

BACH, CHRONICLES, AND CHURCH MUSIC

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The use of instrumental music in worship has often been challenged in the history of the church. It has been attacked for two main theological reasons. While it was rejected in the early church because of its association with pagan religion and culture, Zwingli and many Protestant teachers after him rejected it because it had not been instituted by Christ and his apostles. They therefore argued that it lacked proper biblical authorisation.

Like many musicians before and since, Bach pursued his vocation as a cantor in the face of theological criticism and rejection of what he had been, as he so firmly believed, called to do. These attacks came from people who had been influenced by the Pietist movement with its concern for inward experience, spontaneous spirituality and religious sensibility. For them liturgy and liturgical music was, at best, a distraction and, at worst, a hindrance to the cultivation of personal faith and the expression of individual piety.

Bach obviously rejected the Pietist critique of his project to provide 'well-regulated church music'. Yet, while scholars have been able to deduce why he may have done so, they have not, until recently, been able to document his actual theological position. But we now have at our disposal material from Bach himself which, briefly and epigrammatically, outlines his theology of church music. This material shows us that Bach found divine authorisation for his vocation as cantor, as well as the foundation for his theology of church music, in the two books of Chronicles in the Old Testament. Chronicles provided him with his charter as a church musician. And more than that! It set out for him how church music was to function ritually and theologically in the liturgy of the church.

This article explores that theological rationale from two points of view. First, I shall examine how Bach used the book of Chronicles to understand the theological function of church music and the liturgical significance of his role as cantor. Secondly, I would like to take a step back further in time and trace what Chronicles has to say about the nature and function of sacred music in the divine service performed at the temple in Jerusalem at about 350 BC.

1. BACH, CHRONICLES AND THE CALOV BIBLE

The story of rediscovery which I have to tell begins with the purchase by Bach, in 1733, of a Bible commentary in three volumes. It was written by D. A. Calov, a Lutheran theologian of orthodox persuasion, who taught at the University of Wittenberg and was well known for his opposition to the Pietist movement. Markings in the text and comments in the margin from Bach's own hand show that he studied this commentary eagerly and carefully. He corrected obvious mistakes in it, underlined passages of personal interest to him, highlighted key sections of it by putting NB in the margin, and, most significantly of all, added occasional comments of his own to the text.

After Bach died, the commentary remained unclaimed by his sons, was listed in the inventory of his estate together with what was left of library, and was eventually sold. Nothing further was heard of it until it turned up in America in a second hand German bookshop in Philadelphia. There it was bought by a pious emigrant German farmer called Leonard Reichle who, soon thereafter, settled at Frankenmuth in Michigan. The original ownership of these three volumes remained undetected until 1934 when his son brought them down of the attic of the farmhouse and showed them to a certain Pastor Reidel who happened to be visiting him. That pastor recognised Bach's monogram on the title page and alerted some LCMS church officials to its existence. At that stage no one seems to have examined the three books any further. Eventually, in 1938, they were presented to the library of Concordia Theological Seminary in St Louis where they remained hidden in the stacks, unexamined and unappreciated.

In 1969 a German scholar called C Trautmann tracked down the commentary and arranged for it to be borrowed and displayed in a Bach festival held at Heidelberg (see J.S. Bach, 'New Light on His Faith', *Concordia Theological Monthly* 42, 1991, 88-99; and 'Bach's Bible', *American Choral Review* 14, 1972, 3-11). It was he who discovered the various markings in Bach's hand, deciphered them, and alerted the scholarly community to their existence and significance. R. A. Leaver examined these notations and arranged for the publication of facsimiles of them, together with a translation and commentary (*J.S. Bach and Scripture*, Concordia Publishing House, St Louis, 1985). H.C. Cox also published another facsimile edition, together with the results of a scientific analysis of the annotations and a literal translation of the text with Bach's reactions to it (*The Calov Bible of J.S. Bach*, UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor, 1985).

Three comments are made by Bach on the topic of church music in Calov's commentary on Chronicles. The first occurs in connection with 1 Chronicles 25:1. There we read how David appointed three guilds of Levitical musicians to 'prophesy' in the divine service at the temple in Jerusalem. Bach underlines the verse as well as Calov's explanation of the prophetic function of the musical performance by the musicians. Calov says: 'they were to turn God's word into spiritual songs and psalms and sing them at the temple set to the accompaniment of music played on instruments'. Then he adds in the margin: 'NB. This chapter is the true foundation for all God-pleasing church music'.

This comment needs to be understood in the light of the reasons given by his opponents for the rejection of instrumental church music. The implied argument runs as follows. God has provided the foundation for the performance of instrumental music in the divine service. Through David he has instituted the singing of songs to instrumental accompaniment by Levites. The musicians, called cantors in Chronicles, have priestly status and perform a divinely given role in the worship at the temple. Since instrumental music has been authorised by God, the church can be sure that God is pleased with the singing of the liturgy and liturgical songs to the accompaniment of musical instruments. Such church music serves a prophetic purpose by virtue of its combination with the word of God. It assists the proclamation of God's word powerfully and effectually to the congregation, so that the people of God are moved by it spiritually and respond to it in a God-pleasing way.

The second comment is given in connection with 1 Chronicles 28:21. This verse comes at the end of David's formal delivery to Solomon of the divinely inspired model of the

temple and its appointments. It emphasizes that this model, which David has received like a prophet directly from God, includes the arrangement of the clergy for the services at the temple and their division into two classes. Calov notes:

‘It is clear from this divine model and the whole prophetic directive given to David that he did nothing by his own efforts, in building the temple and arranging the divine service, but did everything for it and its offices according to the model which the Lord presented to him through his Spirit...’

Bach highlights the reference to the divine model in this comment, marks the extended discussion on the difference between ritual devised by human beings and ritual ordained by God, and then adds the remark: ‘NB. A wonderful proof that, together with the other arrangements for the divine service, music too was instituted by God’s Spirit through David.’ The argument here is that music had not been added to the liturgy as a dubious, if not idolatrous human innovation, as the Pietists had claimed, but had been instituted by the Holy Spirit as an important part of the divine service. Hence, just as the musicians belonged to the order of the Levites in the Old Testament, so the position of Bach as a cantor was a divinely sanctioned office in the church.

The third remark is, by all counts, the most telling of all. In 2 Chronicles 5:11-14 the story is told that as a massed choir began to sing a psalm of praise at the dedication of the temple, the temple was covered with a cloud, and the glory of God filled the temple. Calov introduces this section with the caption: ‘How the glory of God appeared during the performance of beautiful music’. In the margin to verse 13 Bach writes: ‘NB. In a reverent performance of music God is always present with his grace’. This gives us Bach’s theology of church music in a single sentence. In brief it is this. God’s presence in grace and mercy, through the means of access provided by him for the divine service, must be distinguished from his presence in wrath. God’s glory is his gracious presence with his people, which is, however, hidden from human sight. That hidden glory is announced and revealed to the congregation by the performance of praise at the temple. Sacred music therefore preaches the gospel in the liturgy. Wedded to the word and performed with reverence, it proclaims God’s presence and favour to those who listen to it. The congregation can therefore be sure that God approves of them and is pleased to grant them what they request of him.

2. CHRONICLES AND LITURGICAL MUSIC

The book of Psalms tells us that songs of praise were sung at the temple in Jerusalem as part of the services which were conducted there. References to musical instruments indicate that they were sung to instrumental accompaniment. Yet despite all this data, they do not actually say how, when, where, and why these songs were performed there. For information about that, we need to turn to the book of Chronicles which, among other things, sets out the theological foundations for the performance of sacred music and song at the temple. Since I have dealt with this topic in some detail in my book, *The Lord’s Song* (Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 1993), I shall merely outline the findings of that study here.

a. The Divine Institution of Sacred Music

The book of Chronicles holds that two people were appointed by God to establish the worship of Israel. While Moses was the founder of the sacrificial ritual which was enacted twice daily at the temple, David was the founder of choral music which was established at Jerusalem and coordinated with the sacrificial ritual (1 Chron 6:31-48; 16:4-42; 23:2-5, 30, 31; 25:1-31). The stimulus for this innovation did not come from David himself but from God. God commanded the prophets Nathan and Gad to tell David to appoint the choir for the temple which his son Solomon was to build after David's death (2 Chron 29:25). The choir was therefore a divinely sanctioned royal institution. Even though the musicians for it were taken from the Levites who were, traditionally, minor clergy under the leadership of the Aaronic priesthood, they were endowed by the king and were directly responsible to him (1 Chron 25:2, 6). They therefore represented the king and performed their musical offerings on his behalf.

In response to God's command David is said to have organised the musicians for their task. They were, as I have already noted, taken from the three clans of the Levites to which all the clergy belonged (1 Chron 6:33-47). David divided them into three guilds which were named after their leaders: Heman, Asaph and Ethan (also named Jeduthun). Each of these leaders was accountable to David and under his authority. From a pool of 4,000 candidates (1 Chron 23:5) came 288 fully trained musicians who were involved in the performance of praise at the temple (1 Chron 25:7). These musicians were divided into 24 shifts with 12 musicians rostered on each shift (1 Chron 25:8-31). Apparently, each shift was on duty for a week twice a year as well as for the three great festivals. In addition to the levitical musicians, at least two priests were appointed to sound the golden trumpets over the daily burnt offering (1 Chron 16:6; 2 Chron 29:26, 28; cf 1 Chron 15:24; 2 Chron 5:12), just as God had commanded Moses (Num 10:10).

David is also said to have decreed which musical instrument were to be used liturgically (1 Chron 23:5; 2 Chron 29:25) and to what the choir was to sing (1 Chron 16:41; 2 Chron 7:6). The leader of the choir used small metal cymbals to call the choir and congregation to attention at the beginning of the performance (1 Chron 15:16, 19; 16:5; 2 Chron 29:25). The song of the Lord was accompanied by lyres and harps. While the lyre provided the melody of the song, the harp was most likely used to provide a deeper bass line. The trumpets, however, were not used melodically or harmonically. They signaled the presence of God the heavenly king and called on the people to perform an act of prostration in his presence, for in the ancient world the trumpet was used royally to announce the public advent and appearance of a king. David also prescribed that the choir was to sing a psalm of thanksgiving and praise to the Lord (1 Chron 16:4, 41; 23:5, 30), like the one given as a model in 1 Chronicles 16:7-36.

David also assigned their musicians their places in the temple (2 Chron 35:15; cf. 7:6). Their place in the temple complex was consistent with ritual status and function. They stood at the top of the fifteen stairs which led from ceremonially clean outer court of the temple to the holy inner court, and performed their songs of praise in front of the altar for burnt offering (2 Chron 5:12). As they sang the Lord's song they had the altar behind them and the congregation in front of them. They therefore stood in the intermediate zone between God the heavenly king and his people. Like courtiers standing before a king enthroned in this palace, they served as his advance guard and mediated between him and his people as they addressed their song of praise to the people.

Lastly and most importantly, David determined the ritual function of the musical performance in the sacrificial ritual. The song of praise was quite deliberately synchronised with the burning of the daily sacrifice on the altar (1 Chron 16:39-41; 23:30, 31; 2 Chron 23:18). This was most significant, for the burnt offering was the focus and centre of the daily services at the temple. By means of it the Lord God met with his people (cf Exod 29:42, 43) to hear their petitions and help them (2 Chron 7:12-16). Through the burnt offering the people had access to their heavenly king. So, when David decreed that the sacred song should be sung together with this important ritual enactment, he established its ritual function and significance. The actual sequence of events is presented quite clearly in 2 Chronicles 29:27-29. As soon as the priests on duty began to set out the burnt offering on the altar, the choir began to sing the Lord's song. Whenever the priests blew their trumpets, whether at the beginning, or at the end of each verse, or at the end of the ritual enactment, the people, led by their earthly king, paid homage to their heavenly king by prostrating themselves in his presence. So practically speaking, sacrifice came to be closely associated and ritually connected with praise.

The performance of choral music was then established by David at God's command. Even after his death it was regulated by the charter which he gave to the musicians (1 Chron 6:32; 2 Chron 8:14; 23:18; 35:15). Their instruments were the instruments of David (2 Chron 29:26; cf. Neh 12:36). Through the agency of the choir and these instruments David continued to praise the Lord long after he had died (2 Chron 7:6). These musicians represented David and praised the Lord on his behalf, just as Christian musicians represent Jesus Christ who, through them, leads the congregation in its praises (Heb 2:12; 13:15).

b. The Theological Significance of Sacred Song

The significance of sacred song is determined by its ritual setting. For the writer of Chronicles and the Israelites in the post-exilic period, the daily burnt offering, presented on the altar at the temple in Jerusalem, was, as it were, the sacred bridge between heaven and earth. In it the Lord met in audience with the assembled congregation, who, in turn, appeared there in his presence and presented their petitions to him there (2 Chron 7:12-16). Like a king at his palace, God held an audience twice a day at the temple during the times of sacrifice. There his people had access to him and his grace. There they petitioned him for justice in the face of manifest injustice, for charity as people in need, and for mercy as sinners. There they ate and drank in his presence. There they received his blessing and were honored by him. Sacred song then gained its significance from association with that momentous interaction between God and his people.

As far as we can gather, preaching and teaching was not a regular part of the sacrificial service. Instead, the levitical choir sang its song of praise during the daily burnt offering. Thus we read in 1 Chronicles 16:4:

'David appointed some of the Levites as ministers before the ark of the Lord to invoke (announce), to thank, and to praise the Lord, the God of Israel.'

Since the Lord was believed to be invisibly and mysteriously enthroned as king on the ark, the choir stood there in his presence and announced his presence to the assembled congregation with a song of praise. In essence it consisted of the refrain (1 Chron 16:34, 41; 2 Chron 5:13; 2:3, 6; 20:21):

‘O give thanks to Lord, for he is good,
for his mercy endures for ever’.

As is shown by this refrain, they did three things in their performance of praise. First, they invoked God by using his holy name: Yahweh, translated as Lord in English. They, as it were, identified him and introduced him by name to the congregation, so that the people had access to him there through his holy name. Secondly, they praised the Lord. They did not address their praise to God but to the congregation. In their praise they sang about his goodness and proclaimed his loving kindness to the assembled congregation, even as they stood in God’s presence. Because God was utterly good and far more generous than any human being, his presence could only be communicated via full-bodied praise. He was so wonderful and great that they could only acclaim him and proclaim his presence with them in the language and posture of praise. Thirdly, as is shown by the psalm given in 1 Chronicles 16:8-36, the singers called on the congregation, all the nations, and the whole of creation to join them in acknowledging God’s gracious presence with his people and in praising him for his steadfast love for them and his whole creation.

In the story of the dedication of the temple by Solomon the book of Chronicles further explains the significance of the praises which were sung by the choir in the daily sacrifice. 1 Kings 8:6-11 had reported that when the priests had placed the ark of the covenant in the temple, the glory of the Lord, enveloped in a cloud, filled the temple. The presence of the glory-cloud was therefore associated with the location of the ark in the temple. In contrast to this, 2 Chronicles 5:11-14 claims that the appearance of the glory-cloud coincided with the performance of praise by the massed choir, standing in front of the altar for burnt offering.

By means of this change the book of Chronicles articulates its theology of praise. It connects the glorious presence of God with the performance of praise at the temple. Like the sun behind a dark cloud, God’s presence with his people is hidden from their sight. In fact, God conceals himself in order to reveal himself to them, without dazzling, overwhelming, and annihilating them. His glory remains hidden from them until it is revealed by the performance of praise. Praise announces God’s invisible presence. His glory, therefore, is not revealed visibly in a theophany to human eyes but audibly to human ears in sacred music and song. Every day, as the smoke, which conceals the holy perpetual fire and symbolises the Lord’s appearance to his people, rises from the altar, the choir proclaims his presence there (2 Chron 7:1-3). As the singers glorify God with their song, his glory is proclaimed and so made known to the people. And they, in turn, acclaim him as graciously present with them there by joining the choir in praising the Lord.

3. Conclusion

Like the writer of Chronicles, Bach was convinced that the presence of the Triune God could not be adequately confessed and expressed by human beings without praise. If God is much better and far more loving than any human being, then his presence could only be proclaimed in full-bodied praise. Words by themselves would not suffice, for no matter how eloquently they were arranged in poetry, they, by themselves, could not engage us fully and involve us entirely at all levels of our being. They could only do that if they were combined with music. And music affects us most profoundly when it links our brain waves with the vibration of string instruments, our breathing with the sound of wind instruments, and our bodily movements with the rhythms of percussion. Yet no matter how powerful the effect of instrumental music could be, it could never be divorced from the name of God and the word of God in Christian worship which, after all, celebrated the incarnation of God's word. Both Bach and Chronicles are right. By the marriage of God's word to human music and song, the liturgy of the church celebrates the glory and mystery of heaven here on earth with us.

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