

Dangerous political propaganda or passionate prophetic speech? An alternative reading of Luther's 1520 treatise, *To the Christian nobility of the German nation concerning the reform of the Christian estate*

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Introduction

Luther's 1520 treatise, *To the Christian nobility of the German nation*, marks a critical turning point in the progress of the sixteenth century Reformation movement in Germany. In it Luther appealed to the princes of the German states to involve themselves in the reform of the German churches. As evidence of the need for such reforms, he included several attacks on the abuses of the Papacy and the whole Roman ecclesiastical structure, especially as it operated in Germany. He also outlined for the first time a comprehensive and radical program for the church's reform.

In 1520 the progress of the reform movement which had been sparked in 1517 had stalled somewhat. Luther's appeals to Rome for reform had been rejected. The bishops were protecting their own power. Church governance and the administration of the affairs of state were deeply intertwined, and the temporal authority of the German states was weakened by long-standing papal claims that the church's divine authority ranked over and above it.

Looking for a way to break the deadlock, Luther turned to the German nobility as the only group who seemed disposed and able to act in defiance of the Pope's claims of power in order to sponsor and support badly needed church reforms. Luther had, even at this early stage of the Reformation, received encouragement and support from various German

princes and knights who had declared their sympathy for his theological position, and so it was to them that he turned for help. *To the Christian nobility* was not written as a detailed theological argument for fellow theologians, but as a rousing call to the German princes to take action. By exhorting the princes to take charge, Luther hoped to empower them to break the Papacy's claims to absolute power over the German church.

It is widely held that this treatise, which was intended as a 'prophetic appeal' to mobilise the nobility to cast off Rome's domination and facilitate churchly reform, was—like some of Luther's other treatises¹—unfortunately later misinterpreted and misappropriated by many of its readers and hearers. Published in German and disseminated widely throughout Germany, *To the Christian nobility* reached a larger and more diverse audience than Luther had intended—not just noblemen but people of all classes. The peasants of Germany, who were at that time increasingly discontented and resentful of their governing authorities and the Roman church's hegemony, took Luther's appeals as warrant for rebellion and armed uprising against their temporal rulers. This rebellion eventually erupted in bloody and violent conflict in 1525 in the Peasants' War.

The controversy

The question which has been much discussed in regard to the above circumstances is: to what extent was Luther's stirring and vehement rhetoric in *To the Christian nobility* to blame for its misinterpretations and misunderstandings which, in part, led to the rebellion and bloodshed of 1525? Was Luther's treatise used as a pretext for rebellion against the rulers of the land, or was Luther himself irresponsible and inflammatory in his use of rhetoric, leaving himself wide open to fatal misunderstanding?

While the debate about this began already immediately after the revolt in 1525, with Luther's Roman opponents publishing tracts blaming Luther's writings for the terrible bloodshed,² recent scholarship has also, on the whole, tended to place the blame at Luther's feet.

Contemporary Luther scholars are generally increasingly disapproving of Luther's polemics and strong rhetoric. Today's popular ethical values of tolerance and inclusiveness do not sit well with Luther's sometimes scathing language against his opponents. His fiery polemical rhetoric also jars with modern and post-modern sensibilities in regard to power and authority, human equality and dignity. So it is hardly surprising that much of Luther's writing in *To the Christian nobility* may seem disturbingly excessive and inflammatory to the contemporary reader.

1 Luther's *The freedom of the Christian* of 1520 was also blamed for inciting the peasant uprising, both immediately after the uprising and since. See Burgard: 279-82.

2 In July 1525 Jerome Emser published *How Luther has promoted rebellion in his books*. Johann Fundling's tract, *Fifty five astonishing things*, accused Luther of stirring up the peasants to rebellion, only then to betray and turn on them. See Brecht: 190. The interpretation of history Burgard is putting forward, therefore, has deep roots.

One recent notable evaluation of *To the Christian nobility* is Peter Burgard's 2008 article, 'Masterful rhetoric: the logic of authority and subjection in Luther', in which he claims that Luther was irresponsible and 'out of control' in his use of rhetoric in this treatise. In his linguistic analysis of the treatise he seeks to show that Luther stirred up egalitarian, democratic and revolutionary sentiments among his readers by stressing that all Christians—not just members of the clergy—were priests and members of Christ's one body. Then, Burgard proposes, Luther unsuccessfully tried to take all this back in the latter part of the treatise, demanding total obedience to the temporal authorities as powers set up by divine authority. Burgard remarks that Luther 'played a dangerous game with his rhetoric and lost', misreading his audience, losing control of his language and inciting revolution by mistake.

The intent of this paper

While honouring Peter Burgard's scholarship, in this paper I venture to offer an alternative—or at least a 'modified'—reading of *To the Christian nobility*. In so far as Burgard's article is representative of other contemporary views, I will use his assessment of Luther's treatise as a point of departure, since it seems to me that, at key points, its case is built on unreliable assumptions about Luther, his world, and his theology. The fundamental problem is an issue of historiographical methodology. Burgard's close linguistic analysis of Luther's treatise is impressive; however, his judgements are anachronistic. Instead of seeking to understand Luther within his own time and context as a first step toward understanding him in today's world, Burgard places back onto Luther political constructs and ideologies from modernity that were simply not part of Luther's world or consciousness in the early sixteenth century. By reading Luther through this lens, Burgard has, I submit, arrived at a somewhat distorted and unfairly critical view of *To the Christian nobility*.

While it is nobody's job to 'save Luther's reputation where he deserves censure', as Mark Edwards puts it (127), it is only good historiography to try to understand Luther properly on the basis of what he actually wrote, within his own cultural and historical context and, more precisely, in the light of the extraordinary circumstances of 1520.

The case for an alternative reading

1. The context: reform in crisis

Burgard suggests that Luther should have been more aware of the potential effects of *To the Christian nobility*. Even if such criticisms are to be taken on board, it is important to understand the spiritual 'crucible' in which *To the Christian nobility* was written. Luther perceived the situation he faced in 1520 as a grave emergency. The reform movement was in crisis; everywhere he looked he saw the distress and affliction (*Not und Beschwerung*) of Christendom, especially in Germany. The extent of the spiritual-financial abuse perpetrated by the Roman church in Germany at this time was staggering. There was a host of costs and levies for ministrations of the church associated with the

Roman penitential economy: endowed masses for the dead, benefices and indulgences, not to mention the cost of the 3000 curial officials and secretaries appointed in Germany (Brecht: 372–74).

Luther had appealed to the Pope to consider reform, unsuccessfully. Rome had not only been immovable but had deployed its own propaganda machinery to discredit Luther and close off as many avenues of churchly reform as possible, ‘immunising’ itself to reform, as Brecht puts it (371).³ Among the German bishops, those who were not hostile were concerned to protect their own positions and wealth, and were therefore disinclined to reform, as were the clergy who depended on their favour and patronage. Luther and his band of Wittenberg reformers, while influential, could not carry the Reformation on their own, especially in the face of mounting opposition from Rome. The fledgling reform movement had reached a stage perilously close to breaking point.

As Luther shows in his introduction, he felt a profound sense of helplessness; he saw clearly that since the normal avenues and options for churchly reform were closed off, he must step beyond the bounds of the church to seek help. He felt himself strongly compelled (*gezwungen*) to speak. He was aware of the potential for misunderstanding, and saw that the whole enterprise may indeed backfire on him.⁴ He knew too that the nature of printed publications in that era was that once they went into the hands of the printer they were beyond the writer’s control. How they would be represented or misrepresented by others, including critics, there was no way of telling. Yet, at this critical moment, as the church faced a vital moment of decision, Luther felt conscience-bound to speak.

Burgard’s assumption that Luther was playing some kind of cynical manipulative power game misses the tone of deep disquiet evident in Luther’s appeals.⁵ Matheson observes that *To the Christian nobility* is full of genuine heartache, characterising it as ‘one long stylised cry of pain’ (121). Driven by this distress, and aware of the strength of the opposition he was already facing, Luther knew that further irenic appeals would be lost in the wind, and set out to impact his readers by addressing the issues more seriously and powerfully (*mit grossem Ernst*).

3 In 1518, the Roman Thomist theologian Silvester Prierias published his *Dialogue* defending papal claims of absolute spiritual power on earth. This was the first of a number of pieces published to discredit Luther and his appeals for reform. After Luther’s talks with Cajetan at the diet of Augsburg in 1518, Cajetan published his own account of the talks, *Acta Augustana*, rejecting Luther’s call for reform and criticising his views. There were many such anti-Luther tracts published between 1517 and 1524.

4 Luther predicted that he may be a fool and even end up playing the role of the court-jester (*Hoffnarr*). The tasty irony of Luther’s comparison here is that the court-jester’s job was frequently to say by way of jest the things that others could not get away with saying in earnest. In this case, then, Luther declared himself quite happy to play the ‘fool’ for the sake of Christ and his church.

5 See WA 6:405, 15–20. The assumption so often made by scholars reading Luther today that he is being ingenuous and manipulative when he speaks this way reveals more about the cynicism of our own era than it does about Luther’s motives. It also shows a lack of understanding about the affective and emotional intensity of life in the sixteenth century, and the ways in which this was outwardly expressed, compared to our modern western world. (Stolt, 2012: 300–306)

These readers were the ruling class of Germany, from the emperor down (Matheson: 117). These were, effectively, the only people left in German society who were still able to act somewhat independently by exerting their temporal powers over their local churches, albeit in defiance of the absolutist claims of the Papacy. Luther's appeal to this audience begins with an unashamed *captatio benevolentiae*: 'It is not from impertinence or rashness that I, one poor man, have taken it upon myself to address your worships' (124). From there Luther sets out to catch and re-catch his readers' attention throughout the treatise. He piles up concrete images and narratives and throws down dramatic contrasts. Matheson (117–20) observes the way Luther hurls the reader at break-neck speed, first through assertions, then rhetorical questions, arguments, allusions and finally, conclusions. *To the Christian nobility* was written to capture not just its readers' attention, but their conscience and indignation, and above all their will to act.

The tone of Luther's language is strident and polemical. He realised its vehemence. However, his conscious perlocutionary goal was to provoke the German princes to action. Luther's superiors, the chancellor of Wittenberg University, Johann Lang, and the Prince Elector, Frederick the Wise, were both surprised and taken aback by the severity of Luther's attacks on the abuses of the Papacy in *To the Christian nobility*. They were also shocked at the breadth of the reforms Luther had proposed, measured as they were to dismantle the structures through which Rome exercised its control over the German church. Luther's central concern was to clear the way for the reform movement's—and the gospel's—free course in Germany.

The contemporary reader of this fiery treatise needs to appreciate the extreme conditions which brought it forth. Luther was looking for a way to break through layers and layers of papal inertia and stagnation. Rome's theologians—Prierias, Eck, Emser and others—wrote their tracts to repudiate Luther's theology, firmly jamming the lid on attempts to open up the issues. They redoubled their claims of papal authority over the German states, seeking to insulate the church from further reform measures.

Luther's views about the situation are evident in the imagery he used. He spoke of the three protective walls (*Mauern*) that the Papacy had erected around itself, a direct reference to the three walls around the *Tartarus* of hell in ancient mythology.⁶ This was no mere cynical rhetorical 'low blow' on Luther's part, but expresses his conviction that the church, and indeed the world, was at a moment of profound eschatological crisis. This was not some political skirmish; the souls of thousands were at stake because of the church's false teaching and practice. There could be no more serious calamity than that. And who else but Satan himself was at work through powers of opposition to the gospel? Luther wrote *To the Christian nobility* in the apocalyptic glare of God's judgement. As Matheson (121) reflects, Luther understood himself to be facing a cosmic struggle between the church and the Antichrist. When we comprehend this, we begin to

6 *Tartarus* in ancient Greek mythology was the lowest region of the underworld, a 'hell' surrounded by three walls, a place where defeated challengers of the gods were sent, and later a place of punishment, a counterpart to *Elysium* (an afterlife paradise).

realise something of the weight of urgency and conviction behind Luther's statement at the beginning of the treatise that the time for silence was over.

2. Polemic and rhetoric in the Reformation

Readers of Luther today are often repulsed by the vehemence of his attacks on his opponents and his unashamed attempts to appeal to the needs and wishes of his readers. As Burgard points out, in *To the Christian nobility* Luther characterised the Papacy and the Roman church as grossly demonic, exploitative and parasitic, even calling them 'Turks'. He painted the nobility, on the other hand, as stern school-masters who needed to take the unruly clergy in hand by giving them a few good strokes of the cane. Burgard's view is that Luther was careless and uncontrolled in the way he threw his polemic around, inciting a generalised spirit of revolution and rebellion among the peasant population who read or heard it. *To the Christian nobility* contains militant rhetoric, no question. However, once again, its meaning can only be properly understood in context.

It is important to understand that the Reformation was a *Wortkampf*, a struggle of language (Matheson: 243), in which it was the norm to employ fiery rhetoric against one's opponents. As inappropriate and gross as it may seem to us today, scathing polemical language was its own rhetorical form in sixteenth century Europe (Matheson: 157–211). It was cultivated not only in written discourse but in woodcut-cartoons, and by people on all sides of the various conflicts that raged during the early Reformation. Debate and discussion were carried forward through passionate adversarial exchanges and 'trading of blows'. It could be playful and burlesque; more often it was attacking and abusive. It was of course frequently quite coarse, making liberal use of scatological and bestial images and terms. For all its distastefulness to us, however, it is wrong to assume that what we find so offensive today was offensive then (Matheson: 184). Neither should we overlay contemporary ethical boundaries in regard to issues like vilification and verbal abuse on the sixteenth century. In an age when there were no libel laws, it was accepted that the only way to defend oneself against an attacker was in kind (Matheson: 184 and 191).

It was the era of the mass-printed pamphlet. A short, punchy format, it was suitable for the reading and listening public of the time and perfect for polemic. This genre brought with it new language and possibilities. The way it was rather over-used polemically could perhaps be seen as an immature use of the amazing new potential of print media to influence and mobilise large groups for oneself or against others—something like the 'pop-polemics' that characterise the use of *twitter* today.

Matheson observes:

When we turn to look at the negative features of polemic, we have, of course, to attempt to see and hear it through sixteenth century eyes and ears. The academic and ecclesiastical worlds, still often sheltered from much of life's importunities,

may be particularly ill-fitted to do it justice, since they tend to abhor the drastic and the emphatic, valuing conventions of courtesy and decency which serve to render life bearable and light in defiance of its dark horrors. The rougher, director world of modern cinema or theatre or novel may be much closer to the popular literature of sixteenth century. (191)

Burgard's claim that Luther's rhetoric in *To the Christian nobility* was particularly out of control and inflammatory seems to lack an appreciation of the culture of polemic in the Reformation era, and of the particular 'polemical battle' which was raging in 1520. Luther's impassioned appeal with its polemical charges was part of a larger struggle in which he not only 'dished it out to others' but had it 'served up to him' too—and richly. He had himself been targeted by Rome's anti-reform propagandists since 1517. An example is the polemical battle between Luther and Emser between 1520 and 1521 following the publication of *To the Christian nobility*, in which Luther was characterised as a demonic 'raging bull' (Brecht: 377–79). An even more vicious attack came from the former Prior General of the Augustinian Order, Egidio da Viterbo, in 1521, in the form of an advisory memo to the Pope, calling Luther the 'father of lies' and the 'minister of Satan' (Posset, 2003: 18).

3. Prophet or revolutionary?

Although Luther never styled himself as a politician or revolutionary (Brecht: 372), nor saw it as his role to reform the temporal estate, it was impossible at that time for his reform agenda not to influence political affairs. As Lindberg observes (155), religious discourse was not the private affair we have made it today, but directly addressed the socio-political system which was intricately wired together with the complex machinery of the Roman church. The political structure of the empire was so deeply enmeshed with the church's spiritual governance that Luther was simply unable to address the issues of the German church's spiritual reform without his words also having an indirect impact on the political realm.

A reading of *To the Christian nobility* also shows that many of Luther's objections to spiritual abuses and his corresponding proposals for reform paralleled objections voiced in the historical *gravamina* of the German nation—a list of grievances about the Roman church's spiritual, political and financial domination of Germany dating back to the end of the fifteenth century.

From one perspective, therefore, this treatise may seem very political: Luther was seeking to exhort the German princes, as the true holders of temporal authority in Germany, to defy the tyrannical claims of the Papacy in order to provide needed support and protection for the reform of the church. However, this political dimension was not the

main agenda; the ultimate objective was always the church's spiritual liberation.⁷ As I will demonstrate, this end goal and the strategy he employed to accomplish it come through clearly in the treatise.

Burgard maintains, however, that Luther went much further. He accuses Luther of recklessly using the political rhetoric of rebellion in *To the Christian nobility*, carelessly stirring up revolutionary sentiment among his German countrymen. It is on this point that Burgard's evaluation is most unconvincing. He anachronistically places back onto Luther modern constructions and interpretations which postdate him by two hundred years and are simply not to be found either in Luther's world or in the text of this treatise, most notably the ideologies of egalitarian democracy, human equality and revolution (Whitford: 180).

I cannot help but think that one has to quite intentionally 'put on political spectacles' when reading *To the Christian nobility* if one wants to find a call to political revolution and revolt, and even then it is hard to make it out. I propose that a theological rather than political reading of the treatise reveals spiritual dimensions in Luther's rhetoric which clearly show its primary intent and force as theological and ecclesial—a piece of prophetic speech addressed to that moment in history.

One thing we know about Luther is his deep knowledge of scripture and the place of ultimate authority it occupied in his theology.⁸ Burgard's charge (273) that Luther manipulates scripture for his own political agenda is premised on a political reading of the text which all but ignores its primary *theological* argument. Luther uses biblical imagery, narrative and phraseology everywhere in his writing, drawing the reader into the 'playing out' of scripture as present reality. A key to understanding the nature of his rhetoric is to pay close attention to the texts he chooses to make his points, and the narrative images that emerge when these texts are placed into the literary and historical context in which he is writing. I believe this is a crucial insight for understanding Luther's theological rhetoric in *To the Christian nobility*. I offer here three examples in reply to Burgard's analysis.

Luther begins his treatise with a powerful opening statement: 'The time for keeping silence is past and the time for speaking has come' (*Die Zeit des Schweigens ist vergangen und die Zeit zu reden ist gekommen*, LW 44: 124). This is of course a clear reference to Ecclesiastes 3:7, a well-known Old Testament wisdom text and popular saying. A provocative statement? Yes, but far from a revolutionary call to arms, as

7 Today we operate with a clear idea of where the boundary that separates church and state lies. This clear line did not exist in sixteenth century Europe, when the church's bishops operated, to all intents and purposes, as landed nobles and princes themselves. For Germans in this era, both the church and the state comprised Christendom, and all was under God's sovereign rule—ie, the Pope's.

8 Scripture was the highest and final authority for Luther even at this early stage in his career. It is popularly assumed that *sola scriptura* was a reformatory principle which he promulgated. However, he had *received* this value from his Augustinian formation and made it his own in the vows he took on becoming a Doctor of Holy Scripture, to teach according to the Bible and defend it against false doctrine.

Burgard suggests. A brief consideration of the text Luther has selected here shows that he is introducing the treatise to follow by characterising it, in line with this wisdom saying, as a considered, *kairotic* and much needed prophetic word.

The image Luther later invoked of the fall of the walls of Jericho at the blast of the trumpet (from Joshua 6:20) was indeed an apt and vivid picturing of the demolition which Luther was hoping would happen as a result of his treatise—not of Rome itself or any other earthly citadel, but of the ‘three walls’ that the Papacy had erected around itself to prevent the changes threatened by reform. Burgard (270) again sees this as a ‘dramatic call to revolution’. However, I suggest that Luther is not ‘tossing off biblical phrases’ for militaristic effect, as Burgard assumes. Luther is driving at something far more profound. He was trying to lead the reader into the biblical narrative in which God delivers Jericho to the Israelites (Joshua 6:2) as they act in obedience to his direction. It was not the Israelites’ mighty blowing of trumpets that knocked down the walls of the city, but God’s power. Luther’s statement here was not a hint to assemble a revolutionary army, but a call to anyone among the princes who would lend a helping hand, who would speak out for the right, trusting God’s power to break down the walls of resistance to reform that had been erected by the Roman curia. Once again, attending to the biblical images and narrative in the statement shows a deeper theological dimension, rather than a subversive political one.

In the second part of the treatise, Burgard claims again (271), Luther renewed his revolutionary call with the words, ‘Therefore let us wake up, dear Germans, and obey God rather than man’ (*D’rum lassen uns aufwachen, liebe Deutschen, und Gott mehr denn die Menschen fürchten!* LW 44: 124). Once again, one wonders why this must be read as a *political call to revolution*. Burgard completely ignores the theological point being made here. This line is a conflation of two biblical passages, rolled together into one exhortation. The first is from Romans 13, where Paul is talking about the need for Christians to obey and be subject to temporal authority. He goes on to contextualise this as part of the Christian’s call to love the neighbour and (later in verse 11) to wake up to the need to take this new order for life seriously in view of the imminent parousia. The second passage is Acts 5:29, where Peter exhorts the apostles to reject the false authority of the Jewish council in Jerusalem and fear God instead. Luther’s rhetoric in this short appeal is dominated by two theologically loaded verbs from the two texts (*aufwachen* and *fürchten*). I suggest that Luther’s intent was not to incite political revolution but rather to speak a performative, spiritual and prophetic word of exhortation, to ‘wake up’ his readers—the German nobility—to the need for the false demands of the Papacy to be put aside in favour of fearing God and obeying his clear revealed will.

Finally, I suggest that Burgard’s political reading of *To the Christian nobility* fails to make any consistent sense of the treatise. It distorts the argument Luther puts forward, creating problems of sense and logic that are unnecessary if a theological hermeneutic is employed. Burgard criticises Luther’s point that the universality of priesthood among Christians does not mean sameness in the individual’s office and work (*Amt und Werk*). He claims (278) that the ordering of different roles and work according to structures of

authority reinstates the very 'subjection' and tyranny that Luther is repudiating. Burgard's judgement assumes that Luther had a political democratic agenda in emphasising the one shared universal priesthood. He therefore comes up against the problem any reader will have with Luther's argument if interpreting the universal priesthood in terms of political power rather than spiritual service and order. For Luther, being a member of the universal priesthood means sharing in and serving the Christian estate, whether one is a noble, knight or peasant. Hierarchy and differences of importance and status do not threaten the unity of one universal priesthood, as a theological reality.

All of this is not to say that the justification for armed rebellion against temporal authority cannot be adduced or found in Luther's treatise by those who are desperate to find a way out of their oppression and misery. Scripture itself was, after all, interpreted in this way in the Reformation by Zwingli and Müntzer (Lindberg: 146,47). It is also important to acknowledge that the German peasants, to a large extent, were not reading but hearing and hearing about Luther's treatises. Scribner (18) points out that in 1520 less than ten percent of the peasant class in Germany could read. Mostly they would have heard Luther's material read out from pamphlets or, more commonly, heard preaching and public speaking based on Luther's words, often from people whose understanding of Luther's writings was somewhat different from what Luther himself intended (Scribner: 18). It is also well documented that by 1523,1524 some of Germany's peasants were hearing Luther's theology filtered through the writing and preaching of Thomas Müntzer, whose vision of the kingdom of God without doubt entailed political uprising and armed rebellion (Lindberg: 138–51).

The characterisation Burgard puts forward of *To the Christian nobility* as rhetorically reckless and inflammatory of revolutionary sentiment, therefore, does not stand up to a deep reading of the treatise according to the theological purposes Luther himself declared at the beginning; that through his appeal to the princes of Germany, God may inspire them to lend a 'helping hand' in the needed reform of the church in Germany.

Conclusion

Did Luther write his fierce treatise, *To the Christian nobility*, and let it loose into the world without proper care or wise judgement about its possible political effects, as Burgard suggests? Such judgements are easy with the advantage of 500 years of hindsight. Matheson (120) offers the insight here that Luther's very genius with language and his ability to move the reader meant that sometimes his writings could 'mis-happen' when they collided with other passionately held causes.

Whatever blame may be laid at Luther's door for the misappropriation of his treatise, it is important at least to read and understand it in its historical context, and to read it according to the author's stated theological and ecclesial goals. Luther was responding to the situation of grave crisis in 1520. Irenic appeals were useless. The doors to reform in the church were rapidly 'slamming shut' as papal claims to absolute power were redoubled. As a sworn doctor of Holy Scripture—one appointed to speak and teach the

word of God prophetically—Luther found himself called and bound to act. In the final paragraphs of his conclusion to the treatise he wrote:

I know full-well that I have been very outspoken. I have attacked many things too severely. But how else ought I to do it? I am duty-bound to speak. I would rather have the wrath of the world upon me than the wrath of God. ... Nevertheless, I know full-well that if my cause is just, it must be condemned on earth and be justified only by Christ in heaven, for all the Scriptures show that the cause of Christians and Christendom must be judged by God alone. (LW 44: 216,17)

While from our vantage point we may well find Luther's judgements of the Papacy severe, this treatise did not represent some new 'low water mark' in Reformation polemic. It was written within an existing culture of polemic, and used that rhetorical form to accomplish its author's stated aim. Given the tone of the polemic being used against Luther at the time, Luther's own polemics were not particularly unexpected or excessive.

While it seems clear that Luther's words were later tragically misunderstood or misappropriated by some in Germany as justification for armed rebellion, *To the Christian nobility* does not easily read as a call to revolutionary action. Because of the church's dominant role in temporal government, Luther's proposed ecclesial reforms unavoidably touched the social and political life of Germany, but they certainly cannot be called political propaganda (Matheson: 119). His careful, concerted and pertinent use of biblical images, narratives and exhortations also clearly mark his rhetoric as theological. This is passionate prophetic speech, crafted to stir its hearers to action.

The nature of the prophet's work is that it responds to the church's urgent need with urgently needed truth. It reveals human idolatry, pronounces God's judgement and declares God's promise. The effects of this word may go far beyond the prophet's own intent or expectations, both breaking down and building up (Jer 1:10). Luther understood his role in 1520 in just this way, notwithstanding his own regret and bewilderment over the peasants' later misunderstanding of his writings (Brecht: 190).

To the Christian nobility is the work of a pastor and preacher, speaking out of deep concern for souls. Matheson's poetic description captures it powerfully. It is 'a vivid dazzling dream of what the church can be ... an invitation to an apocalyptic dance, to enter with Christ into his Kingdom' (243).

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