach. Not only was the pay considerably less, but his social standing also went from being *Hofkomponiest* (court composer) to cantor of the *Thomaskirche*, which is even less than *Kapellmeister.*[28] He was also on the same pay scale as a mason or metalworker in Leipzig.

What possessed Bach to leave his good position in Cöthen and stay at his less-than-perfect job in Leipzig for twenty-seven years? Was Bach so devoted to his church music that he took the first position that allowed him to compose in that area? Why did he not leave Leipzig and find a new position after all of his troubles there? With his talents he would have surely found another position to his liking. Whatever the reasons may have been, the fact remains that Bach spent more than half of his life in the service of the church.

II. Images of Bach

After Bach's death in 1750, the emphasis on Lutheran church music fell away in the pre-classical period. As a result, there was no public venue for his works to be heard and they were utterly forgotten. The only works of his that were published during Bach's lifetime include the *Clavier-übung*, the Schübler chorales, the variations on *Vom Himmel hoch*, and the *Musical Offering.*[29] To try to keep his father's music alive, one of Bach's elder sons, C.P.E. Bach, wrote

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[28] Smith, <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~tas3/life.html>.
[29] Grout, 404.

an extended obituary of his late father and also compiled the first catalogue of his father's manuscript works.

Part of the reason why Bach's works were forgotten was the radical change in musical taste in the middle of the 18th century.[30] Although Bach remained an influence on future composers, his compositions were not readily available to the public. Mozart and Beethoven, two of the great classical composers, were influenced by Bach's works only through their mutual connection with Baron von Swieten, who was the head of the imperial library in Vienna and had access to the works of Bach.

A real revival of Bach's works did not occur until the 19th Century. Felix Mendelssohn, a Romantic composer, was given the score of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* as a gift from his grandmother, Bella Salomon, in 1824.[31] In 1829, he conducted a performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* in Berlin, which brought much attention to Bach and his works.

This performance prompted the publication of his works in 47 monumental volumes.[32] Through the growing number of public concerts and the new concert halls built in the 19th century, more of Bach's works were played and heard each year. Finally in 1850, through the urging of many famous Romantic composers such as Mendelssohn, Robert Schumann, C.F. Becker, and Mortiz Hauptmann, the Bach Gesellschaft[33] was formed. It was set up to publish a complete critical edition of his works.[34] This not only opened up a completely new world for scholarship on Bach and his works, but also was the first German musicological society of this scope.[35]

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[30] Grout, 404.
[31] Grove, <www.grovemusic.com>.
[32] Grout, 575.
[33] Bach society.
[34] Grove, <www.grovemusic.com>.
[35] Grove, <www.grovemusic.com>.

Early Biographers

This new world of evaluation on Bach opened up the door for biographies to be written. The very first biography of Bach was written in 1802 by Johann Nikolaus Forkel. He worked closely with C.P.E. Bach to obtain manuscripts of Bach compositions for analysis and future publication. Forkel wrote a small biography on Bach and dedicated it to Baron von Swieten, partly because he felt it was a good idea to attract his interest in the whole project.[36] Forkel's picture of Bach was mainly that of a virtuoso player and a craftsman in composing. The church did not play a significant part in his analysis and Forkel portrayed Bach as a national hero, guardian of "true German spirit."[37]

Forkel was the only person who took interest in creating a biography of Bach prior to the formation of the Bach Gesellschaft in 1850. Karl Hermann Bitter was the next biographer who wrote *The Life of J.S. Bach* in 1865, sixty-three years after Forkel.[38] His biography presented Bach as a devout Christian, fervent Lutheran, and a theological church musician.

> He was in truth a sincere Christian; and his deep religious feeling is shown throughout his life. He was a zealous Lutheran; his healthy mind was not troubled with doubts, but he had not, like so many, passively remained in the church in which he was brought up; he had made its creed his own by faithful study and mature reflection; had embraced it with his understanding, and impressed it on his heart, and his life was shaped in conformity to it.[39]

Thirteen years after Bitter wrote his biography, Philip Spitta wrote a two-volume biography on Bach. Spitta became the foremost biographer of Bach and was considered as such for almost the next one hundred years.[40] His work was considered conclusive and

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[36] Christoph Wolff, The New Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents (New York: Norton, 1998), 393.
[37] Friedrich Blume, "Outlines of a New Picture of Bach," Music and Letters 44, no. 3 (1963): 216.
[38] The English version was written in 1873 and is an abridged version of the original biography.
[39] Karl Hermann Bitter, The Life of J. Sebastian Bach, trans. Janet E Kay-Shuttleworth. (London: Houlston and Sons, 1873), 46.
[40] Until Christoph Wolff, who is the foremost expert on Bach today.

unsurpassable.[41] His biography described the whole scope and importance of Bach's work in an "objective and historically sound manner unlike any other author before him."[42] Spitta's catalogue of Bach's works was also the authoritative source until the 1950s.

Even though Spitta was the respected source on Bach, he also followed suit with Bitter and turned Bach into the "great Lutheran cantor."[43] According to Walter Buszin, Spitta grew up in the strict Lutheran orthodoxy similar to Bach and had a sort of hero worship of Bach. Spitta also believed that "one must understand the Lutheran background of Bach if one wishes to understand and appreciate his music fully."[44]

Both Bitter and Spitta created the portrait of Bach as a great Lutheran theologian. The ideas of these 19th century Romantic writers were also found in the early 20th century in Albert Schweitzer's two-volume biography on Bach in 1905.[45] Although he was not as passionate about connecting Bach with Lutheran orthodoxy, Schweitzer did find music and religion connected in Bach.

> Music is an act of worship with Bach. His artistic activity and his personality are both based on his piety. If he is to be understood from any standpoint at all, it is from this. For him, art was religion, and so had no concern with the world or with worldly success. It was an end in itself. Bach includes religion in the definition of art in general. All great art, even secular, is in itself religious in his eyes; for him the tones do not perish, but ascend to God like praise too deep for utterance.[46]

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[41] Blume, 215.
[42] Wolff, Bach Reader, 505.
[43] Blume, 216.
[44] Walter E Buszin, "Lutheran Theology as reflected in the life and work of J S Bach," Concordia Theological Monthly 21 (1950): 897.
[45] First written in French in 1905, translated to German and expanded in 1908 and translated to English from the German translation in 1911.
[46] Albert Schweitzer, J.S. Bach (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1947), 167.

Schweitzer saw that Bach had been subjected to many inner conflicts, which "invariably vex the typically genuine Lutheran."[47] He also believed that music and religion went hand in hand where Bach is concerned.

Epithets of Bach

As a result of these portraits of Bach, many epithets to describe Bach's character began to emerge. Soon Bach became known as "the Classic Lutheran Layman," "a Sign of God," "the Preacher," "the Teacher," "the Theologian," and "the First Great German Voice Since Luther," along with various other such names.[48]

Many of the Bach scholars of the 20th century also asserted that he was a devout Christian and theological church musician. Throughout these books and articles, the epithets multiplied: "God's musical ambassador," "God's master musician," and "St. Sebastian." These epithetical depictions are still used today and seem to have helped to reinforce this glorified ideal of Bach. These epithets have made Bach into a sort of theological idol for other church musicians to aspire to.

The most extravagant of all the epithets is "the Fifth Evangelist," given to us by the Archbishop Nathan Soederblom of Uppsala, Sweden.[49] Past biographers of Bach have not only used this epithet, but it is casually used today in books and articles as a description of Bach. Is Bach truly worthy of this highly exalted description?

An "evangelist" means one who proclaims the Gospel. The capitalized term "Evangelist" refers to one of the four gospel writers. By naming Bach "the Fifth Evangelist," it places him side by side with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Are Bach's works on the same level as these

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[47] Buszin, 897.
[48] Robin Leaver, ed., J.S. Bach and Scripture: Glosses from the Calov Bible Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 1985), 13.
[49] Buszin, 898.

four gospel writers? Does Bach's music proclaim the gospel on the same level? The four gospel writers were inspired to write by God, was Bach inspired in the same way?

Richard Dinwiddie, a modern musicologist seems to think so. He has similar ideas about Bach's theological significance as the early biographers did. For a scholar writing about a hundred and twenty years later, he goes beyond the claims of these early biographers and creates an image of Bach that is next to godliness.

His article entitled "J.S. Bach: God's Master Musician" is an epithet unto itself. His description under this epithetical title is "[Bach] expressed a profound theology in music better than anyone has ever done." Throughout the entire article, Dinwiddie claims that Bach is "one of the greatest evangelists in history," that he had "intimate devotion to his Savior," and "total dedication to Christ."[50]

What is striking about this article is that there are very few sources quoted. Dinwiddie treats all of the grand claims about Bach theological character as facts. It is striking to see scholarship carry on in the same manner as it did a century before and in some ways takes the epithetical ideas about Bach even further.

New Picture of Bach

Another reason why Dinwiddie's article is so interesting is that there was much discussion and scholarship in the mid-1960s on this subject. It seems strange for an author writing in 1985 to ignore the other side of Bach presented by Friedrich Blume and the new chronology of his works, especially because of the impact it had on Bach scholarship.

Blume was a German musicologist who took great interest in Bach's theological character. He looked at Bach's biography and the history of scholarship on Bach and concluded

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[50] Richard Dinwiddie, "J.S. Bach: God's Master Musician." Christianity Today 29 (1985): 16.

"Bach was no more a church musician than any of his few great and many smaller contemporaries."[51]

In comparison to the first and second choices for the Leipzig job (Telemann and Graupner), Bach composed far less church music than either of the two. According to Blume, his output in organ music was also far less than that of many other organists of the time and some of them, like Pachelbel, Buxtehude, Murschhauser, Zachow and others were professional church musicians throughout or for most of their lives.[52] In Blume's opinion, Bach "turned his back on the service of the church" when he went to the court at Weimar and "only with the greatest reluctance that he resumed the cantor's gown" in Leipzig.[53] He does not find any evidence that it was spiritually necessary for Bach to be a church musician. He believes that "Bach, the supreme cantor, the creative servant of the Word of God, the staunch Lutheran, is a legend" created by traditional and romantic illusions.[54]

Part of Blume's argument derives from a new chronology of Bach's works that was developed in the 1950's by Georg von Dadelsen and Alfred Dürr. This new chronology changes the way that Bach's twenty-seven years in Leipzig are seen and the way that previous scholars have viewed him. This new chronology was based on research into the watermarks in the paper of the original manuscripts and the handwriting of the various copyists that Bach employed.[55] Although the watermark research was not a new technique, it was finally applied to *all* of Bach's works so that they could all be analyzed in the same way.

The results were quite surprising to many scholars because watermark test demonstrated that most of Bach's Leipzig church cantatas date from between 1723 and 1729, not after 1730 as

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[51] Blume, 217.
[52] Blume, 217-218.
[53] Blume, 218.
[54] Blume, 218.
[55] Alfred Dürr, "New Light on Bach," Musical Times 107, no. 1480 (1966): 484.

originally thought. It also showed that the Kyrie and Gloria of the *Mass in B minor* were sent to Dresden in 1733, but the rest of the work (Credo, Sanctus and Angus Dei) are from the very last years of Bach's life.[56] Although it is possible that Bach wrote compositions after 1730, only a few of his larger works have survived until today. The output that is available from 1730 on is very small in comparison to his compositions from the first five years in Leipzig.

Blume's work also reveals is that not all of Bach's cantatas are original compositions, but that he used the musical device known as "parody" in some of them. In other words, he took themes and ideas from some of his other works, such as secular vocal or instrumental works, and used them in his cantatas. Parodies have been found in some of his major works such as the *Easter Oratorio* and *Christmas Oratorio*, and the *Mass in B Minor* is full of parody movements.[57] Blume believes that there are many more parodies in Bach's music than have not yet been found. Parody, in Blume's opinion, is the only explanation for how Bach created such a large output of music in the first few years of his career in Leipzig.

Blume goes on to claim, "there are numerous cantatas where our sense of their religious quality is not in the slightest diminished by our knowledge that they are parodies," even though these cantatas have been proven to be based on secular rather than sacred music.[58] Conversely, Blume argues that in Bach's case, his theological character is not as strong as a result of these parodies of secular music. Although parody was used quite often in the church, they were not based on any "heartfelt" need or devout feelings, making them less theological in Blume's eyes.[59]

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[56] Dürr, 484.
[57] Blume, 220.
[58] Blume, 221.
[59] Blume, 221.

This new picture of Bach for Blume is not necessarily true for his whole life, but focused on his time in Leipzig. Blume concedes that the picture of Bach in his earlier years in Weimar, Arnstadt and Mühlhausen remains the same: Bach identified himself with the office of Lutheran organist.[60] It was his letter of resignation from his post in Mühlhausen that "makes it perfectly clear that Bach the church musician became Bach the court musician on moving to Weimar."[61] In Blume's opinion, he did not find it difficult to give up his church music job for more freedom and money at the court.

The letter in question was Bach's request for his dismissal from the pietistic church in Mühlhausen. This is one of two letters written in Bach's hand that has survived until today. Towards the end of the letter, Bach gives his reason for wanting to leave.

> Now, God has brought it to pass that an unexpected change should offer itself to me, in which I see the possibility of a more adequate living and the achievement of my goal of a well-regulated church music without further vexation...[62]

Bach was trying to explain that he could not produce his "well-regulated church music" in the pietistic setting in Mühlhausen. It also showed that composing church music was important to him.

The new chronology supports the fact that the first five years of Bach in Leipzig were years of great musical output while the last twenty-two years were very meager in comparison. Blume believed Bach was "bitterly depressed by his situation in Leipzig with the narrowness of the musical conditions and with all of his quarrels with the authorities and students in Leipzig."[63] His last compositions, the *Musical Offering* and the *Art of the Fugue*, were works for teaching

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[60] Blume, 223.
[61] Blume, 223.
[62] Wolff, Bach Reader, 57.
[63] Blume, 225.

rather than performing, and were written to continue the contrapuntal techniques from the school of Palestrina.[64]

At the very end of Blume's article, he states that Bach needs to be perceived with an open mind and that all sides need to be considered when interpreting Bach.

> Those who see Bach as the mere guardian of tradition misinterpret him just as much as those who try to see him exclusively as the pioneer; and those who see in him only the churchman just as much as those who characterize him one-sidedly as the court *Kapellmeister*; and those who see him only as the learned musician in his study just as much as those who lower him to the level of the mere virtuoso, conductor and hack. He was all these things, and his greatness lies not least in the fact that he was able to combine them all in himself and to integrate them, from the power of his own spirit, in a work of absolutely unique quality.[65]

Blume reinforces the fact that there are so many different images of Bach and that many of them are very biased in their view.

It is interesting that Blume includes this statement is at the end of his article that is somewhat biased itself. Blume waits until the very end of his conclusion to discuss the other views of Bach. One wonders if he did this because this was his true belief, or that he was trying to appease the other side. In either case, being in the extreme minority in his view of Bach, it is no wonder that Blume spends his whole article trying to present the other side to an audience that has held a common belief about Bach for such a long time.

Although Blume makes a good case for looking at Bach from another point of view, its weakness is that the only real evidence in Blume's favor is the new chronology. The rest is left up to speculation and interpretation. In fact, Alfred Dürr, who helped to create the new chronology, has a different perspective on the new picture of Bach.

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[64] See footnote 2.
[65] Blume, 227.

Dürr does not accept Blume's idea that a true church musician would not pack all of his compositions into just a few years, but would spread them out through his entire career. He does not find anything wrong with Bach's faith as a result of the new chronology.

> The premise seems to me unsound. I do not see why a man should not be regarded as a church musician—and as fully conscious of his bent—just because when he first took office, he devoted superhuman energy to providing himself with a stock of practicable compositions of his own, to be repeated as necessary. Indeed I doubt whether it would have been physically possible for Bach to continue such exertions throughout his life; and in any case I cannot see how the known facts can be used to prove that Bach lost his vocation—any more than I can see the converse would be true; that is to say, that writing church cantatas at regular intervals throughout the Leipzig period would have proved that he was a devout Christian.[66]

Dürr brings up a very good question: what amount of output in a certain time interval constitutes Bach as a devout Christian? Does any amount of compositions constitute him as a church musician?

One explanation that Dürr gives for the lack of compositions between 1730 and 1750 is that beginning in 1729 Bach worked for the *Collegium Musicum* in addition to his job as cantor at the *Thomaskirche*. Every week the *Collegium Musicum* performed at Zimmermann's coffee-house, which required a great deal of music. Dürr believes that the coffee-house heard the performance of many of Bach's original compositions that no longer exist.[67]

The general problem with trying to make out Bach's personality, according to Dürr, is that there is so little evidence of it. There are only two letters that Bach wrote that survive today, one is his resignation from his post at Mühlhausen, which stated that his aim was to give regular performances of church music to the glory of God. The other letter is to his school-friend Georg Erdmann, in which Bach describes how he got his job in Leipzig, what his duties are, and asks for Erdmann's help in finding another post.

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[66] Dürr, 484-485.
[67] Dürr, 487.

> ...it pleased God that I should be called hither to be *Director Musices* and Cantor at the St. Thomas School. Though at first, indeed, it did not seem at all proper to me to change my position of Capellmeister for that of Cantor...Here, by God's will, I am still in service. But since (1) I find that the post is by no means so lucrative as it was described to me; (2) I have failed to obtain many of the fees pertaining to the office; (3) the place is very expensive; and (4) the authorities are odd and little interested in music, so that I must live amid almost continual vexation, envy and persecution; accordingly I shall be forced, with God's help, to seek my fortune elsewhere.[68]

The letters were each written for a specific purpose, the first one was to explain why he wanted to leave his difficult situation in the pietistic town. The second was to explain why he found his job in Leipzig less satisfying than he hoped. Dürr points out that these letters, the only personal connection we have to Bach, have been taken out of context by scholars and used to mean more than what Bach meant them to.

Dürr also tries to disprove the notion that Bach turned his back on Lutheranism in his last years. Even though the chronology has dated most of his cantatas to 1724-1725, his variations on Luther's *Vom Himmel hoch* (From Heaven Above) from 1747 are still rooted in devout Lutheranism.[69] Just because he did not have significant output rooted in Lutheranism after 1730, does not mean that Bach lost his faith and did not want to write traditional Lutheran church music anymore, Dürr argues.

Both Blume and Dürr try to make sense of the changes to the portrait of Bach that results from the new chronology. Although they each reached different conclusions in their portraits, they both agree that the new chronology is a major discovery that changes the way Bach has been portrayed by previous biographers and scholars.

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[68] Wolff, Bach Reader, 151-152.
[69] Dürr, 488.

Calov Bible

Another tool for evaluating Bach's theological character is the discovery of the Calov Bible. This is a three-volume commentary on the Bible by Abraham Calov, which includes a translation of Martin Luther's *Die deutsche Bibel* (The German Bible). Johann Abraham Calov (1612-1686) is considered one of the most important Lutheran theologians of his time was an adamant defender of the Augsburg Confession during the seventeenth century.[70] He added concordances, annotations and explanations to his edition of Luther's Bible.

The Calov Bible was one of eighty-three theological works that Bach had in his personal library. Along with the Calov Bible there were two volumes of Luther's works and at least another edition of the German Bible that Bach used to fill in the missing verses of the Calov Bible.[71] After his death, these theological works went to his widow Anna Magdalena Bach and disappeared from there.

Oddly enough, the Calov Bible was not discovered in Germany, but in Frankenmuth, Michigan, a town founded by German missionaries in 1845. In 1934, the Michigan District of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod met in Frankenmuth. Pastor Christian G. Reidel stayed with his cousin, Leonard Reichle, while he attended the conference. One night during his stay, Reichle wanted to show the pastor his father's old German New Testament that was bought in Philadelphia. What the farmer and his family never noticed, before Pastor Reidel pointed it out, was on the bottom right-hand corner of the title page was Bach's monogram with the year 1733 written underneath.[72]

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[70] Christoph Trautmann, "J.S. Bach: New Light on His Faith," Concordia Theological Monthly 42, no. 2 (1971): 92.
[71] It is unclear if these verses were left out in editing or were purposefully left out by Calov. This is an area of continuing investigation.
[72] Leaver, 17.

The first two volumes were recovered from a chest hidden in the attic of the Reichle's house.[73] Now, the complete set of Calov's translation of *Die deutsche Bibel* had been discovered. For five years, the Bach experts wanted Riechle to give the Bible to the Bach Museum in Eisenach to be added to their special collection, but this was during the Nazi era of Germany and Reichle felt that the Germans were not "upright, God-fearing people."[74] Instead, in 1938, he was persuaded to donate the Calov Bible to the Concordia Seminary Library in St. Louis.

The Calov Bible was left alone for several decades and was not even examined until 1969, when it was loaned to the *Bachfest* in Heidelburg that year. While it was in Germany, Bach scholar Christoph Trautmann examined the Bible in detail. He found marginalia and other markings that were in Bach's hand, such as: candid personal notes, missing Bible texts, amplification or comments on the commentary and typographical errors which Bach corrected in the Bible text and commentary.[75] Four specific marginalia were directly linked to Bach by Trautmann. All four of these were in Bach's handwriting and most of them were in red ink. Although there were many other owners of the Bible from 1733 to 1934, only Bach used red ink when writing in the Bible.

The Calov Bible is one of the few glimpses we have into the theology of Bach. Although this Bible is from 1733, long after most of his major works were written, it shows that Bach took an active interest in studying the Bible and went to the effort of commenting on and working with the texts. Since Bach filled in the missing Biblical texts in the Calov Bible, he must have had another Bible to consult.

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[73] Leaver, 18.
[74] Christoph Trautmann, "Bach's Bible," American Choral Review 14, no. 4 (1972): 7.
[75] Leaver, 21.

> *NB* This chapter is the true foundation of all God-pleasing church music.[78]

Since the Old Testament is looked upon as the origin of church music, Bach saw his work ordained by David. Bach found his calling in this chapter since this is where instrumental music receives its blessing to be a part of the church service.

The third entry is found in response to 1 Chronicles 29:21:

> Behold the divisions of the priests and the Levites for all the service of the house of God; and with you in all the work will be every willing man who has skill for any kind of service; also the officers and all the people will be wholly at your command.

Bach's response to this verse is:

> *NB* Splendid proof that, beside other arrangements of the service, music too was instituted by the Spirit of God through David.[79]

It seems that in this entry, Bach is using the text to defend himself against some kind of attack. Knowing how much trouble he was having with the authorities in Leipzig, it is no wonder that he would note verses that showed the importance of music in the church. This was his biblical validation to bring to the authorities.

The last entry that Bach made was in response to 2 Chronicles 5:13:

> And it was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the LORD, and when the song was raised, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise the to LORD, "For He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever"[Ps. 136:1], the house, the house of the LORD, was filled with a cloud.

In response to this verse, Bach wrote:

> *NB* Where there is devotional music, God is always at hand with His gracious presence. [80]

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[78] Trautmann, 94.
[79] Trautmann, 95.
[80] Trautmann, 95.

Calov summarized these verses 11-14 with the subtitle "How the Glory of the Lord Appeared After Beautiful Music."[81] Bach underlined in red ink the words "beautiful music" in the commentary as well as any time the words appeared in the Biblical text.

Since these four marginalia passages are not directly connected with his music or musical texts, they are evidence that Bach did not just use the Bible sources for his masterpieces. His careful study of the Bible is shown by the effort he took to mark in it. Trautmann see this as an "expression of a mature person conscious of his responsibility, a Christian and an artist."[82]

There are many more markings and *nota benes* (NB) in the Bible, but extensive studies in graphology have not yet pinpointed the authors. In some cases the notes could possibly be Bach's, but the letters and print styles are so changed or deformed that handwriting matches cannot be determined.

Trautmann was a staunch believer that the Calov Bible proved that Bach was a Christian who lived with the Bible.[83] The fact that Bach used the not just for his compositions adds great weight to this argument. He believed that these four passages showed that Bach was a student of the Bible as well as a musician who proclaimed it.

These four marginalia are the only textual proof that modern scholars have to connect Bach with his theology or at least with the process of biblical study and interpretation. Many scholars agree with Trautmann and use the Calov Bible to support their arguments that Bach was a theologian. There are others, however, that do not believe that this is the case.

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[81] Trautmann, 95.
[82] Trautmann, 96.
[83] Trautmann, 99.

Although, Trautmann presents a tenable analysis of these four marginalia, his conclusions must remain open to question because the evidence on which he relies is very limited. It is clear that Bach took time to read and comment on the Bible and the commentary and Trautmann seems to equate studying the Bible with being a theologian. He also seems to take this a step further and equates being a theologian with being a Christian.

Since the marginalia were written well after most of his works were completed, especially his sacred works, they are hard to link directly back to them. These marginalia discuss how music and the Bible are connected in more general terms and not in creating specific works. Therefore, the marginalia support the attempt to separate the man from his works and look at his theological character. Trautmann uses the last three marginalia to show that Bach studied and commented not on passages directly linked to his works, but to the study of music in the Bible and this is what leads Trautmann to credit Bach as a Christian theologian.

Some scholars view the Calov Bible as a refutation of Blume's picture of Bach. Gerhard Herz believes that, contrary to Blume's contention, the Calov is proof that Bach was a theologian. He believes that "Bach's relation to his professional service as organist and cantor was indeed a relation of the heart," and that now there is "no split between Bach, the man and Bach, the church musician.[84]

The question still remains: can Bach's theological character truly be shown in just four marginalia? Do these four short passages ultimately prove that he is a theologian? Although these four passages are an important discovery and give us some sense of Bach's mind, can Bach's whole character be summed up in so little proof?

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[84] Gerhard Herz, "Toward a New Image of Bach, Parts I and II," Bach 16, no. 1 (1985): 29.

The Calov on its own may not be evidence of Bach's theological nature, but important conclusions can be drawn from it. Although these passages do not fit in with any of his works, it is clear that he was a student of the Bible if he took the time and effort to read and comment on the passages. The fact that he owned and studied this Bible when he was not writing a lot of music shows that he was still using it. Contrary to Blume's opinion, he most likely did not lose his faith after 1730 if he was commenting in the Calov Bible in 1733 or after.

Blume presents strong evidence against the idea that Bach was a theologian. He was the first (and one of the few scholars) to suggest that image of Bach might be different from the image of the first Romantic biographers. He points out that these biographers might have had an alternative agenda when they were creating their image of Bach.

Although Blume makes some very good points, his assumptions and portrait of Bach go a little too far in the other direction. It is Dürr who possibly presents the most useful approach of Bach thus far. Although Dürr does not come right out and say that Bach is a theologian, he does present a crucial question: what output of musical works in a certain period of time constitutes Bach as a devout Christian? Dürr also gives other reasons as to the lack of compositions that we have today from 1730-1750.

The Calov Bible shows that Bach was clearly a student of the Bible and his four marginalia show that he took the time to reflect on four passages in the Bible. This does put Bach closer to the category of theologian. Nevertheless, the Calov on its own is not enough to prove that Bach was a theologian. There needs to be some other evidence of study or reflection on God on the part of Bach to prove his theological character.

III. Bach and his work

Another way of analyzing Bach is to look at his compositions, particularly his vocal compositions with text, to see how theology plays a role. How Bach incorporates theology in his works can give insight to his theological character as a whole.

It can be argued that Bach's compositions are theological based on inscriptions he included in them. For example, at the beginning of his sacred works he wrote *Jesu Juva*, meaning "Jesus help." It was like a prayer at the beginning of his pieces. At the end he would write *Soli Deo Gloria* (Glory be to God Alone).[85] Also in his dedication in the *Orgelbüchlein*, he wrote "Dem Höchsten Gott allein' zu Ehren" (to the honor of the only God Most High).[86] This shows that Bach included these dedications for a reason. Although it is relatively small evidence, it can be added to the Calov Bible to make a stronger case for the scholars that consider Bach a theologian.

Passion Music

It is commonly accepted that Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* is not only one of his best large-scale compositions, but that it is also a very important sacred work. Some even consider it the "Jewel of the Genre" or the best Passion that has ever been composed.[87] However, Bach did not invent the Passion form and took many of his ideas from his predecessors in the genre.

The musical form of the Passion can be traced back to as early as the 5th century. This form was deeply rooted in the liturgy by having plainchant settings of the four Gospel accounts

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[85] It is unclear if anyone else did this in their compositions, but Bach is known for doing it on all of his compositions.

[86] Johann Sebastian Bach, Orgelbüchlein (St. Louis: Concordia, 1984), 23.

[87] Lisette Canton, "The St. Matthew Passion – The Jewel of the Genre," La Scena Musicale 7, no. 7 (2002): <http://www.scena.org/lsm/sm7-7/passion-en.html>.

of the Passion sung during Holy Week: St. Matthew on Palm Sunday, St. Mark on Tuesday, St. Luke on Wednesday and St. John on Good Friday. [88]

The earliest form of the passion as a drama dates to the Middle Ages. During this time, Passion plays were created with simple scenes in Latin with Gregorian plainchant. At first these plays were presented at the altar of the church, but since the church was not only a place of worship but also a common-meeting place, they ended up being performed in its nave or the porch.[89]

In the mid 16th century, the passion play in Germany took a radical turn. Lutheran composers based their settings on a German version of the gospel (Luther's translation) instead of the traditional Latin.[90] They also simplified the Latin melodies and used a more syllabic and less melismatic line.[91]

In the 17th century, the opera became a more prominent genre of music in Europe. This type of baroque opera, the precursor to its modern form, united music and drama on the stage. As a result, the oratorio became the sacred counterpart to the opera. Both opera and oratorio were very similar and used identical musical techniques, but differed in the subject matter and in the methods of dramatic presentation.[92] The oratorio did not have action on the stage like the opera, but had a narrator to describe the action that was taking place. The Evangelist in the Passion oratorios is a narrator, whose part of the libretto is taken from the biblical text.

Soon the oratorio was combined with the Passion: plainchant was converted to recitative, instrumental accompaniments were added, and arias, chorales and orchestral symphonies were

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[88] A form of unison chant (originally unaccompanied) of the Christian liturgies. (Grove Dictionary) An example of this would be Gregorian chant.
[89] Basil Smallman, The Background of Passion Music:J.S. Bach and his Predecessors (New York: Dover, 1970), 22.
[90] Smallman, 24.
[91] In plainchant, the setting of text characterized by florid groups of notes called melismas, each of which is sung to one syllable, as for example in most Kyries and alleluias. It is contrasted with neumatic or group style (mainly two to four notes per syllable) and syllabic style (mainly one note per syllable). (Grove Dictionary)
[92] Smallman, 29.

introduced into the composition. Subsequently, Passion music became a focus of Lutheran composers.[93] The oratorio became known as the "Passion oratorio" when the subject matter was the passion story. This type of oratorio exhibited a higher degree of independence between the singer and instrumental accompaniment than the earlier oratorios. Greater freedom in choice of a text also emerged as biblical paraphrase with poetical interpolations of a meditative character or the use of chorales for the same purpose.[94] These new vocal and musical forms added a meditative commentary on the gospel texts at significant points in the unfolding of the story.[95]

In Leipzig, the traditional type of Passion setting was a simple narrative in unaccompanied plainsong. A choir would sing the crowd parts in simple chordal responses.[96] This style went on for almost two hundred years until Bach's predecessor, Johann Kuhnau (1660-1722), yielded to the common practice at the time of writing an oratorio passion. He led the way for Bach to continue in this style when he assumed the role of cantor.

The Passion is usually performed on Good Friday, which is the day during Holy Week that commemorates Jesus' death on the cross. It is often thought of in theological terms as the suffering of Christ. The New Catholic Dictionary defines the Passion as "the suffering both interior and exterior or endured by Jesus Christ from the Last Supper until His death on the cross."[97] The idea of devotion to Jesus and giving oneself to the service of God is an important theme in the Passion.

St. Matthew Passion

Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* was first performed on Good Friday, 1727 at the *Thomaskirche* in Leipzig. It was the "pinnacle of the vocal works composed by Bach for the

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[93] Smallman, 30.
[94] The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965, 1852.
[95] Smallman, 31.
[96] Smallman, 17.
[97] New Catholic Encyclopedia. 2nd ed. Vol. 10 New York: Thomson, Gale, 2002, 924.

Leipzig churches."[98] It contained a libretto with arias, recitatives and gospel texts and chorales. The purpose of the *St. Matthew Passion* was to "dramatically challenge the listeners to a personal contemplation on the historical events and their meaning."[99] But was this truly Bach's conscious purpose? An examination of the parts of the work may suggest an answer.

A libretto is the dialogue attached to a piece of music that tells the action or story. In the case of a Passion, the gospel text is the primary source of action and the other arias and recitatives are supplements to the gospel text. In the Passion, the aria, a song usually for solo voice with an instrumental accompaniment, reflects on the action that has taken place. A recitative is the action or dialogue of a piece of music with minimal accompaniment. In the *St. Matthew Passion*, for example, the gospel verses are sung in recitative style. This helps to unify the piece by keeping the music flowing, yet moves the dialogue along quicker than trying to sing it in a drawn-out aria.

When the *St. Matthew Passion* was first performed, not everyone accepted it as a religious performance. One person present in the audience rose and exclaimed "God help us! 'tis surely an opera-comedy."[100] Although today's listener might find this rather strange, this shows that Bach's passion was different and more modern than what was normally heard in the church.

In his passion, Bach was expected to "so arrange the music that it shall not last too long, and shall be of such a nature as not to make an operatic impression, but rather to incite the listeners to devotion."[101] However, our ideas of "not too long" today are much different than that of the 18th century church. Unlike today, the Passion itself was not considered an entire church

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[98] Wolff, Bach Learned Musician, 288.
[99] The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church, 1853.
[100] Buszin, 915.
[101] Smallman, 18.

service, but was part of the larger whole. The usual form of the Good Friday service in Leipzig was:

(i) Hymn: *Da Jesus an dem Kreuze stund* (Jesus on the cross)
(ii) The Passion – Part I
(iii) Hymn: *O Lamm Gottes unschuldig* (O Lamb of God unspotted)
(iv) Pulpit hymn: *Herr Jesu Christ, dich zu uns wend* (Dear Jesus, to you we turn)
(v) Sermon
(vi) The Passion – Part II
(vii) Motet: *Ecce quomodo moritur justus* (Behold how the righteous one is killed)
(vii) The Passion collect
(ix) Hymn: *Nun danket alle Gott* (Now thank we all our God)
(x) The Blessing.[102]

Since the performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* itself (parts I and II) lasted about three hours or more to perform, the service on Good Friday lasted the better part of a day.

The *St. Matthew Passion* is also Bach's largest vocal work. It has a double chorus (choir I and choir II with four singers per choir), two orchestras (one for each choir), four soloists (soprano, alto, tenor, bass), the Evangelist (narrator) and Jesus. The four soloists also cover a number of different dramatic roles in the passion including Peter, Judas, Pilate, two Priests, Pilate's wife and two maids.

The libretto was written by Picander, the pseudonym of Christian Friedrch Henrici, who also wrote many other sacred libretti including Bach's later *St. Mark Passion*. He wrote the text for the arias and extra-biblical recitatives. He also wrote in a complex madrigal-style of poetry that helped to unify the work from a literary point of view.[103]

The gospel text for the passion is taken from Matthew 26-27. There are no alterations made in the gospel text and it is sung in recitative style by the Evangelist and by Jesus accordingly. The other arias and recitatives by Picander are based on the context of these gospel texts and reflect what has happened in the action in a very devout and spiritual way. For

[102] Smallman, 119.
[103] Wolff, Bach the Learned Musician, 296.

example, when Jesus is before the high priest and is silent, the tenor sings a recitative and aria successively responding to Jesus' silence.

Recitative
My Jesus holds his peace
before false lies,
so as to show us
that his merciful will
is bent on suffering for our sake;
and that, in like agony,
we should be like him, and hold
our peace in time of persecution.

Aria
Patience, patience,
even when false tongues sting me.
Contrary to my guilt I suffer
abuse and mockery.
Ah, then, may dear God
avenge my heart's innocence.

The recitative describes what is going on in the scene in the first person and has more action than the aria. The aria is more introspective and moves the focus futher away from the action than the recitative. The "I" represents not only the singer, but also the audience and all believers. The tenor part connects with the listeners by including them in the drama through the text.

Bach took special care to rework the *St. Matthew Passion* for its third performance in 1736. The largest change he made was to replace the last chorale at the end of part I (*Jesum lass ich nicht von mir*) with the more powerful *O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde gross* (O man, mourn your great sin), which was from his second arrangement of his *St. John Passion.* He also prepared a new copy of the score that used two different colors of ink: red and dark brown. The red was for the text of the Evangelist (and Jesus) and the chorale *O Lamm Gottes unschuldig* (O guiltless Lamb of God).[104] The rest of the Passion narrative was written in dark brown.

The Passion story begins with Jesus foretelling his death: "the son of Man will be handed over to be crucified." At the end of part I of the Passion, Jesus is arrested at Gethsemane. The beginning of part II, after the sermon, Jesus is brought before the priests and the Passion ends

[104] Wolff, Bach the Learned Musician, 298.

with Jesus' death. The action of the Passion is split up by the arrest instead of after Peter's denial as it was typically done.[105]

The Passion drama flows through the arias and recitatives for the soloists, the gospel texts and the chorals. The chart in Appendix A gives a visual illustration of the *St. Matthew Passion* of how each of these separate parts works together to create one large unit. Bach interweaves these three separate entities together through their individual textual elements. In this way, the separate texts can come together to create a whole Passion narrative.

The chorale is an integral part of the passion narrative as a whole. The congregation, because of the difficult nature of the harmonization, most likely did not sing the chorales. The texts and tunes that Bach chose for the chorales were well-known hymns in the Lutheran church. This gave voice and recognition to the congregation and let them be a part of the Passion. The hymn texts and tunes were familiar to the Lutheran congregation and reflected the gospel text as well as the arias and recitatives.

What is interesting about these chorales is that although they are separated quite a bit by the gospel text and the arias and recitatives, they not only have very similar themes, but they fit together like stanzas of a poem. The first five chorales are an excellent example of this.

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[105] Smallman, 38.

1. O guiltless Lamb of God
slaughtered on the stem of the cross,
always found patient,
how despised You were.
You have born all sin,
else we must have despaired.
Have mercy upon us, O Jesus!

3. Beloved Jesus,
what have you done wrong
that they have pronounced
so hard a sentence?
What is your guilt,
into what sort of misdeeds
have you fallen?

10. It is I. I should atone,
my hands and feet
bound, in hell.
The scourges and the fetters
and all that you endured –
that has my soul earned.

15. Know me, my keeper,
my shepherd, take me to You.
Through You,
source of all good things,
much good has befallen me.
Your mouth has refreshed me
with milk and sweetmeats.
Your spirit has favoured me.
with many a heavenly longing.

17. I would stand here beside You;
do not then scorn me!
I will not depart from You
even if your heart is breaking.
When your heart grows pale
in the last pangs of death,
then I will hold You
in my arms and lap.[106]

These chorales have very similar text, but at the same time they are reflect different events in the biblical action. Somehow they not only work together as chorales, but also with the biblical text and libretto. Bach uses the chorales to tie together the theological pieces of the gospel text and the arias and recitatives. In some ways they are a summation of what has been happening in the action.

The Passion text, based on the gospel account, focuses on the necessary suffering of Jesus and the believer's engagement with it. The chorale text demonstrates the other side of the "Lutheran paradox" in that Christians are at the same time sinners and righteous, *simul justus et peccator.*[107] The suffering and darkness of the cross brings the light and redemption.

The chorales are only one stanza long and were chosen by Bach out of a long list of stanzas from each chorale in the Lutheran hymnal. Bach took special care in choosing each of

[106] Henry J. de Jong, "Passion notes," 2000, <http://www.chorusniagara.ca/resources/passion/> (25 March, 2004).
[107] Paul Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 242.

the chorales for the Passion that not only reflect the action, but the Passion as a whole. It is interesting to see how Bach weaves these theological threads together through the chorales.

The first chorale stanza is sung by the *Knabenchor* (boys choir) along with the other two choirs. The opening musical statement of the choirs and chorale set up the crucifixion and the emotion behind it. The *Knabenchor* sings a very penitent text that prepares the listeners for what is going to happen in the next three and a half hours of the Passion.

The second chorale (number three) comes very soon after the first one. It is in response to the biblical text of the priests plotting to arrest Jesus. The chorale again reflects on the action. By providing familiar text and tunes for the audience, it allows them to engage and reflect on the biblical passage as well.

The focus of the fifth chorale (number seventeen) is the idea of devotion in the Passion. The biblical text preceding it describes Jesus leading the disciples to Gethsemane. On the surface, the "I" in the chorale focuses on the disciples' voices, but it can also reflect the believers in Christ as well. It is their devotion to Christ that forgives them of their sins. Connecting this with Jesus' death on the cross makes a powerful theological statement.

The *St. Matthew Passion* as a whole is a very dramatic, theologically driven piece that depicts the emotion and passion of the last days of Christ. The three parts: aria/recitative (by Picander), the gospel text, and chorales are unified under a musical and theological context that makes the passion such a magnificent work.

It is easy to understand, after listening to this piece, why so many of Bach scholars are convinced that Bach was a devout theologian. The care, energy and dedication that went into creating a work like this are obvious even to the untrained listener. Bach's reflections on God and the scriptures are readily apparent, as is the way Bach engages everyone, including the

audience in the Passion, to marvel at his technique. It would be hard for anyone to listen to the *St. Matthew Passion* and not be moved by the work.

Many scholars believe that the *St. Matthew Passion* is the source of Bach's epithet as the "Fifth Evangelist." Bach "has brought the Gospel to countless thousands who might otherwise never have heard the Gospel and its message of redemption" and Hans Besch claims that Bach "has brought the Gospel to more souls than any other preacher."[108] Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in a letter to his friend, "that anyone who has neglected and ignored the Gospel of Christ Jesus and who hears Bach's *Passion According to St. Matthew* will have to hear this great work not only as a musical masterpiece, but also as a proclamation of the Gospel."[109]

Although Bach's Passion brought part of the gospel to the people in a different way by setting it to music, he cannot be considered "Evangelist." The Passion narrative itself only covers two chapters of the gospel of Matthew and the words are verbatim from the text. Bach appropriation of the gospel text is no different than that of hymn writers or other sacred texts that are based on or taken from the Bible. By setting the text to music he does have a wider audience than the average preacher and can reach more people with his work, but was that his ultimate goal?

Since Bach may have been inspired by God to write the music, but not the text, this would exclude him from being considered an Evangelist. Although it is hard to speculate on Bach's motivation, it seems that Bach's Passion setting was a way to reach the people of Leipzig other than through the pulpit.

The most interesting part about the *St. Matthew Passion* is that Bach did not write the text. He had the gospel of Matthew, the chorale texts that were already in existence, and the

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[108] Walter E Buszin, "Lutheran Theology as reflected in the life and work of J S Bach," Concordia Theological Monthly 21 (1950): 899.
[109] Buszin, 899.

libretto from Picander. It was Bach's job to *set* the texts to music, not to write them. However, he did have to combine these three aspects to weave together the Passion story. By combining these pieces into one magnificent work can we then consider Bach a theologian?

I think that Bach could not have put together the texts and the ideas that are portrayed in the Passion if he was not a theologian. He had to understand what the biblical text, libretto and chorales meant on a theological level in order to incorporate them into one large work. Also, the emotions sparked by the music and the text draw the listeners in, engaging them in reflection on the meaning of the crucifixion *more* than a superficial level. The first five chorales not only connect the listeners with the Passion, but they also allow them to be drawn in theologically.

Conclusion

It has been over two hundred and fifty years since Bach's death and scholars are still trying to determine his character. Much effort has gone into the study of Bach and his legacy, but which, if any, of these assessments is accurate? Can we trust that the scholarship of Bach has not been influenced by the presuppositions of earlier writers?

Bach grew up in an environment where he was taught theology and Lutheran orthodoxy from an early age. He spent over half of his life in service to the church writing his sacred works that began with *Jesu Juva* and ended with *Soli Deo Gloria*. Although he also wrote secular works, his sacred repertoire has the largest amount of surviving works and is remembered the most.

The early biographers of Bach have exerted a great influence over later and modern scholars alike. However objective they try to be, they are still influenced by the theological claims of Forkel, Bitter and Spitta. Whether they are right or wrong, their scholarship carried over into the 20th century and influenced even the most modern scholars.

Friedrich Blume seems to be the sole voice of opposition, as he believes that Bach was not a theologian. Dürr and the new chronology open the door to new interpretations on his life as a result. He gives the most useful approach to Bach and leads us to wonder: "is it valid to think that there is any relationship between Bach's musical output and his religious beliefs? Dürr does not think so. Both Blume and Dürr offer new attitudes and scholarship and towards Bach and his theological character.

The Calov Bible is a significant discovery that gives a first-hand connection to Bach and his library. The four marginalia give some insight into Bach's ideas about music in relation to the Bible and his study and reflection on the scripture. Although the marginalia by themselves are hardly sufficient to prove that Bach was a theologian they can be used to strengthen the claims of scholars.

The *St. Matthew Passion* is Bach's definitive sacred work. Although Bach did not compose the text himself, the connection of the gospel text, chorale texts and arias and recitatives creates a magnificent work of the last days of Christ. Bach draws in the listeners through his chorales and chorale text and allows them to become part of the Passion and to think theologically, in a distinctively lutheran way, about Jesus' death on the cross.

In weighing all of the evidence, it is clear that Bach was a theologian in terms of studying carefully and reflecting deeply on God and the Scriptures. Bach studied theology while he was in school and was proficient enough to pass the theology exam for his job in Leipzig. He spent many years composing sacred works and in putting together the Passion, it is clear Bach studied and reflected on God and the scriptures.

Although Bach may be a theologian by our standards, would he have considered himself a theologian? On the other hand: is it even important for Bach to be a theologian for us to

understand his music today? Does it in some way devalue his works (particularly his vocal works) if he was in fact *not* a theologian or even a Christian? Many scholars have argued that Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* is such a deeply theological work that it is unfathomable that Bach would not be a Christian.

Bach's music has great significance to the musical world in terms of his style and technique that he mastered. He will always be held in high esteem for his musical contributions. However, we cannot ignore the theological influence in his works. The *St. Matthew Passion* is a deeply moving work that recounts the last days of Jesus. The texts are woven together by Bach to create a magnificent theological work. Bach may or may not have truly believed what he wrote, but his compositions are still important sacred works today with theological value for the listener to consider.

Appendix A

Poetry by Picander (choruses, arias, recitatives)	Gospel	Chorales
Part I-Before the Sermon		
The Daughters of Zion (I) and the Faithful (II)		
1. Kommt, ihr Töchter (I/II) (Come you daughters)	**2.** Matthew 26:1-2	**3.** Herzliebster Jesu
When the woman anointed Jesus	**4.** 26:3-13	(Beloved Jesus)
5-6. Du lieber Heiland/ Buss und Reu (I)		
(Dear Redeemer/ Penance and remorse)	**7.** 26:14-16	
When Judas took the 30 silver pieces:		
8. Blute nur, du liebes Herz (II)	**9.** 26:17-22	**10.** Ich bins, ich sollte büssen
(Bleed on, dear heart)		(It is I, I should atone)
When Jesus kept the Passover	**11.** 26:23-29	
12-13. Wiewohl mein Herz/ Ich will dir mein Herze (I)		
(Although my heart/ I will give my heart to You)	**14.** 26:30-32	**15.** Erkenne mich mein Hüter
		(Know me, my Redeemer)
	16. 26:33-35	**17.** Ich will heir bei dir stehen
		(I would stand here beside You)
When Jesus quailed at the Mount of Olives	**18.** 26:36-38	
19-20. O Schmerz/ Ich will bei meinem Jesu wachen (I/II)		
(O sorrow/ I will watch beside my Jesus)	**21.** 26:39	
After the words		
"O my Father...let this cup pass from me"		
22-23. Der Heiland fällt/ Gerne will ich mich bequemen (II)	**24.** 26:40-42	**25.** Was mein Gott will
(The Saviour falls/ I will gladly submit myself)		(Whatever my God wills)
When Jesus was captured (Zion and the Faithful):	**26.** 26:43-50	
27. So ist mein Jesus nun gefangen (I/II)	**28.** 26:51-56	**29.** O Mench, bewein dein Sünde gross
(So is my Jesus captured now)		(O Man, mourn your great sin)

Part II-After the Sermon

The Faithful and Zion:		
30. Ach, nun is mein Jesus hin (I/II)		
(Ah! My Jesus has gone now)	**31.** 26:57-59	**34.** Mir hat die Welt
After the words "But jesus kept silent":	**33.** 26:60-63a	(The world has judged me deceitfully)
34-35. Mein Jesus schweigt/ Geduld (II)	**36.** 26:63b-68	**37.** Wer hat dich so geschlagen
(My Jesus holds his peace/ Patients)		(Who has buffeted You so)
	38. 26:69-75	
When Peter wept:		**40.** Bin ich gleich von dir gewichen
39. Erbarme dich (I) (Have mercy)		(Although I have strayed from You)
After the words "It is not lawful...because it is the price of blood":	**41.** 27:1-6	(Commend your way)
42. Gebt mir meinen Jesum wieder (II)	**43.** 27:7-14	**44.** Befiel du deine Wege
(Give me back my Jesus)		**46.** Wie wunderbarlich
	45. 27:15-22	(How miraculous)
After the words "What evil has He done?:	**47.** 27:23a	
48-49. Er hat uns allen wohlgetan/ Aus Liebe (I)		
(He has done good to us all/ Out of love)	**50.** 27:27-30	
When Jesus was scourged:		
51-52. Erbarm es Gott/ Können Tränen meiner Wangen (II)	**53.** 27:27-30	**34.** O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden
(Have mercy, God/ If the tears on my cheeks)		(O head, full of blood and wounds)
When Simon of Cyrene was compelled to bear His cross:		
56-57. Ja freilich will in uns/ Komm, süsses Kreuz (II)	**55.** 27:31-32	
(Yes gladly is the flesh and blood/ Come, sweet cross)		
When Jesus was crucified (Zion and the Faithful):	**58.** 27:33-44	
59-60. Ach Golgatha/ Sehet, Jesus hat die Hand (I; I/II)		
(Alas, Golgotha/ See, Jesus had his hand)	**61.** 27:45-50	**62.** Wenn ich einmal soll scheiden
		(When once I must depart)
When Jesus was taken down from the cross:	**63.** 27:51-58	
64-65. Am Abend/ Mache dich, meine Herze, rein (I)	**66.** 27:59-66	
(In the evening/ Make yourself clean, my heart)		
After the words "And they sealed the stone"		
67-68. Nun is der Herr/ Wir setzen uns mit Tränen neider (I/II)		
(Now the Lord ist brought to rest/ We sit down in tears)		

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[110] Table is from Christoph Wolff, Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician (New York: Norton, 2000), 299-300.

English translation from Henry J. de Jong, "Passion notes," 2000, <http://www.chorusniagara.ca/resources/passion/> (25 March, 2004).

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