

Session to Session

... promoting the strengthening and
growth of Biblical Presbyterianism
in America ...

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Perceiving the Passion in Central Europe

by O. Palmer Robertson

The ultimate cultural experience for mortals may be hearing Johann Sebastian Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion* presented in the beautiful music hall of Vienna, Austria. After standing in line two hours for tickets, this was my experience during the week before Easter. Two choirs, two orchestras, and outstanding soloists captured the attention of a standing-only audience filling three tiers for over three hours.

Bach's genius communicates not only in the musical score, but in his sensitive insights into the gospel. The heartfelt German pietism plies the hearts of his hearers far more than even Handel's majestic *Messiah*.

Hearing this performance in Vienna, straddling East and West as it does, stirs a sympathetic soul-vibration for the suffering brothers and sisters in central Europe. Today they are "filling up that which is lacking in the sufferings of Christ" (Col. 1:24). For the sake of the spread of the gospel, they suffer daily in a godless social structure. The tangible representation of the "iron curtain" dividing Austria from Hungary may have been dismantled recently. But Bach's representation of the sufferings of Christ remind us that his passion continues through the church.

From the cultural center of Vienna it was possible for my wife and me to slip behind the iron curtain for several days. During our travels, we had the opportunity to meet with many believers who live daily under the pressure of an anti-Christian government. We learned first-hand from these brothers and sisters in Christ what it means to suffer for Christ under a Marxist regime.

One thing the church suffers today in the name of Christ is the lies of his enemies. Christ's accusers could find nothing against him, so they manufactured lies. "This fellow said 'I have the power to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days'," they declared (Matt. 26:61).

Satan is the father of lies, and he continues to lie today. The name "Satan" means "accuser," and he gives himself to the task of accusing Christian brothers. His subversive work in this manner applies to Christians in the West as well.

For at least two decades, Christianity has been blamed for environmental pollution. By teaching that man should "sub-

due the earth," it has been argued, Christianity has encouraged the abuse of the environment for the selfish desires of men. But visit countries of the materialistic Marxist persuasion in central Europe, and you will see the concrete effects of a godless philosophy. In one area, children are allowed to breathe the outside air for only five minutes at a time. From five years of age and up they are taken from their families for as long as three weeks so they can inhale air relatively

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Of the World, But Not In the World

by Kenneth A. Myers

[In October, Crossway Books will publish *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture*, by Session to Session managing editor Kenneth A. Myers. This article is adapted from portions of that book.]

A healthy cultural life is not in itself a spiritual good. One can be fully devoted to that which is true, noble, right, pure, lovely and admirable in the created order and *still* not recognize the Creator. Likewise, one can be surrounded by cultural garbage and enjoy the fruit of the Spirit in great abundance. But one's cultural life is not a matter of indifference, any more than one's physical health is. A very sick person can be a very holy person, but generally, it would be better if he weren't sick. Health offers opportunities for Christian service, for more time spent in Bible study and prayer, for more fellowship with other Christians, for participating fully in the life of the visible Church. To the extent that we guard our health, we add to our usefulness in the body of Christ.

If our cultural lives are sick, it is likely to be an impediment to our spiritual lives. Much popular culture promotes a spirit of restlessness. That is likely to be an obstacle to prayer, to concerted reflection, and to attentiveness to the needs of others. Popular culture also has an extremely limited range of sensibilities. I have never heard a work of popular music that has the depth of poignancy of the opening bars of the Brahms *German Requiem*, for example, with its text, "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." I learn something about mourning when I hear Brahms; I know of no similar lessons in popular music. I did not know such feelings until I heard these works. Now that I know them, I think that I know something about grief, sorrow, and suffering that I did not know before. Reflecting on

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free of poisonous pollutants.

But even in the midst of the lies about Christ and Christianity, the passion of Jesus offers hope. Before Caiaphas, the chief priests twist his words, pretending that they understood him to threaten to destroy the temple of Solomon in Jerusalem (Matt. 26:61). But after the crucifixion, these same chief priests must come to Pilate and themselves offer the true interpretation of Jesus' words: "Sir, we remember that while he was still alive the deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again'" (Matt. 27:63). With his genius for musical scoring, Bach arranges his climactic crescendo so that the finest testimony for the resurrection of Christ comes from the lips of his enemies.

The lies of Satan ultimately will be uncovered. The perversion of the truth by Christ's enemies will in the end serve as strong testimony to the truth. This lesson Christ's passion teaches us.

Another lesson from the passion of Christ is the blindness of his own disciples. The enemies of Jesus saw it. They understood that by referring to the rebuilding of the temple, Jesus was anticipating his own resurrection. They grasped his point.

But his disciples did not. They were expecting a victorious kingdom. They could not conceive of a circumstance where God ruled while the Messiah suffered and died. Although Jesus stressed this point with them repeatedly, they could not get it.

The church today has the same difficulty. It expects everything to move toward success, acceptance, and victory. Rapid growth and favor in the eyes of the men has become the measure of faithfulness to the Lord.

But Paul warned that through much suffering we must enter the Kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). All who live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution (II Tim. 3:12).

The reports from central Europe confirm that fact. One woman testified through her tears how she must work in the fields all day to sustain her five children. Yet they hardly have enough bread to eat, and many are on the verge of starvation. When concerned Christians came to the border of her country with a large supply of clothes for the needy, they were told they would have to pay taxes that amounted to the purchase price of the clothes.

But Christianity is thriving nonetheless. Wherever we went, the evening services of worship were as well attended as the morning services. One brother who has travelled in an eastern bloc country indicated that he spoke to over a thousand people in one church. In other places, as many people stood outside the church as were crowded inside.

In a context of persecution, the church of central Europe manifests a strong spirit of sincerity in its profession. It was incomprehensible to these believers that leaders of some Christian churches in America did not accept the whole Bible as the word of God. Why should someone want to be known as a Christian if he did not believe all of God's word to be true?

The grace of hospitality abounded in every place. Al-

though these brothers and sisters had never met us, they opened their homes to us at the risk of losing personal freedoms. They emptied their cupboards, insisting that we share in the little they had.

Let us not continue as though we were blind to the calling of our Lord. His church is to "fill up that which is lacking in the sufferings of Christ." The pharisees understood Jesus, but his disciples did not.

Understand Jesus. Don't be duped and deluded by any modern versions of triumphalism. Take up your cross daily and follow him.

A final lesson to be learned from the churches of central Europe is the triumph of Christ even as he undergoes his suffering. The night before the presentation of the *Saint Matthew Passion*, the Vienna folk-opera featured (in German) Puccini's *La Bohème*. This opera ends in a death. It is a pointless death, suitable to a plot as thin as water.

The wonder of Bach's insight into Matthew's account of the death of Christ is that he ends with burial, and yet with a note of triumph. Calmly, gently, peacefully, Jesus rests in triumph even in his burial. Dramatizing the stillness of the end of day of Christ's death, Bach sets to music the following words:

At evening, when it was cool,
Adam's fall was displayed;
At evening, the Savior overcame it.

Oh lovely time! Oh evening hour!
The conclusion of peace with God is now made,
For Jesus has endured his cross.

Now the Lord is made to rest;
My Jesus, good night.
The toil is over that our sins made for him;
My Jesus, good night.

Rest, you weary limbs;
Rest softly, rest well.

Having depicted the peacefulness of Christ's burial, Bach then turns to a point of personal application. He reflects on the request of Joseph of Arimathea for the body of Jesus and then addresses his own soul:

Oh, dear soul, *you* ask!
You go; let them give *you* the dead Jesus.

Make yourself pure, my heart;
I myself will bury Jesus.
Make yourself pure, my heart,
For he shall now and forevermore
Take his sweet rest *in me*.
World, go out! Let Jesus in!
Make yourself pure, my heart.

The highest society of Vienna, dressed in their finest furs, responded with untypical applause that demanded four curtain calls. However, you could not but question whether the majority actually understood the message of Christ's

passion. The suffering Christians just a few kilometers away, locked behind the barrier of the iron curtain, may understand the message much better.

They may understand it better than we in America as well. Although suffering daily in the loss of personal freedoms, they may be more than conquerors though him who loves them.

From their daily celebration of Christ's suffering we have much to learn. They continue to be the victors even in their many trials. Ω

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Jesus' identity as a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, has more meaning for me than it did before. As human experience is deepened or broadened by aesthetic experience, human compassion and sympathy are enriched. These natural virtues are not to be identified with the fruit of the Spirit, but they *can* be an aid to spiritual obedience. . . .

The influence of a culture that once was dominated by Christian values is now one of the greatest spiritual challenges for American Christians. Once decency and order seemed to characterize the lives of individuals and communities. The institutions they created and the traditions they respected seemed to make American culture more hospitable to Christianity than any culture in history. American society was regarded as a "Christian society."

Earlier generations of Christians were concerned about "worldliness," but whatever that meant, it was seen as an aberration in American culture, not its essence. But today, most Christians regard their culture itself as an implacable enemy, a constant threat to their own sanctity and to the stability and faith of their families.

More specifically, what is called "popular culture" has been troubling to parents, teachers, pastors, and counselors for generations. The effects of television, movies, popular music and fiction, fashion, and other aspects of popular culture have been debated intensely, if not always intelligently. Much of the attention has been focused on the content of popular culture, especially material that mocks religion, the family, and "traditional values," and that makes explicit or suggestive sexual appeals.

It has been common for evangelical Christians to give up trying to come to terms with "secular" popular culture, and to boycott it altogether. But often they have simultaneously endorsed the creation of an extensive parallel popular culture, complete with Christian rock bands and night clubs, Christian soap operas and talk shows, and Christian spy, romance, and horror novels. They have thus succeeded in being of the world but not in the world. . . .

In his book, *The Triumph of Vulgarity: Rock Music in the Mirror of Romanticism* (Oxford, 1987), Robert Pattison suggests that rock's threat to religion is that it forces "churches to compete [with rock-dominated culture] on the

basis of their ability to titillate the instincts of their worshippers," thereby making religious leaders

entrepreneurs of emotional stimulation. Once God becomes a commodity for self-gratification, his fortunes depend on the vagaries of the emotional marketplace, and his claim to command allegiance on the basis of omnipotence or omniscience vanishes in a blaze of solipsism as his priests and shamans pander to the feeling, not the faith, of their customers.

How much of the liturgical and educational life of our churches has been influenced by this need for emotional stimulation, whether or not the music we sing sounds like rock? How many sermons are shaped by the necessity of communicating to a culture dominated by this sensibility?

While rock was asserting the new dominance of an instinct-driven popular culture in American society, conservative Protestants were assessing two phenomena within their ranks: the Jesus people, and the charismatic movement. The Jesus people were Christian hippies, an unorganized assortment of relatively new believers who were adamant in their eagerness to construct their fellowship and worship according to the sensibility of the counter-culture.

Today the charismatic movement is unproblematic in evangelical circles, but it was a hotly debated issue during the late 1960s and into the 1970s. It is at least a curious thing that this was exactly the time that cultural guru Theodore Roszak was extolling "the non-intellective capacities of personality—those capacities that take fire from visionary splendor and the experience of human communion" as "the arbiters of the true, the good, and the beautiful."

The charismatic claim was that non-intellective bodily and emotional forms of communication from God were a central aspect of true piety. One must ask to what extent the controversy over this claim was settled by the power of exegetical proof from the Scriptures, and to what extent the controversy simply died down because the new cultural sensibility of instinctiveness made it difficult to sustain *any* argument, especially one concerning ecstatic utterance.

One must also ask to what extent the *popularity* of the charismatic claim is due to the work of the *Heiliger Geist* and how much was simply the effect of the *Zeitgeist*. I remember a young woman exclaiming to me in the early 1970s how wonderful it was that she had been filled by the Holy Spirit, because she didn't have to *think* about her faith any more. Why did she *assume* that it was wonderful not to have to think about her faith? Was it because she had come of age in the 1960s and was influenced by the fashionable preference for pre-rational spontaneity?

The evangelical churches in America by and large consented to the legitimacy of the charismatic claim at about the same time it stopped fussing about rock 'n' roll. To be sure, there are still many Christians uncomfortable with both, but they are generally relegated to the fringes. They are simply up-tight, and since the dawning of the New Age, up-tight is *not* where you want to be. Ω

Session to Session

Good Reading

One of the chapters in Jaroslav Pelikan's wonderful book, *Bach Among the Theologians* (Fortress, 1986), is entitled "'Meditation on Human Redemption' in the *Saint Matthew Passion*." The first part of the chapter's title is from a treatise by Anselm of Canterbury (ca. 1033-1109), best known for his work *Why God Became Man* (*Cur deus homo*), a classic text on the doctrine of the atonement. *Meditation on Human Redemption* was a shorter work, more devotional in intent, and liturgical in tone. Its convictions

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are precisely the convictions expressed by Bach in the *Saint Matthew Passion*. Anselm's *Meditation* began: "O Christian soul, soul raised up from grievous death, soul redeemed and freed by the blood of God from wretched bondage: arouse your mind, remember your resurrection, contemplate your redemption and liberation. . . . Taste the goodness of your Redeemer, be aflame with love for your Savior."

Pelikan points out that one of Bach's contemporaries was the rationalist theologian, Hermann Samuel Reimarus, a great enemy of the gospel who maintained that the death of Christ was all a mistake. As Pelikan notes, the *Saint Matthew Passion* is an eloquent rebuttal of Reimarus. "We can hear in the *Matthew Passion* how, as a result of the satisfaction theory of the atonement, grief and gratitude can form an exquisite blend in the supreme choral version of Michelangelo's *Pietà*." [p. 101] —KAM

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