

J. J.

Johann Sebastian Bach was fired from his job as organist at the Lutheran church in Arnstadt because he got into a fist-fight with a bassoonist. That almost certainly isn't the most important thing to remember about Bach, but I can't help loving the picture: two musicians, in flowing horse-hair wigs and those brocaded tail-coats like bathrobes on steroids, going full-contact in the public street- flailing at one another with their elbows because neither one could afford to damage his hands.

But the thing about Bach, cage-matches aside, is that he was a devout Christian. Raised in the valley below Wartburg castle where Luther took it on the lam from Pope Leo, baptized in the church where the great reformer preached on his way to drop the *Hier stehe ich* bomb on the Diet of Worms, young Johann learned early on to love Christ and to love even music only as a means of praising God. He cranked out over one hundred and fifty cantatas keyed to the church calendar, works of theological depth as well as musical brilliance- an achievement fueled by an eight-volume theological library which included a three-volume Bible with frequent marginalia by the composer himself.

Bach's piety appears in an idiosyncratic devotional practice involving his musical manuscripts. At end of the musical score he typically wrote, "S. D. G." an abbreviation for the Latin *Soli Deo Glori*, "Only to God the Glory."

Now, that's pretty good if you're Bach, or even Fanny Crosby. When I first heard about this pious *post scriptum*, I thought I might try the same thing with my sermons, but it seemed a little presumptuous: I can't convince myself that there's all that much glory to be had from them, or that God wants the credit for such a feeble product.

Then I learned something else about the great musician: he kicked off the composing process by scribbling "J.J.," another set of Latin initials for *Jesu, juva*, "Jesus, help." Bach didn't wait to pawn the finished product off on God; he turned the process over to the Father from the start.

I've often marveled at how much of our prayers consist of asking God to bless what we've already done, and telling other people we are above question because we've given God the credit. I wonder what the Latin phrase is for "Only to God the Blame." Calvin Miller speaks in *The Philippian Fragment* of a woman who insisted on reading her poetry in church and capped each assault with, "The Holy Spirit gave me this poem; I take no

credit for it myself." Her pastor quips, "There was a widespread belief in the fellowship that the Holy Spirit didn't want the credit either."

But if "J.J." precedes "S. D. G.", perhaps we find some genuine way to offer to God whatever good may be done. I very much doubt if anyone will be reading my sermons two and a half centuries from now as they still listen to Bach's cantatas, but who knows that a soul may stand at the throne for eternity because the Spirit chose to use something I said? *Jesus juva!* Lord help me! Own my work from start to finish in order to accomplish your ends.

S. D. G.
Doug