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J.S. Bach's Church Cantatas and Church Music Today

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Abstract: This article explores the church cantatas of German composer J.S. Bach (1685–1750) as models for how we can think about the practice of faithful worship in the Christian church today. The article begins with an overview of Bach's vocation as a church musician, in which he served in various contexts throughout his life. The article focuses on Bach's final calling as a church musician, as music director for the town of Leipzig for the final 27 years of his life. It explains the context of the main Sunday and feast day worship service in Leipzig, with particular attention to the role of the church cantata in this service. The article then presents a general overview of the characteristics of Bach's church cantatas before exploring in-depth liturgy, text, and music in one particular example, Cantata 104, *Du Hirte Israel, höre*. It concludes by proposing that a study of J.S. Bach's church cantatas can teach us lessons of three kinds—practical (how we do church music), creative (how we create art), and spiritual (for ourselves and our congregations)—that we can apply in our churches today.

Keywords: Bach, Cantata, Church Music, Music Ministry, Spirituality

INTRODUCTION

How do we as Christians today learn about worship and church music? How do we think about what music we will sing in Christian worship and the principles that should guide us in choosing and leading church music? Certainly, there are many different ways we answer that question: we study the Bible, we sing the words of the Scriptures, we read what theologians, worship leaders, and scholars of church music are writing today, we attend lectures, and conferences by scholars and practitioners of church music.

In this article, we offer and explore yet another example of how we live out God's call in leading music for the Christian church: by studying the example of a faithful Christian musician from the past. Our particular example for this article is the German composer and church musician Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750). We want to clarify from the start that we are not arguing that J.S. Bach is the best example of a Christian church musician and certainly not that he is the only example. However, Bach does offer us one example of a musician who dedicated most of his life to creating and leading music for the Christian church and sought to do so faithfully, creatively, and skillfully.¹

¹On the historical study of Christian worship, liturgy, and church music in Indonesia, see Marzanna Poplawska, *Performing Faith: Christian Music, Identity and Inculturation in Indonesia* (New York: Routledge, 2020); Yudha Thianto, "Genevan Psalms in Javanese," *Calvin Theological Journal* 52 (2017): 151–80; Yudha Thianto, *The Way to Heaven: Catechisms and Sermons in the Establishment of the Dutch Reformed Church in the East Indies* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014); Yudha Thianto, "Elements of Calvin's Theology and Practice in the Reformed Churches of Java in the Seventeenth Century," in *John Calvin, Myth and Reality: Images and Impact of Geneva's Reformer*, ed. Amy Nelson Burnett, 91–106 (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011); and Ester Widiasih, "A Survey of Reformed Worship in Indonesia," in *Christian Worship in Reformed Churches: Past and Present*, ed. Lukas Vischer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

In this article, we will briefly introduce J.S. Bach as a church musician and then proceed to introduce the church service in the town of Leipzig, where Bach worked the majority of his life. The article then focuses on the genre of the cantata, a kind of music Bach was responsible for leading in Leipzig's main churches every Sunday and feast day. After introducing the cantata in general, we explore one particular example, Bach's Cantata 104, *Du Hirte Israel, höre*, which he composed in 1724 for the Second Sunday after Easter, known in the modern church as Good Shepherd Sunday. The article ends with some particular lessons we can learn from Bach for music in the Christian church today. We propose that studying Bach's life and works can give us insights into how we might create and prepare the music for our churches today. These insights can be applied to Christian churches of any denomination, in any place, with any musical style.

J.S. BACH AS CHURCH MUSICIAN

When people think of Western classical music, Johann Sebastian Bach is one of the first composers who come to mind. We recently did a Google search for "top classical composers." Of the first results that appeared, Bach was consistently in the top three (along with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven) and often in the number one spot.²

We was curious then to consider what music people were thinking of when they reflected on Bach as the best classical composer. We found that such lists disproportionately favor Bach's instrumental music (composed mostly for the court, the coffee house, or the home) over his vocal music (composed mostly for the church). For example, Gramophone's "The

²See, for example, [udiscovermusic.com's](https://www.udiscovermusic.com/classical-features/best-classical-composers-top-20/) "Top 20 Best Classical Composers of All Time," from August 6, 2019, which lists Bach as first in their "Top 20," <https://www.udiscovermusic.com/classical-features/best-classical-composers-top-20/>.

Ten Best Bach Works—A Beginner’s List” features eight instrumental compositions and only two for voice, with the two vocal works reaching only spots nine and ten on the list:³

1. Orchestral Suites
2. Brandenburg Concertos
3. Violin Concertos
4. Goldberg Variations
5. Partitas
6. Cello Suites
7. Well-tempered Clavier
8. Solo Violin Sonatas and Partitas
9. Mass in B-minor
10. St. Matthew Passion

Likewise, *udiscovermusic.com*’s “Best Bach Works: 10 Essential Pieces by the Great Composer” includes eight instrumental works and two vocal works.⁴ An Apple Music list from 2017, “Bach: The Essentials,” includes seven examples of vocal music in its twenty-five tracks, but four of the seven are from the same composition, the *St. Matthew Passion*.⁵

Of course, all the Bach compositions on these lists are wonderful. Nevertheless, the lists are misleading in presenting Bach primarily as a composer of instrumental music, not vocal music. Moreover, they are even more misleading by disproportionately leaving out Bach’s church music. These lists miss the fact that Bach was employed as a church musician for most of his career and was responsible for vocal music for the church. In fact, Bach worked as a church musician for almost his entire adult life. Of the 47 years of his musical career, from age 18 until his death at age 65, Bach spent all but about six of these as a

church musician. So while people today recognize Bach as one of the greatest Classical composers and celebrate his instrumental music and a few of his major vocal works, few know that Bach was a dedicated church musician throughout his life or celebrated his phenomenal contributions to music for the Christian church.

Bach began his professional career at age 18 in the town of Arnstadt, where he served as organist of the Neuen Kirche from 1703 until 1707. He moved Mühlhausen in 1707 to take up the post of organist at the Blasiuskirche but did not remain there for long. In 1708, he was appointed organist and chamber musician for the ducal court at Weimar, where he was involved with the court chapel (the Himmelsburg) and other churches in the town. Bach’s role concerning church music at the Weimar court was expanded in 1714 when he was given the added responsibility of composing one church cantata each month for the court chapel. Bach continued in these roles in Weimar until early in 1717, when he left for the ducal court of Cöthen, the only non-church position Bach held in his life. Bach’s focus during his time in Cöthen was on music for the court, and much of his instrumental music was composed during this time. Since the Prince and court were Calvinist, not Lutheran, Bach was not responsible for any church music (Bach and his family attended a small Lutheran church in the town). This situation changed dramatically in 1723, when he moved to Leipzig to take up the post of music director for the city, which included responsibility for the music at the town’s four principal churches. Bach remained in these posts for twenty-seven years, until his death in 1750, dedicating the remainder of his life primarily to music for the Lutheran Church.⁶

³Gramophone, “The Ten Best Bach Works—A Beginner’s List,” March 23, 2012, <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/features/article/the-ten-best-bach-works-a-beginner-s-list>.

⁴*udiscovermusic.com*, “Best Bach Works: 10 Essential Pieces by the Great Composer,” March 1, 2019, <https://www.udiscovermusic.com/classical-features/best-bach-works-10-essential-pieces/>.

⁵Apple Music, “Bach: The Essentials,” 2017, <https://music.apple.com/gb/album/bach-the-essentials/1452282161>.

⁶For a brief introduction to Bach’s life as a church musician, see Mark Peters, “St Johann Sebastian Bach,” *Lutheran Forum* 49, no. 3 (2015): 60–64. For an excellent introduction to Bach’s relationship to Lutheran churches throughout his life, see Robin A. Leaver, “Churches,” in *The Routledge Companion to Johann Sebastian Bach*, ed.

Of Bach's contributions to music for the Christian church, the best-known compositions are major works, such as the *St. Matthew Passion*, *St. John Passion*, *Magnificat in D Major*, *Christmas Oratorio*, and *B-minor Mass*.⁷ However, Bach's primary musical responsibility as Leipzig music director was to lead the performance of a smaller-scale genre, the church cantata, for each Sunday

and feast day, about 60 occasions each year. Bach himself composed about 200 church cantatas, and he led the performance of more than 1,500 cantatas for his twenty-seven years as Leipzig town cantor.

THE MAIN WORSHIP SERVICE IN LEIPZIG: HAUPTGOTTESDIENST

Bach was responsible for leading the performance of a cantata during the main morning service, called Hauptgottesdienst (the principal service of God, a service that ran from 7 to 10 a.m.), on every Sunday and feast day in one of Leipzig's two main churches, the Saint Thomas Church and the Saint Nicholas Church.⁸ On feast days, he also led a performance of the same cantata in the other church that afternoon during the Vespers service, which began at 1:45 p.m. The liturgies for both Hauptgottesdienst and Vespers in Leipzig will appear familiar to many Christians today: Martin Luther's liturgical reforms in the sixteenth century were grounded in the liturgies of the Medieval church. Many modern churches worldwide—including Lutheran, Anglican, and Roman Catholic churches—retain the overall shape and many of the individual elements of these liturgies.⁹

The first portion of the service, which spanned approximately two of the total three hours, was focused on God's Word and particularly on the Gospel reading for the day. The

Robin A. Leaver, 142–190 (New York: Routledge, 2017). Bach's employment as a church musician throughout his life is also clear in biographies of the composer, including Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000); Malcolm Boyd, *Bach*, 3rd ed., Master Musicians Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Martin Geck, *Johann Sebastian Bach: Life and Work* (New York: Harcourt, 2006). Other books study Bach's life comprehensively, but with a focus more on his compositions than his biography. See, for example, Richard D.P. Jones, *The Creative Development of Johann Sebastian Bach*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Christoph Wolff, *Bach's Musical Universe: The Composer and His Work* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2020).

⁷For a good and accessible introduction to Bach's principal works for the Christian church, see Markus Rathey, *Bach's Major Vocal Works: Music, Drama, Liturgy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016). For an overview of Bach's vocal compositions and current approaches to research on these works, see Mark A. Peters, "Vocal Music," in *The Routledge Companion to Johann Sebastian Bach*, ed. Robin A. Leaver, 267–294 (New York: Routledge, 2017). Mark A. Peters and Reginald L. Sanders, eds., *Compositional Choices and Meaning in the Vocal Music of J.S. Bach*, in *Contextual Bach Studies* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), includes a wide variety of perspectives on Bach's vocal works written by leading Bach scholars. There are also many books dedicated to individual Bach compositions, of which I can list only a few here. For a good introduction to Bach's passions, see Daniel R. Melamed, *Hearing Bach's Passions*, updated edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), and for an introduction to the *Mass in B-minor* and *Christmas Oratorio*, see Daniel R. Melamed, *Listening to Bach: The Mass in B Minor and the Christmas Oratorio* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). For a detailed study of the *Christmas Oratorio*, see Markus Rathey, *Johann Sebastian Bach's Christmas Oratorio: Music, Theology, Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). On the *B-minor Mass*, see also Yo Tomita, Robin A. Leaver, and Jan Smaczny, eds., *Exploring Bach's B-minor Mass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). A helpful resource for study of the texts and theology of the major vocal works is Michael Marissen, *Bach's Oratorios: The Parallel German-English Texts with Annotations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). I am currently writing a book on Bach's *Magnificat*, forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

⁸Tanya Kevorkian's *Baroque Piety: Religion, Society, and Music in Leipzig, 1650–1750* (New York: Routledge, 2016) provides a fascinating introduction to religion in Leipzig from the perspective of social history, with details not only on church musicians, but also on the clergy, the town council, the congregants, and other aspects of the town and its churches. For a detailed study of the Leipzig liturgy in Bach's time, see Günther Stiller, *Johann Sebastian Bach and Liturgical Life in Leipzig*, trans. Herbert J.A. Bouman, Daniel F. Poellot, and Hilton C. Oswald, ed. Robin A. Leaver (St. Louis: Concordia, 1984).

⁹For a detailed study of Martin Luther's liturgical reforms and the role of music in relation to these reforms, see Robin A. Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications*, Lutheran Quarterly Books (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

service opened with music, including a hymn by the choir, an organ prelude, and the introit motet sung by the choir. The congregation was provided with particular prayers to offer as they prepared for the service, came to the service, and listened to this opening music. The standard liturgical texts that followed next are the canticle, the “Kyrie Eleison” (“Lord, have mercy”), and the “Gloria in Excelsis Deo” (“Glory to God in the highest”). A salutation and the prayer of the day led into the Scripture readings. A reading from the New Testament epistles was followed by a litany, the hymn of the day, the Nicene Creed, the announcement of the sermon, another hymn, and the Gospel reading (the central reading of the service, designated for that day from Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John). The Gospel reading was followed by the cantata (to be discussed below), the announcement of the sermon, another hymn, and the sermon itself, which was expected to last about one hour. This first portion of the service then ended with the Lord’s Prayer, other prayers, and a benediction.

The second portion of the service, which covered the final hour, was focused on Holy Communion. After a hymn and the “Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus” (“Holy, Holy, Holy”), the ministers proceeded with the communion liturgy: the words of institution and the administration of communion (with hymns during the administration of the sacrament). The service concluded with a concluding Bible verse, prayer, and blessing, followed by a hymn.¹⁰

The first element we would like to highlight concerning the Sunday and feast day service in Leipzig is the importance of music throughout. While some modern church members would be used to the amount of singing in a Lutheran service from the eighteenth century, most would be surprised with how much of the ser-

vice was sung. Indeed, except for the sermon and some of the prayers, almost all the service was chanted or sung. So as we focus in the next section on one particular musical portion of the service, the cantata, please keep in mind the importance of singing throughout the service, by the ministers, the choir, and the congregation. Music was not something that was added to other elements of the service. It was rather integral to them. Scripture was sung, expositions of Scripture were sung, applications of Scripture were sung, prayers were sung, benedictions were sung, and so on. Much of this singing was done by the congregation, including the many hymns in the service. The congregation would also regularly have sung German hymn versions of other liturgical texts, such as the “Kyrie Eleison,” the “Gloria in Excelsis Deo,” and the creed. Other singing was done by the ministers, including the chanting of Scripture, the Words of Institution, and the benediction. Still, other singing was done by a small group of trained musicians on behalf of the congregation, that is, the choir. This choir included the introit motet and the cantata. So the cantata was an essential musical element in the liturgy, but it also took place amid a primarily sung liturgy.

With this context in mind, the second element we would like to highlight concerning the liturgy is the role of the cantata within the service. The cantata was a key element in the first portion of the service focused on the Gospel:

1. Epistle
2. Litany
3. Hymn of the day
4. Gospel
5. Cantata
6. Creed (in Latin on feast days, but on most Sundays sung in its German hymn version, “Wir glauben all an einen Gott”)
7. Announcement of the sermon
8. Hymn
9. Sermon

¹⁰ See Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach, 253–258*; and Stiller, *Johann Sebastian Bach and Liturgical Life in Leipzig*, 116–129.

The service included two Scripture readings: one from the New Testament Epistles and one from the four Gospels. Bach's Leipzig followed Martin Luther's one-year lectionary, which means the same Epistle and Gospel passages were read every year for each Sunday and feast day.¹¹ Of these two, the Gospel reading usually set the theme for the service, particularly for the central portion of this Gospel liturgy. Most important was the chanting of the Gospel text itself. However, significant were three surrounding elements that helped congregants understand and apply the Gospel: the hymn of the day, the cantata, and the sermon. The hymn of the day served to introduce and frame the Gospel text, while both the cantata and sermon served to explain and apply the Gospel for the Christian believer. So just like the sermon, the cantata was based on the assigned Gospel for the day, was addressed to the Christian believer, and included both explanation and application of the Gospel. Indeed, the cantata has often been referred to as a "second sermon."

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CANTATA

The cantata as a genre originated in Lutheran Germany in the early eighteenth century, growing out of earlier musical genres for the church and the concert hall. In particular, it fused the church music traditions of choral song and congregational hymnody with operatic styles of solo song.¹² The cantata genre developed around 1700, with significant early poets in the genre including Erdmann Neumeister, Duke Ernst Ludwig of Saxe-Meiningen, Georg Christian Lehms, and early

composers including Johann Ludwig Bach (a distant cousin of J.S. Bach) and Georg Philipp Telemann.¹³

A standard cantata was typically in six to eight movements and incorporated the following four different text types, including both quoted texts and newly composed poetry:

1. Quoted texts: Bible verses, and Hymn stanzas
2. New poetry: Recitative, and Aria

The cantata would often begin with a Bible verse, quoting either a verse from the Gospel reading for the day or another Scripture passage on a theme from the Gospel. Such quotation of Bible verses grounded the cantata in Scripture and connect it with the most common kinds of church music composed for German Lutheran church choirs in the seventeenth century.

The second kind of quoted text also linked the cantata to traditions of Lutheran church music, in this case, those of congregational song. Cantatas regularly included hymn stanzas, today generally referred to Bach's works as chorales. In addition to choosing an appropriate Bible verse with which to begin the cantata, the author of the text would usually choose a single hymn stanza with which to conclude the cantata. This closing could be any stanza of any hymn, but one the poet felt would both bring the text to a fitting close and help congregants identify with the cantata through hymnody.

Both these quoted text types had been standard in Lutheran church music of the seventeenth century. In the early eighteenth century, what was new was for poets to combine these quoted texts with the two types of poetic texts from opera of the time, recitatives and arias. Like contemporary

¹¹See Robin A. Leaver, "Bach's Understanding and Use of the Epistles and Gospels of the Church Year," *BACH: Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute* 6, no. 4 (1975): 4–13, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41639962>.

¹²The standard book on Bach's cantatas is Alfred Dürr, *The Cantatas of J.S. Bach with Their Librettos in German-English Parallel Text*, rev. and trans., Richard D.P. Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). After a brief overview, Dürr provides text and English translation for each cantata along with a brief overview of its text and music.

¹³On the origins of the cantata, see Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, 160–161.

opera, cantata texts would typically alternate between recitatives and arias. Recitatives were more flexible poetically, tending more toward prose styles. They retained poetic elements such as meter and rhyme but did not hold them as closely as the stricter poetic styles of the aria. These differences were reflections and adaptations of recitative and aria in opera, in which recitatives carried the details of narration and dialogue, while arias provided space for individual characters to project their emotional response to the action. While such distinctions were not as strict in church music as in opera, the two types of pieces often retained these general purposes. Recitatives were typically tasked with carrying the content of the piece, in cantatas conveying more specific theological messages, while the arias would then reflect on that content, often with personal application for the Christian believer.

Quoted texts framed most cantatas: an opening Bible verse and a concluding chorale, or hymn verse, with the middle movements consisting of newly written poetry, recitatives, and arias. A typical cantata text, then, would be structured in this way, as is Bach's Cantata 104, which we will study below:

1. Bible verse
2. Recitative
3. Aria
4. Recitative
5. Aria
6. Chorale

Each of these four text types—Bible verse, chorale, recitative, aria—also had its own associated musical style. Bible verses were most often set elaborately for the full vocal and instrumental ensemble: soprano, alto, tenor, and bass singers accompanied by strings, basso continuo, and usually a selection of wind instruments (on festive occasions with trumpets and timpani, as well). The chorale would also employ the full ensemble,

but in a simple, straightforward setting with the hymn tune in the soprano voice, the lower voices providing harmony, and instruments doubling the voice parts. The solo movements followed a similar pattern, with the arias being complex and elaborate with many repetitions of words and phrases and more elaborate instrumental accompaniment. The recitatives were simple and straightforward, with little or no text repetition and a simple accompaniment.

Example: J.S. Bach, Cantata 104, *Du Hirte Israel, höre*

We turn now to one example of how all of this works—liturgy, Gospel reading, poetry, and music—in one particular cantata, J. S. Bach's Cantata 104, *Du Hirte Israel, höre*, “You Shepherd of Israel, hear us.”¹⁴ We begin with the liturgy. As with Bach's cantatas, *Du Hirte Israel, höre* was performed in the service after the Gospel reading and before the sermon and served to interpret and apply the Gospel for congregants. Cantata 104 was written for the Second Sunday after Easter, known in the modern church as Good Shepherd Sunday because it focuses on Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

The Gospel for the Second Sunday after Easter in Bach's Leipzig was John 10:11–16, which consists entirely of the words of Jesus:

¹⁴Many scholars have written about individual Bach cantatas and about groups of cantatas within Bach's output, includes Mark A. Peters, *A Woman's Voice in Baroque Music: Mariane von Ziegler and J.S. Bach* (London: Routledge, 2016); Mark A. Peters, “‘Meine Seel' erhebt den Herren (BWV 10) as Chorale Cantata and Magnificat Paraphrase,” *BACH: Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute* 43, no. 1 (2012): 29–64, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41640620>; and Mark A. Peters, “Death to Life, Sorrow to Joy: Martin Luther's Theology of the Cross and J.S. Bach's Eastertide Cantata *Ihr werdet weinen und heulen* (BWV 103),” in *Compositional Choices and Meaning in the Vocal Music of J.S. Bach*, ed. Mark A. Peters and Reginald L. Sanders, 51–73 (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018).

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”¹⁵

While it would be fascinating to know more about the other two elements of the service closely linked to the Gospel—the hymn of the day and the sermon—information about these elements is not extant from Leipzig in Bach's time. From the hymnals linked in some way to Bach, we know that the hymn most often associated with the Second Sunday after Easter was a paraphrase of Psalm 23 entitled “Der Herr ist mein getreuer Hirt” (The Lord is my faithful Shepherd).¹⁶ Bach in fact, uses the first stanza of this hymn as the final movement of Cantata 104, and he later composed a chorale cantata based on the hymn, Cantata 112. It seems plausible, then, that the Leipzig congregation sang “Der Herr ist mein getreuer Hirt” as part of the service for which Cantata 104 was first performed.

Some indication of possible themes for the sermon for that day may be gleaned from the two sermons for the Second Sunday after Easter in his *Haus-Postille* (House Sermons).¹⁷ These were sermons of Luther that were

¹⁵John 10:11–16, *New Revised Standard Version*.

¹⁶Detlef Gojowy, “Kirchenlieder im Umkreis von J. S. Bach,” *Jahrbuch für Liturgik und Hymnologie* 22 (1978): 105.

¹⁷Martin Luther, *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, vol. 6, ed. Eugene F.A. Klug (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 73–84.

published for devotional use, and Bach himself owned two editions of the collection.¹⁸ Both sermons focus on Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the one who cares for and never forsakes his followers. In the first sermon, Luther particularly addresses how the Christian believer should be attentive to the voice of Jesus, just as sheep recognize and attend to the voice of the shepherd. In the second sermon, he explains the words of Jesus in the Gospel as highlighting the themes of faith and love.

Like the hymn of the day and the sermon, the cantata text is very closely linked with the Gospel for the day, John 10:11–16. We do not know who wrote the text for Cantata 104, but it is clear that the poet understood the Gospel well and worked to express it clearly, artfully, and meaningfully in the cantata's text. It is also clear that Bach approached the Gospel in the same way as he transformed the poet's text into a musical composition.

As is typical for a cantata, the poet begins with a Bible verse, Psalm 80:1, in which the psalmist addresses God as the “shepherd of Israel,” a clear link with the Gospel text focused on Jesus as the Good Shepherd.¹⁹

1. Chorus: “Du Hirte Israel, höre” (Psalm 80:1)

Du Hirte Israel, höre, der du Joseph hütetest wie der Schafe, erscheine, der du sitztest über Cherubim.

You Shepherd of Israel, give ear, You who

¹⁸See Robin A. Leaver, *Bachs theologische Bibliothek: eine kritische Bibliographie*, Beiträge zur theologischen Bachforschung 1 (Neuhausen-Stuttgart: Hänssler, 1983).

¹⁹The English translation of the cantata text is from Dürr, *The Cantatas of J.S. Bach*, 298–299. In this section, we encourage you to pause during your reading to listen to each movement of the cantata, of which many recordings are easily available online. Our favorite recording of Cantata 104 is Masaaki Suzuki directing the Bach Collegium Japan, *J.S. Bach Cantatas*, vol. 19, BIS-CD-1261 (2002).

lead Joseph like sheep; shine forth, You who are enthroned upon the Cherubim.

The first movement is the grandest and weightiest of the cantata for all four voice parts and the full instrumental ensemble of three oboes, strings, and basso continuo. In it, Bach evokes a common musical style which his original listeners would have clearly identified, the *pastorale*. The *pastorale* was a musical style associated with rural settings and particularly with shepherds and sheep. Therefore, it made sense for Bach to invoke this style on Good Shepherd Sunday, especially for a cantata text focused on Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

Three particular musical elements of this movement evoke the style of the *pastorale*.²⁰ One of these elements is the prominence of the oboe, an instrument associated with such a rural, *pastorale* style. Another is the rocking triplet motion throughout, with rhythmic patterns in groups of three. A final element of the *pastorale* in the movement is known as pedal tones, that is, long notes held in the bass line. These three elements combined would have clearly signaled to Bach's original congregation the style of the *pastorale*, with its associated image of shepherds and sheep.

Bach also invokes the image of God as a shepherd, and his people as sheep who follow him, by employing the compositional technique of imitation, in which one voice part sings a melody, then a second voice part sings the same melody afterward (and, in this case, a third and a fourth), thus imitating the previous voice. In the movement's second vocal section, Bach gives the words "der du Joseph hüttest wie der Schafe" ("You who lead Joseph like sheep") first to the tenor, then alto, then soprano, then bass, thus representing God leading and his people following.

Finally, Bach highlights the prayerful nature of the Psalm verse, in which the psalmist cries out to God, the Shepherd of Israel. Note that the verse is in the second person, with the psalmist speaking directly to God in petition: "give ear" ("höre") and "shine forth" ("erscheine"). Bach highlights these petitions musically in two ways, first through repetition of the words "höre" and "erscheine."²¹ For example, when the voices first enter, what we hear is not simply "You Shepherd of Israel, give ear," but, with Bach's setting employing word repetition, actually: "You Shepherd of Israel, You Shepherd of Israel, give ear, give ear, You Shepherd of Israel, give ear, You Shepherd of Israel, give ear, You Shepherd of Israel, give ear." We can clearly hear the pleading nature of the petition as Bach conveys it musically. Bach further emphasizes this by regularly having all four voice parts sing the key words of petition, "höre" and "erscheine" all together at the same time, thus representing the whole people of God crying out to him in one voice.

Following this elaborate and lengthy first movement are four movements of newly composed poetry—recitative, aria, recitative, aria—in which the poet expounds upon the relationship of the Christian believer (portrayed as a sheep) to Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Note the personal, intimate tone of the poetry: it is written in the first person, it is honest about danger and evil in the world, it is honest about faith and doubt, and it concludes by affirming God's faithfulness to his people and particularly, in the first person singular, to me, to you.

²⁰See Dürr, *The Cantatas of J.S. Bach*, 299.

²¹While Bach set only the opening verse of Psalm 80, a reading of the entire Psalm emphasizes its pleading nature, as the psalmist cries out to God for the deliverance of his people. The nature of the Psalm is summed up in the repeated words of verse 3, 7, and 19: "Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved."

2. Recitative: "Der höchste Hirte sorgt vor mich"

Der höchste Hirte sorgt vor mich,
Was nützen meine Sorgen?
Es wird ja alle Morgen
Des Hirtens Güte neu.
Mein Herz, so fasse dich,
Gott ist getreu.

The highest Shepherd cares for me:
What use are my cares?
Indeed, every morning
The Shepherd's loving kindnesses are new.
My heart, then compose yourself:
God is faithful.

The author of the cantata's text shifts immediately from the opening Psalm verse's setting in the past and on a large communal scale (both of which are evoked by referring to the people of God as "Israel" and "Joseph") to the immediate present and the first person singular. This recitative text makes it clear that God is not only the Shepherd of Israel and Joseph but, the Christian believer says, he is my Shepherd, too. The recitative gives the Christian a personal and daily reminder of God the Shepherd, invoking Lamentations 3:23: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."

Bach's composition for this movement, in keeping with typical music for recitative, is short, simple, and direct, thus highlighting the personal nature of the text. The tenor sings the text with a sparse accompaniment. Bach expands on the simple recitative style right at the end of the movement to emphasize the final words, "Gott ist getreu" ("God is faithful"), with this phrase sung three times and to a more elaborate melody and accompaniment. Bach thus musically emphasizes this key theological point of God's faithfulness to the individual Christian believer.

3. Aria: "Verbirgt mein Hirte sich zu lange"

Verbirgt mein Hirte sich zu lange,
Macht mir die Wüste allzu bange,
Mein schwacher Schritt eilt dennoch fort.
Mein Mund schreit nach dir,
Und du, mein Hirte, wirkst in mir
Ein gläubig Abba durch dein Wort.

If the Shepherd is hidden too long,
If the wilderness makes me too anxious,
Still my weak step hurries on.
My mouth cries to You,
And You, my Shepherd, work in me
A believing "Abba" through your Word.

In the ensuing aria text, however, the Christian believer is honest about the human condition in this world: even when we know God is faithful, sometimes we still feel like he is not present with us, afraid and wandering in the wilderness. However, even as the text emphasizes these words of doubt and fear, it still attests to God's faithfulness and the Christian's response: the Christian continues onward, no matter how weak their steps and God gives them the faith to respond to his Word.

Bach portrays this more anxious text through the general mood of his musical setting. He sets the tenor aria in a more somber minor key and with two oboes d'amore accompanying. These instruments were lower in pitch and darker in tone than standard oboes. In keeping with aria style, the instruments play a significant role in alternating with and accompanying the solo voice. The vocal part employs elaborate melodies and a lot of text repetition, thus emphasizing the text's structure and content. Bach intensifies the believer's fear of God's absence in the wilderness by creating elaborate and wrenching melodies for the words "long" and "anxious," with particularly jarring harmonies on "anxious." He then repeats four times, at increasingly higher pitch, the phrase "Mein

Mund schreit” (“My mouth cries”), as if the believer is yelling louder and louder for God to hear. Bach understands and musically portrays the believer’s longing for God’s presence.

4. Recitative: “Ja, dieses Wort ist meiner Seelen Speise”

Ja, dieses Wort ist meiner Seelen Speise,
Ein Labsal meiner Brust,
Die Weide, die ich meine Lust,
Des Himmels Vorschmack, ja mein alles
heiße.

Ach! sammle nur, o gutter Hirte,
Uns Arme und Verirrte;
Ach laß den Weg nur bald geendet sein
Und führe uns in deinen Schafstall ein!

Yes, this Word is my soul’s nourishment,
A refreshment to my breast,
The pasture that I call my delight,
A foretaste of heaven, indeed my all.
Ah! gather up, O Good Shepherd,
Us poor and straying ones;
Ah, let the path be ended soon
And lead us into Your sheepfold!

It is God’s Word, referenced in the last line of movement three and the first line of movement 4, that then restores faith and a sense of peace to the believer. In this fourth movement recitative, the Christian believer transitions from doubt to faith and from focusing on the earth (“the wilderness”) to the kingdom of God (“the pasture,” “heaven,” God’s “sheepfold”). While the text is again a petition, calling on the Good Shepherd for deliverance, it is imbued with hope, a hope that stems from God’s Word, the “soul’s nourishment.” Musically, the movement is unremarkable and in a very simple recitative style. Nevertheless, this simple style is the perfect way for Bach to convey the straightforward and faith-filled confidence of the believer’s words, and it provides a stark contrast to the agitated musical style of the previous aria.

5. Aria: “Beglückte Herde, Jesu Schafe”

Beglückte Herde, Jesu Schafe,
Die Welt ist euch in Himmelreich.
Hier schmeckt ihr Jesu Güte schon
Und hoffet noch del Glaubens Lohn
Nach einem sanften Todesschlafe.

Happy flock, Jesus’s sheep,
the world is to you a heavenly kingdom.
Here you already taste Jesus’s goodness
And still hope for faith’s reward
After a sweet sleep of death.

The cantata’s second and final aria is full of hope and confidence, as the Christian believer has left behind all doubt and fear and instead hopes in God. The text builds on the previous recitative, indicating that God’s “pasture” and “sheepfold” are not only the future kingdom of God but also in the present on earth. Earth is not just a “wilderness,” but for the believer, “the world is ... a heavenly kingdom.” The second half of the aria text exemplifies the “already, but not yet” nature of the Christian faith: the Christian “already taste[s] Jesus’s goodness” in the present world, yet still “hope[s] for faith’s reward after a sweet sleep of death.”

Bach’s composition for this aria highlights the hope and confidence of the Christian believer. Not only does he set this in an untroubled major key, but he returns to the pastorale style of the opening movement invoking images of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Like in the opening movement, there is a prominent oboe part, use of pedal tones, and a gently rocking triplet feel throughout. Bach clearly connects the Christian’s hope for the present and the future with Jesus the Good Shepherd and the cantata’s opening movement and its invocation of God as Shepherd. Bach emphasizes the reality of death in the aria’s final life, with a twisting melody on “Todes” (death) and an extended single note held on “schlafe” (sleep). How-

ever, he ends in confidence by going back and repeating the first three lines of the text in their original musical setting, indicating an exact repeat of the aria's first section. The movement thus ends with the confident statement, "The world is to you a heavenly kingdom."

6. Chorale: "Der Herr ist mein getreuer Hirt"

Der Herr ist mein getreuer Hirt,
Dem ich mich ganz vertraue,
Zur Weid er mich, sein Schäflein, führt,
Auf schooner grüner Aue,
Zum frischen Wasser leit' er mich,
Mein Seel zu laben kräftiglich
Durchs selig Wort der Gnaden.

The Lord is my faithful Shepherd
To whom I fully entrust myself;
To a meadow He leads me, His little sheep,
On fair green pasture,
To cool water He leads me
To refresh my soul thoroughly
Through the blessed Word of Grace.

As customary, the cantata ends with a chorale, that is, a hymn stanza. In this particular cantata, the chorale is also a Scripture paraphrase, the first stanza of a metrical setting of Psalm 23. The chorale clearly mirrors the opening verses of this Good Shepherd Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul." Also, as typical for such a closing chorale, Bach's composition is simple and straightforward, with the chorale melody in the soprano voice, harmonies in the other voices, with instruments doubling the voice parts. The entire ensemble, on behalf of the gathered congregation, together proclaims their faith in Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

So Bach's Cantata 104, *Du Hirte Israel, höre*, is beautiful, masterful, exemplary. Yet within Bach's compositional output, we might also

call it normal. As Leipzig music director, it was his job to perform a cantata of this sort for about sixty occasions each year, for most Sundays and feast days. While studying what Bach particularly did in this cantata musically and theologically is remarkable to us, this is the kind of piece he led in worship regularly for his twenty-seven years as a Leipzig church musician. So what can this teach us about music in our churches today, nearly 300 years after Bach composed Cantata 104?

LESSONS FROM BACH'S CHURCH CANTATAS

We propose that the example of Bach's cantatas can teach us lessons of three kinds—practical (how we do church music), creative (how we create art), and spiritual (for ourselves and our congregations)—that we can apply in our churches today.

Practical

The first of these we believe, is as much spiritual as practical. It is simply *faithfulness*, or we might say steadfastness. Simply put, "Just keep at it." As Leipzig music director, Bach was responsible for the performance of a cantata every Sunday and feast day, about 60 occasions each year. He was not required to compose a new cantata for each of these days, but he did have to either compose or select an appropriate cantata, make sure there were copies of all the parts, rehearse the musicians, and lead the performance. Furthermore, he did this for 27 years. We know very little about Bach's personality or thoughts, or opinions, but we do know he worked steadily and faithfully throughout his life to provide music for Leipzig's churches.

A second practical lesson we can see is the necessity of *collaboration*. The cantata preparation and performance were indeed Bach's responsibility. However, of course, he could not do it himself. He worked with pastors and

poets in creating cantatas appropriate for the liturgy. He worked within the larger structures of church and town and Lutheran practices. Moreover, very practically, he had to work with musicians each week. These included choir boys from the St. Thomas School; Bach was responsible for their musical training, and the best of these sang soprano and alto for Bach's cantatas in the main churches. Men joined these, sometimes university students, singing the tenor and bass parts. The singers were joined by probably at least 12 instrumentalists and possibly up to 20 or so on major feast days. So it took a lot of planning and collaboration. We know that Bach did not always get along with the people he worked with, but he still worked with them.

A third practical lesson is not so much about Bach but rather about the town of Leipzig. The Leipzig town council, for whom Bach worked, put in place *structures and resources* for excellent church music. They hired a cantor of Bach's caliber. They supported the musical training of boys in the St. Thomas School. They also paid musicians to rehearse and perform church music. The liturgical structures required such music, and the cantata was included as a regular part of the liturgy. We do not often think of such things, but it is significant and meaningful work to put such structures and provide the financial resources for them to continue.

A final practical lesson likewise extends beyond Bach himself to all the persons involved with the worship service, including the ministers, the musicians, and the congregation. This is a reminder that there are *different roles* in worship and that they are all vitally important. The outline of the main Sunday and feast day service in Leipzig earlier in this article detailed the many parts of the service and also pointed to different persons or groups of persons who led or participated in these sections. For music, the cantata reminds

us that sometimes a small group offers music on behalf of the congregation. This can be an important part of Christian worship (we might think today of a soloist, a worship team, or a choir, for example). The service also reminds us of the vital role the congregation plays in church music, both through joining in congregational songs and actively listening to music offered by a smaller group on behalf of the congregation. It is important that we attend to such different roles in our worship leading today.

Creative

A second kind of lesson we believe we can learn from Bach's cantatas relates to creativity. For the first of these, we have borrowed a phrase from Augustine, "*ever ancient, ever new.*" Bach's cantatas grew out of the ancient theology and liturgy of the Christian church, founded on God's Word and the thousands of years of history of God's faithfulness to his people. The music in Bach's Leipzig incorporated hymns both old and new, a motet usually 100 or 200 years old, and a cantata on which the ink was hardly dry that incorporated musical styles both old and new. Indeed, all Christian worship is always "ever ancient, ever new." All Christian worship is grounded in God's person and actions from before the foundations of the world while anticipating our eternal worship in the new creation. Nevertheless, it also always takes place in the present. It is happening right now.

In addition to reminding us that Christian worship is "ever ancient, ever new," Bach's cantatas remind us of the importance of *fittingness* for our church music. Once again, there was much music in the Leipzig liturgy in a wide variety of styles. However, each piece of music was designed to fit the particular text and function within the service and the church year. Church music is never a performance for the sake of the music itself. It is in service to Word and Sacrament, in service to the liturgy

and the church year. We regularly quote Martin Luther's statement that music is the handmaiden of theology. And, yes, this speaks highly of music in the church. It also reminds us that music is the servant and that theology is the one being served.

A third creative lesson from Bach's cantatas is *excellence*. Bach's cantatas are artfully created, presenting the best of poetry and music that the town of Leipzig had at its disposal. The town hired Bach, the best musician they could, and they tasked him with and supported him in, his creative work. Bach himself strove to create faithful, creative, excellent music that served the liturgy. His cantatas were new creative expressions that were made and offered with excellence.

Spiritual

Finally, we believe there are spiritual lessons we can learn from the example of Bach's cantatas for our own lives today in church music. The first of these again notes that Bach's cantatas grew out of and were immersed in the *liturgy of Word and Sacrament*. Bach's cantatas remind us that through faithfully offering music, we are not only facilitating the congregation's worship, but we are also worshiping the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our music is worship, and it is a great privilege and a great responsibility to offer such worship to our God.

The second spiritual lesson is expanding the first, reminding us that our worship, and our music in worship, are both *communal and personal*. We worship God together with, and in the presence of, God's people. And we ourselves worship God. Corporate worship is always personal—it requires us to offer up our very selves to God. But it is also not about us: it is focused, once more, on God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The third spiritual lesson is that worship is always *local*. It is always practiced in a particular time and place and grows out of and connects to that time and place. The fact that we do not know who wrote the text for Cantata 104 may be seen as both insignificant and notable. It is insignificant because the authorship for both the text and the music was not the point—the point was to provide the congregation with an additional way of understanding the Gospel text. It is notable because scholars believe the text was written locally, probably by a pastor or theologian in Leipzig. This practice of providing a new text for the liturgy would help ensure that the text was directly relevant to the present needs of the local congregation.

And finally, we are reminded by Bach's cantatas that our music in worship is *prayer*. Our music is offered to God, and through it, we have the privilege of communicating with God himself. If we pay close attention to the texts of Bach's cantatas and the texts we sing in worship each week, we will note the language of prayer. Many of these texts are in the first person, being spoken by the Christian believer directly to God, as in Bach's Cantata 104. However, once again, we are proclaiming such texts together with, and in the presence of, God's people. Some of these sung prayers we offer up together with one voice, those that we offer in congregational songs. A soloist or small group offers other prayers on behalf of the congregation, that is, words sung by the celebrant, the pastor, the worship leader, the choir. Moreover, these are still corporate prayers. They are words that belong to all of us, that are being prayed by all of us to our God. Our church music is always prayer.

CONCLUSION

The cantata in Bach's Leipzig was a faithful—and, we believe, Spirit-filled—expression of worship offered to God by, and on behalf of, God's people. It was grounded in the liturgy,

an exposition, and application of God's Word leading to the sacrament of Holy Communion. It was collaborative, as God's people offered the best of poetry and music. Furthermore, God's people put structures in place and allocated resources for such excellence in worship.

Do we need to perform Bach's cantatas in our churches today? Not necessarily. However, what if we strove to follow the example of our forebears in eighteenth-century Germany—and of so many other Christians of countless times and places—who in their own ways sought to offer God worship that was faithful, Spirit-filled, grounded in Word and Sacrament, excellent, both personal and communal, both ancient and new? Moreover, what if we did our best to provide structures and resources to ensure such worship would continue? May God grant us the grace to offer him such worship.

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