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### Luther's Divine Rhetoric

Martin Luther, the sixteenth century monk who sparked the Reformation, made use of his rhetorical skills to challenge the religious powers of his day and to relieve the masses of their unscrupulous and unbiblical burdens. He was as much a product of his times as he was a catalyst for the changes that were taking place in the Western world. Others agree. Neil Leroux, a leading researcher of Luther's rhetoric writes, "Luther's biblical and pastoral rhetoric coincides with characteristics of a Renaissance culture of oratory that relied heavily on persuasion rather than on coercion" (qtd. in Leroux 162). Luther's persuasive style, his passion for his message, and his understanding of his audience contributed to his influence as a rhetorician. His debates and writings changed the course of history, impacting every component of the developing Western Civilization, including politics, religion, culture, and the dignity of individual human beings. Many consider him one of the most influential figures in modern history. As we begin to study his "style—the rhetor's crafted effort to identify with an audience—with some information about his context (the rhetor's background, the rhetorical situation, and the audience)" (Leroux 40), then we can begin to grasp the significance of Martin Luther's contributions.

First we must establish the context for Luther's work, and to do so we must learn something about his life and the times in which he lived. To begin, Luther did not enter the world with any indication that he was destined for greatness. Instead, he was born into humble beginnings, to a peasant family living in a small village in Germany. His father was a copper-miner and his mother, a hardworking woman who saw to the needs of their household, dutifully dragging home wood from the forest to heat their home and fuel their cooking fire. As peasants, they were a

rugged and coarse breed, but they were also devout people, given to prayer. At the time of Luther's upbringing, elements of German paganism and Christian mythology influenced the fears and beliefs of the ignorant peasants. He grew up believing in mythical creatures, including: elves, sprites, and witches. He was convinced they inhabited the nearby woods and that "Sinister spirits would release storms, floods, and pestilence, and would seduce mankind to sin and melancholia" (Bainton 27). The German peasants were a superstitious people during the late fifteenth/early sixteenth centuries and this early upbringing fed into Luther's formative beliefs about God.

As a young man, Luther entered the University at Erfurt, where he earned both his Bachelor and Master of Arts degrees. Afterwards, he went on to study law at Erfurt. One day, while travelling by foot back to his village, he suffered a harrowing experience in which he felt his life was threatened. Fearful of being struck by lightning during a tempest, he vowed that if Saint Anne, the patron saint of miners (Dillenberger xiv), would spare his life, he would become a monk and spend the rest of his life in service to God.

Shortly thereafter, he left his law studies and entered the monastery. While there he did everything religion afforded to ease his tormented conscience. It seemed he could never confess enough, sacrifice enough, or suffer enough to atone for the sins he felt infected his mind and heart. He believed that since God is so holy, man, whom he knew to be unholy, could not possibly abide in his presence. So Luther determined to make himself holy by zealously attending to every religious duty. He did so not only through the kindlier pursuits of charity, love, and sobriety, but also through the suffering aspects of fasts, vigils, and mortifications of the flesh. "Whatever good works a man might do to save himself, these Luther was resolved to perform" (Bainton 45). Later, Luther was known to have said, "I was a good monk, and I kept

the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I” (Bainton 45). In an attempt to ease his tormented soul, he fasted days on end, exceeded the requirements of his order with prayer vigils, and nearly froze to death by going without blankets when the nights reached sub-zero temperatures. Yet instead of feeling satisfied that he had somehow achieved holiness through these endeavors, he continued to be tormented by thoughts that he had still not done enough.

Luther’s confessor, Johann von Stupitz, the vicar of the Augustinian order to which Luther belonged, was frustrated that he could not comfort Luther’s soul. “He recognized in him a man of moral earnestness, religious sensitivity, and unusual gifts” (Bainton 59). So, he decided to try a new approach. He informed Luther that he had been chosen to assume the chair of the Bible at the University of Wittenburg and would be required to study for his doctoral degree in Biblical studies. This meant Luther would begin studying the Bible and preaching.

At first Luther protested. He did not feel worthy of such a task. Little did he know this new direction would lead not only to a life-changing personal revelation that would finally bring relief to his tormented soul, but also launch him into his life’s work that would bring about the Reformation—the movement that called for the reform of the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church. The Church of his day taught that a person could atone for their sins by paying money to the church or by performing penitent acts the church deemed virtuous in order to have their sins remitted and to avoid eternal punishment. Once the fees were extracted or the deeds performed, the adherents received a written certification from an agent of the Pope. These certifications were called indulgences. The Church of Rome used these to procure money and in return they promised forgiveness of sins.

As a result of his biblical studies, Luther had discovered in the Scriptures that a person's sins were forgiven and remitted according to God's grace, and by that grace alone, not as a result of the merits earned through the indulgences obtained through the Church. Luther accused the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church of wrongdoing. And as a result, he called for reforms that would return the Church to a pure representation of the Gospel (God's plan to bestow his righteousness on humankind by his grace). "... this paradoxical figure revived the Christian consciousness of Europe. In his day, as Catholic historians all agree, the popes of the Renaissance were secularized, flippant, frivolous, sensual, magnificent, and unscrupulous" (Bainton 21).

Prior to acquiring this revelation of God's grace, Luther said, "I was more than once driven to the very abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created. Love God? I hated him!" (Bainton, 59). Now he was able to say, "This it is to behold God in faith that you should look upon his fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger nor ungraciousness. He who sees God as angry does not see him rightly . . ." (Bainton 65).

With this new understanding of God's grace which is received by faith and not by merit, Luther's world was turned upside down. No longer was he a fearful monk driven to despair over his sinful unworthiness; now he had become a man of extreme faith and courage, who would challenge the corruption of the church of his day which he believed had been burdening and misleading the masses. He would also inspire nationalism and undo the way the political systems functioned with a corrupt church to control populations through fear. And finally, he would reveal once again the power of God's grace to reconcile people to God apart from their own merits or sacrifices.

Luther nailed his famous Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg in the hope of initiating a debate concerning the practice of buying and selling indulgences. From

there, his writing and preaching took on a fervency that impacted the Church hierarchy as well as the masses. He wrote, spoke, and debated prolifically about sin, free will, and grace. The Pope declared him a heretic and placed a ban on him. As a result, his life was in constant danger, but he kept on writing and speaking.

He understood the value of using his rhetorical skills to communicate his message, and no doubt, his contributions to rhetorical theory show up most vividly in the realm of preaching. “Indeed, enemies and followers alike—in different ways and toward opposite ends—attested to the rhetorical skills of this ‘German Cicero’” (qtd.in Leroux 11). Luther was well aware that “... preaching and sermon construction draw heavily upon the principles of rhetoric . . .” (Leroux 17) and he was “skilled with argument and rhetorical devices and knew how to draw his listeners—his congregation—into his messages” (Leroux 11-12). This use of rhetoric won him an ever-broadening audience. “. . . for every one in favor of the Pope, there were three for Luther . . . no case had so plagued the Church in a thousand years . . .” (Leroux 105).

Through the years Luther’s ideas, however, have not avoided criticism. As with all prolific writers down through history, readers discover among their tomes ideas which draw contention. For Luther, this includes a treatise written about Jews which was contrary to his practice and earlier writings. Upon closer study, we discover that particular treatise was written later in Luther’s life when he was feeling intense emotion in regard to a particular situation which disturbed and irritated him (Bainton 379). Sadly, some have used this treatise to discredit Luther by associating him with anti-Semitism, which runs contrary to the greater substance of his work and teachings.

Despite that diversion, no one can deny Luther’s positive impact on the world of his time, nor his ongoing influence today. Catholic reforms and Protestantism owe much of their existence to

him. “Luther was a skilled rhetorician who was intensely committed to the interpretation and proclamation of God’s Word from both lecture desk and pulpit” (Leroux 12), and through his writings and preaching the whole of Christendom has benefitted. His revelation of the Gospel of God’s grace and its implications for all people led him to write and preach powerful, clear, and persuasive sermons that have been studied by masterful preachers and orators down through the centuries, with his influence still being felt in seminary preaching and oratory classes today. Although written in German, Luther’s rhetoric translates well into other languages, and he continues to be quoted often and famously throughout the world. Although he came from humble beginnings, he made his mark on the world, igniting a movement through his use of rhetoric that undid the corrupt religious systems of his day.

### Works Cited

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