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CHAPTER 3

"Putting on the Neighbor"

The Ciceronian Impulse in Luther's Christian Approach to Practical Reason

Gary M. Simpson

Everyone should "put on" his neighbor and so conduct himself toward him as if he himself were in the other's place.¹

Cicero was the wisest man.²

What has long been noticed but little analyzed is Luther's relationship with his "beloved Cicero," as one interpreter has again recently remarked.³ I will explore a key feature of Cicero's relationship with his philosophical predecessors in order to highlight one reason for Luther's love affair with this "wisest man." The twinkle in Luther's eye makes good sense when we consider Cicero's peculiar wisdom within the context of Luther's christological formulation of Christian love as "putting on" one's neighbor. In particular, Cicero's innovation in the Greek rhetorical tradition provided Luther with a kind of philosophical venture capital for his christologically tinged approach to practical reason.

Faith and Practical Reason

Luther's "The Freedom of a Christian" remains a mother lode for the intricate and richly textured relationships of faith, love, and practical reason, which were much contested in Luther's day and before, as in our own.⁴ Indeed, in the very last paragraph he summarizes the predicament that confronts practical reason⁵ or "natural reason," as he calls it there.⁶ When the ubiquitous questions of our moral life arise, practical reason becomes "superstitious." That is, practical reason erroneously presumes the quite commonly held "opinion," which moreover is "trained and confirmed . . . by the practice of all earthly lawgivers," that its calling is to lead us toward righteousness in God's sight, toward justification.⁷ Luther sought to emancipate practical reason from such "false opinions concerning works, that is, from the foolish presumption that justification is acquired by works"⁸ by having us "theodidacti, that is, those taught by God [John 6:45]."⁹
In Luther's *Lectures on Galatians* (1531, 1536), he promulgates the first commandment of his theology, so to speak: *ne confundatur mores et fides* ("let not morality and faith be confounded")—"both are necessary, but both must be kept within their limits." As he notes in a 1522 sermon:

[It is necessary to make a distinction between God and men, between spiritual and temporal things. In human affairs man's judgment suffices. For these things, he needs no light but that of reason. . . . But in divine things, the things concerning God, and in which we must conduct ourselves acceptably with him and must secure [eternal] happiness for ourselves, human nature is absolutely blind, staring stone-blind, unable to recognize in the slightest degree what these things are."

Luther emphasizes that this distinction between the passive righteousness of faith and the active righteousness of love and reason is "easy to speak of," but "in experience and practice it is the most difficult of all, even if you exercise and practice it diligently." When reason trespasses its terrestrial limits, aspiring to occupy the throne in matters of salvation, Luther's rhetoric is unsparing. Reason, so enthroned, transmogrifies into "the lovely whore," the "arch-prostitute," "the Devil's whore," and the "Devil's bride." For this reason, exclaims Luther in his "Disputation against Scholastic Theology," "Virtually the entire [Nicomachean] Ethics of Aristotle is the worst enemy of grace. This in opposition to the scholastics."

As we will see, a Ciceronian form of practical reason, when—like love—formed by faith in Christ, can render a salutary service to the Christian love of neighbor. Practical reason, when formed by faith, shares characteristics akin to Luther's famous "reason illumined by faith" that grasps the beauty and joy of that "fortunate exchange," which "couples Christ and me more intimately than a husband is coupled to his wife." Here we encounter forms of "another reason," of an emancipated reason that Luther calls "the reason of faith." The purpose, therefore, of the Christian vocation to rightly distinguish faith and reason in experience and practice is so that in everyday life they might be rightly related and coordinated. Cicero's oratorical model of practical reason made it a ready candidate for such coordination. Before turning to it we will attend briefly to Luther's cruciform communion Christology and its ramifications for the relationship of faith and good works of neighbor love.
"Putting On" the Neighbor

Luther sought to reestablish the relationship between faith and love and thus to undo the distorted relationship that had come to dominate medieval piety expressed theologically in Aquinas’s formula, “faith formed by love.” Luther claimed, to put it briefly, that Christian living is doubly ecstatic. Christians live “beyond” themselves in a twofold way: “a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. . . . He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love.”18 Faith, whose form is Christ himself,19 is our all-sufficient sociality in relationship with God, and love is our all-sufficient sociality in relationship with neighbors.20 Indeed, it is the sufficiency of faith in Christ, this “living ‘spring of water welling up to eternal life’”21 that begets love’s sufficiency in relationship with neighbors. Because “every good tree produces good fruit” [Matt. 7:17],22 therefore, “[l]ove is true and genuine where there is true and genuine faith.”23

Christian love entails that “the good things we have from God should flow from one to the other and be common to all.”24 In this earthly commonwealth formed by love, the explicit focus lies on “what I see is necessary, profitable, and salutary to my neighbor.”25 While love, overflowing from faith, provides the willing spontaneity to meet the neighbors’ and their neighborhoods’ needs, it does not yet by itself provide the moral epistemology, so to speak, for how one discerns these needs and what will meet them. Historically, such discernment is the calling, service, and capacities that practical reason provides for love, provisions of which Luther is quite aware.26

Luther employs the oft-used biblical, and Pauline, metaphor of “put on,” as with clothing, relative to our neighbors. Indeed, we “put on” Christ (Rom. 13:14) in our baptisms (Gal. 3:27) because in Luther’s cruciform sociality Christ has “so ‘put on’ us and acted for us as if he had been what we are,”27 that is, sufferers and sinners.28 More so yet, Christ’s putting on sufferers and sinners furnishes both the possibility and the form of a Christian’s putting on one’s neighbor “as if he himself were in the other’s place.”29 We become “Christ to my neighbor,” “Christ to the other,” “Christs to one another”30 by putting on their life-world, sharing their place, attending to their needs from within their situation. Here Luther’s exploration of cruciform communion Christology emits a moral epistemological imagination, so to speak, for practical reason.

The Love Affair with Cicero

Luther had high regard for “worldly wisdom” relative to the moral life.31 God “writes it [God’s moral wisdom and law] upon the hearts of all human beings . . . [and] from this natural knowledge have originated all the books of the
more sensible philosophers, such as Aesop, Aristotle, Plato, Xenophon, Cicero, and Cato. Indeed, God

is a gentle and wealthy Lord. He casts much gold, silver, wealth, dominions, and kingdoms among the godless, as though it were chaff or sand. Thus he casts great intelligence, wisdom, languages, and oratorical ability among them, too, so that His dear Christians look like mere children, fools, and beggars by comparison.

In his Lectures on Genesis, Luther also reveals his own preference for worldly wisdom: “Let the older ones learn Cicero, to whom, to my surprise, some prefer Aristotle as a teacher of morals.” Already in his first appointment at the University of Wittenberg (October, 1508–March, 1509) he had lectured four hours a day on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics for a course on moral theology. He always held Book 5—justice and epieikeia—and Book 6—prudence—of Nicomachean Ethics in high regard, but he still considered Cicero “supreme in human wisdom.” “Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics is fair,” he confessed, “but Cicero’s Officer [On Duties] is better.” It is no accident, then, that even in his last preserved written words Luther cites Cicero. Here we will examine one aspect of Cicero’s work—there are others—that endeared him to Luther: oratory and civic life.

Oratory and Civic Life

The first Ciceronian impulse for Luther’s approach to practical reason resides in the civic vocation of Cicero’s innovative understanding of rhetoric. Here we will probe three facets of Ciceronian rhetoric that are crucial (there are others): the bond of wisdom and eloquence, the vocation of oratory in civic life, and the relationship between oratory and consent. Cicero took on the dispute between Plato and the sophists who both, though from opposite points of view, held to the incompatibility of philosophy, reason, and wisdom, on the one hand, and rhetoric, on the other. From his earliest reflections as a twenty-year-old or so to his last book written in the year that he died, Cicero sought to heal the breach inherited from the Greeks between philosophy and rhetoric, between reason and speech, between wisdom and eloquence. This was an artificial, indeed illusory breach, he argued, that undermined his own lifelong aspirations for a republican basis of society. “Wisdom without eloquence leads to very little of value for civic bodies, while eloquence without wisdom for the most part performs in an excessive fashion and leads to nothing,” he claims in On Invention. In On Duties he argues:
But it seems we must trace back to their ultimate sources the principles of fellowship and society that Nature has established among men. The first principle is that which is found in the connection subsisting between all the members of the human race; and that bond of connection is reason and speech, which by the processes of teaching and learning, of communicating, discussing, and reasoning associate men together and unite them in a sort of natural fraternity. In no other particular are we farther removed from the nature of beasts.\footnote{39}

Cicero was “the wisest man” precisely because, as Luther himself emphasized in 1532, he combined “wisdom and eloquence.”\footnote{40} Luther was keen on this Ciceronian innovation to bring about not only a measure of “natural fraternity,” which is the task of practical reason, but also to bolster Luther’s waning though still hopeful yearnings for reform of the church. For instance, in his introductory remarks to Erasmus in \textit{The Bondage of the Will} (1525) he goes so far as to employ the Ciceronian innovation. Luther would bring his gift of wisdom to the debate and bear Erasmus’s “ignorance,” and he pleaded that Erasmus would bear Luther’s “lack of eloquence” by bringing his gift of it, in order “to render mutual service with our gifts, so that each with his own gift bears the burden and need of the other [Gal. 6:2].”\footnote{41} During the weeks leading up to the Diet of Augsburg (1530), Luther urged political authorities to excel in the virtue of peacemaking with its benefits “so eloquent and so wise.”\footnote{42} On another, very different occasion, Luther, directly inspired by Cicero, raved that we come to trust Jesus because he alone is “the wisest among the sons of men” endowed with “the sweetest and loveliest lips,” with “the loveliest mouth,” “pleasant lips,” indeed “superabundant in His lips” out of which “gushes forth . . . the sweetest and loveliest wisdom . . . sweet and delightful wisdom, worthy of such high praise.”\footnote{43}

Luther’s initial affection for Cicero commenced because of the “bond” that Cicero had forged between wisdom and eloquence. Luther’s love intensified because Cicero understood oratory itself to be nothing less than wisdom and eloquence brought to bear on civic life for its well-being, and, from Luther’s theological perspective as well, brought to bear on ecclesial life for its communion and salvation. Indeed, Cicero had argued that it was oratory itself that originally actualized human sociality and furthermore that it is only continual oratory that can sustain and strengthen civic life in its various dimensions. In this way oratory is itself the key mode of practical reason. The implications of Cicero’s argument for Luther and his times were enormous and are routinely under estimated or even overlooked altogether.

Briefly stated, nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians of political philosophy have generally juxtaposed two dichotomous medieval and Reformation
lines of thought relative to human sociality, and theologians have usually followed
this consensus. Augustine set forth the first line of thought, epitomized in his
well-known statement: "For there is nothing so social by nature, so anti-social by
sin, as man."44 Within the earthly city, humanity's fallen, perverted, sinful nature
made anything but discord and strife hardly imaginable yet alone achievable. At
best God instituted political authority as a negative counterforce to our fallen
nature, with the task to bridle human corruption and to compel obedience to its
order of coerced tranquility. Human sociality hardly crosses the threshold into the
postlapsarian era, perhaps not at all. Aristotle fathered the second line of thought,
according to this historical reconstruction, which Thomas Aquinas and his fol­
lowers supposedly adopted wholeheartedly. Nature constitutes human beings as
political animals and endows us with an internal telos whereby our natural inclina­
tions and tendencies organically, directly, and inexorably lead to positive family,
civic, and political structures and institutions. Robust notions of sin, or its philo­
sophical equivalents, do not figure prominently in Aristotle's equation, save per­
haps in a weak privational fashion.45 Political historians, and theologians as well,
have routinely placed Luther prominently and exclusively within the Augustinian
line of "pure pessimism."46

Cicero, however, represents a third, clearly distinguishable, and readily avail­
able tradition from which Luther himself drew.47 In Cicero's account of the ori­
gins of human sociality, Nature originally endowed humans with the potentiality
for sociability residing in their capacities for reason and speech. This potentiality, however, stayed dormant, leaving human primordial existence scattered, savage, brutish, and devoid of morality, law, and civic associations. What humans needed and what emerged was a first orator who "transformed them [primordial humans] from wild beasts and savages into tame and gentle creatures on account of heed­ing speech and reason more diligently."48 Furthermore, for Cicero, oratory's civic
vocation must continue lest humans relapse to their primordial antisocial exist­
ence. For Luther and many others, this vision of sinful yet social contributed to
his twofold realism about both human sin and God's continuing left-hand provid­
ence. The Ciceronian impulse continually nudged Luther away from the "pure pessimism" that he surely at times exhibited. Luther, therefore, regularly cited
Psalm 127:1, which was also on his short list of verses that children should mem­
orize,49 when espousing God's real providence mediated through a variety of terrestrial "masks." Unsurprisingly, Luther at times interpreted these masks from the viewpoint of oratory.50

Especially in On the Best Sort of Oratory and On Duties, Cicero construed and
exercised practical reason through his oratorical imagination. Here Cicero empha­sized a third characteristic that kindled Luther's affection: the consent of the ora­
tor's audience. In the task of practical reason "[t]he supreme orator is the one
whose speech instructs, delights, and moves the minds of his audience ... To
move them is indispensible.” The orator must therefore accommodate oneself to common idioms, customs, and speech. As Cary Nederman stresses, “whereas in all other arts that which is most excellent is furthest removed from the understanding and mental capacity of the untutored, in oratory the very cardinal sin is to depart from the language of everyday life and the usage approved by the sense of the community.” We can see this very dynamic at work in Luther’s “On Translating,” whereby the biblical translator must diligently “look the other in the mouth.” This priority on the audience resonates both with Luther’s “new radical reevaluation of ordinary life” and with his christological accent to “put on” his neighbor and so conduct himself toward him as if he himself were in the other’s place.”

Cicero’s oratorical, discursive, communicative imagination of practical reason is “overtly participatory” where the audience of fellow citizens is the final arbiter. The orator thereby defers to the audience rather than commands them. According to Luther’s christological imagination of Christian love, we “put on” our neighbors’ circumstances and needs, and these then direct, discipline, and determine the situation-specific shape of Christian love. Luther usually reserved his more overt participatory intuitions and insights more for his conciliar approach to ecclesial life than for his political approach to terrestrial rule. However, when he reflected on the moral aptitudes of rulers regarding distributive justice, he often played a participatory note.

Luther developed a suggestion first made by Augustine that Paul positioned love as the first fruit of the Spirit because love is really the only Christian virtue (Gal. 5:6; also Rom. 5:5; 1 Corinthians 13). As we “put on” our neighbors, Christian love “expands into all the fruit of the Spirit.” Whether the neighbor is within or without the Christian communion appears unimportant (Gal. 5:13-14; Rom. 13:8-10). Christian love operates like a pluripotent stem cell becoming—by means of an emancipated practical reason—whatever set of virtues neighbors, neighborhoods, and communities need for their welfare, thus setting out the breadth of Christian vocation in God’s world.

**Conclusion**

Luther was surely not the only one of his age to be delighted, instructed, and moved deeply by this “wisest man.” In this brief exploration we can more easily determine the extent and depth of Luther’s delight and affectedness than we can the precise nature of the instruction that he took from Cicero. Various models of practical reason were commonplace in Medieval and Renaissance thinkers and numerous were delighted, instructed, and moved by Cicero.

I have suggested a Ciceronian impulse within Luther’s approach to practical reason, though he never wrote a philosophical account on the subject matter.
Luther’s metaphor of Christian love as “putting on” one’s neighbors readily opens a door for and resonates with Cicero’s participatory oratorical model of practical reason. The Ciceronian impulse also sheds light on his frequent lyrical raptures in favor of Aristotle’s concept of *epieikeia*—the practical spirit of justice in complexities of real life—rather than Plato’s preference for the pure letter of the law. Here, too, Luther regularly cites Cicero’s commonplace, “More law, less justice [more injury]” (“Summum ins summa iniuria est”; *De officiis* 1.10.33) in order to insist, “therefore equity [epieikeia, Greek; *aequitas*, Latin] is necessary.” But such an exploration must wait for another occasion to appraise Luther’s love affair with this “wisest man.”