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Trevor Sutton

Michigan State University, sutton28@msu.edu

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Christ Coming To Us Luther's Rhetoric of Location

A. Trevor Sutton

Introduction

Our lives are a mash-up of places: we are born in one community, yet die in another; we live in one zip code, yet worship elsewhere; we study at one academy, yet teach in a different setting. Rather than living in a place, we live in places. Many miles separate our home, work, and communal meeting areas. The first place is home, the second place is work, and our various social environments constitute third places.¹ The panoply of domains in which we live is not without consequence. We have become greatly detached from our physical location. We have lost our sense of place.

Fueled by rapid globalization and technological advances, we have become a transient culture. The digital age has helped to expand our geographic precision in demarcating physical location. It has, however, diminished our attention to the meaningful details that make a place special or unique; Google Earth has located the whole world, yet it has done little to help our culture foster authentic human attachment and belonging to a given place. Technology has enabled us to be both located and placeless.

Many complications arise as we collectively lose our sense of place. The more we lose our sense of place, the more we become placeless individuals living within a placeless culture. Personal culpability, historical rootedness, and authentic community diminish proportionate to our culture's growing placelessness. Colonialism has thrived in this sort of interchangeable culture; monarchical reign was thought to work just as well in the *mundus novus* as it did in Europe. Injustice finds fertile breeding ground in this itinerant culture; packing up and moving to the gated suburbs can easily solve even the worst urban problems. Wanton disregard for neighbors can occur amongst a placeless people; there is no impetus to love neighbors who will be gone in a month anyway.

Many disciplines—ranging from history² to higher education³—have seen increased reflection on the topic of place and placelessness. Location and place, though often used interchangeably, are not exact synonyms; one is spatial while the other is social. Location is a geometrically knowable point within physical space whereas place is a more ambiguous boundary often constituted by human and social attributes. Social factors such as human discourse, language, history, and shared belief contribute to

A. Trevor Sutton is associate pastor at St. Luke Lutheran Church in Haslett, Michigan. He is a graduate student in Writing & Rhetoric at Michigan State University. He has a BA from Concordia University in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and an MDiv from Concordia Seminary in Saint Louis, Missouri.



place identity and sense of place in a way that geometry cannot. Though often used in the study of geography, place has a deeply human dimension.

The discipline of rhetoric is among the many academic disciplines reconsidering the important role of both place and location. Location has taken on a new significance within modern rhetorical theory. While rhetoricians have often discussed location (mainly rhetorical situation and audience), discussions about location have taken a new approach in recent decades. Modern rhetoricians have expanded the discussion beyond audience to consider how location functions as a tool for creating meaning. Recent discussions have arisen around topics such as rhetorical space,⁴ digital mapping,⁵ and locus of enunciation.⁶ This is a direct departure from classical rhetoric and its attempt to create universal rhetorical precepts.

Though he was not primarily a rhetorician, Martin Luther has recently become the topic of considerable rhetorical scholarship. According to Neil Leroux, “contemporary scholars of the history of rhetoric have only recently begun to pay the same kind of attention to the reformer-preacher Luther as they have to Erasmus and Melancthon.”⁷ While Melancthon is chiefly known as the influential rhetorician of the Reformation,⁸ Luther did leave a mark on the rhetorical landscape. He was steeped in classical rhetoric by way of Aristotle, Quintilian, and Augustine. Luther’s rhetoric, however, had a strong sense of location that went well beyond audience and rhetorical situation. Luther recognized and utilized physical location in the proclamation of God’s word. Luther *located God’s work in the culture by retelling God’s story of salvation within* the framework of his own world; he actively shifted God’s speaking into the culture of his day and thereby allowed Christ to come to his people through the proclamation of God’s word. Luther’s rhetoric was far from a placeless proclamation of God’s word; it was an endeavor to locate God’s speaking within a specific place and culture. This emphasis on location of speaking makes him remarkably relevant to modern rhetoric.

Rhetoric and Location

Greek and Roman rhetoric tended toward a placeless rhetoric. These rhetorical traditions are characterized by a strong sense that rhetorical precepts are not only universal and knowable, but can also be translated into any location. An interchange between Socrates and Gorgias from Plato’s *Gorgias* provides an adequate example of the belief in a placeless rhetoric:

Socrates: And are we to say that you are able to make other men rhetoricians?

Gorgias: Yes, that is exactly what I profess to make them, not only at Athens, but in all places.⁹

These rhetorical schools claimed an essential rhetoric that could be used in all places. Location was far less important than rhetorical precepts. It was believed that place could not and should not interfere with basic rhetorical principles. Physical location—whether it was Athens, Rhodes, or Rome—was largely inconsequential apart from properly fitting an oration to its intended audience. Stanley Fish notes that

Sophist rhetoric went one step further by dislocating axiology from rhetoric; the orator no longer had to be good, he just had to be good at what he did.¹⁰

Modern scholars of rhetoric have distanced themselves from Greek and Roman rhetoric by placing a much greater emphasis on location. The role of location within rhetoric has shifted away from periphery questions about audience and rhetorical situation and into the center of many rhetorical discussions. For instance, recent rhetorical scholarship has explored, “rooms, lecterns, auditoriums, platforms, confession booths, MOOs, classrooms” and their “material dimensions that affect what we do there.”¹¹ The relationship between word and space has become a central conversation.

Walter Mignolo, in *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, uses location heavily in his study on Renaissance colonialism. Drawing heavily on Michel Foucault’s concept of *mode d’enonciation*, Mignolo explores a concept that he calls locus of enunciation. He argues that physical location is an important factor in understanding any discursive practice. Mignolo uses locus of enunciation to mean the location from which one speaks:

Scholarly discourses (as well as other types of discourse) acquire their meaning on the grounds of their relation to the subject matter as well as their relation to an audience, a context of description (the context chosen to make the past event or object meaningful), and the locus of enunciation from which one “speaks”, and, by speaking, contributes to changing or maintaining systems of values and beliefs.¹²

Mignolo understands location and discursive practice to be inexorably linked with values and beliefs being changed or maintained through the process. Recognizing the locus of enunciation from which one speaks helps to reveal its colonizing aim: Is one speaking from a familiar place or to a foreign place? Is one speaking from the center or the periphery of the culture? Is this speaking an attempt to change or maintain systems of values and beliefs? All of these questions are informed by location. And the answers to these questions are used by Mignolo to reveal the colonizing aim of discourse.

Although he approaches the topic by way of Renaissance colonialism, Mignolo’s work is helpful to rhetoricians in revealing how place is an important tool for meaning making. He advises, “We must look for the place (physical as well as theoretical) from which a given statement (essays or book) is being pronounced.”¹³ Meaning is added to a rhetorical utterance by the place of enunciation. Is the locus of enunciation sacred or profane? Is it any old space or is it a meaningful place? Is one speaking from a place of power or subjugation? Attending to these details of location offers not only a context for meaning but also insight into how the act of speaking contributes to changing or maintaining systems of values and beliefs.

Luther’s Rhetoric of Location

Recent scholarly interest in location has made Luther’s rhetoric of location a very relevant topic of discussion. Luther had an exceptional awareness for God’s locus of enunciation. His rhetoric firmly understood the multivalent nature of God’s active

speaking through the external word;¹⁴ for Luther, God's speaking shifted into the modern culture through the preaching and hearing of the word.

Luther believed that Scripture was not merely an account of divine work in a distant time and place. He understood the Bible to be, in the words of Robert Kolb, "a confrontation with the contemporary sinfulness of hearers and readers and into an encounter with the love and mercy of their Creator, who has come as their Redeemer, and who was in the process of sanctifying them through his Word."¹⁵ Luther told the stories of Scripture in such a way that the parts of the story were relocated in the new context of the present culture: "Thus as he strove to remain faithful to the story as it was told, he retold it within the framework of his own world."¹⁶

Proclaiming God's word in the framework of a new location involved more than merely fitting the oration to please German ears. While other scholars of rhetoric have pointed out how Luther crafted his orations to fit a specific rhetorical situation,¹⁷ his proclamation of God's word was also deeply concerned with shifting God's speaking into a rhetorical space. For Luther, the task of the preacher was not about helping his hearer's encounter an echo of God's speaking in a past location; rather, the task of the preacher was to actively relocate God's speaking into the present location. Luther describes this rhetorical endeavor, though mediated through the very human words of the sermon, as "Christ's coming to us."¹⁸ Luther was concerned with shifting God's locus of enunciation into the specific location of his hearers:

When you open the book containing the gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him.¹⁹

The location of God's speaking is shifted from past to the present; it is shifted from the narrational accounts of Scripture into the present culture. The public oration that constituted a sermon was not a moment to idly gaze at the distant work of Christ; the sermon was a head-on confrontation with God coming to his people in a specific location by means of the external word.²⁰ Hearers are confronted with a mysterious presence that is not mathematically quantifiable; however, similar to Luther's teaching on Christ's sacramental presence, the mere inability to quantify physical presence does not negate physical presence.

The sacrament of the altar, like the public proclamation of God's word, provided Luther with a similar opportunity to shift God's locus of enunciation into the context of the present culture. The words of Christ, though spoken both miles and centuries away from Wittenberg were relocated in a new place:

Listen to this: "given for you"; "shed." I go to the sacrament in order to take and use Christ's body and blood, given and shed for me. When the minister intones, "This cup is the New Testament in my blood," to whom is it sung? Not to my dog, but to those who are gathered to take the sacrament . . .

That's why I have said that these words are spoken, *not to stones or a pillar*, but for Christians. "For you." Who does "for you" mean? *The door or the window, perhaps?* No, these who today hear the words "for you."²¹

Luther addresses the rhetorical space within which Christ speaks through the words of institution. He makes it clear that Christ speaks not to the stones, pillars, doors, or windows but to the people. According to Luther, this powerful utterance of Christ is shifted into a new location every time it is spoken to faithful ears.²² His emphasis on location of speaking explains why Luther considered the ears to be the primary Christian organ.²³ Similar to Mignolo in his recommendation that one looks for the place from which a given statement is being pronounced, Luther always maintained an awareness of where God speaks. Celebrating God's ongoing conversation with his creation through word and sacrament ministry, Luther's rhetoric sought Christ's coming to a specific location.

Since preaching was about Christ coming to a specific location, a sense of place shaped Luther's preaching. God's word is to be proclaimed within a specific location. Place, including the people and culture of a given place, influenced how Christ's speaking was shifted into the present culture. For example, in his "Sermon at the Dedication of the Castle Church in Torgau," Luther preached:

And here again he [Christ] says the same thing: "Which of you, having an ass or an ox that has fallen into a well, will not immediately pull him out on the sabbath day?" What he really wanted to say to them in our plain German was: You are just plain oxen and asses yourselves and even more stupid than those you untie, and it may well be that the ass can read better than you can, and the ox might lead you to school, for he can well teach you to untie him when he is thirsty and to water him on the sabbath, or to pull him out of the well if he has fallen into it, so that he will not perish.

While dedicating the physical space of a new sanctuary, Luther shifted Christ's speaking into the rather coarse "plain German" of his culture. He understands God as speaking to a specific place. Later in the sermon, Luther explains how God appointed the congregation to be the location of his work: "God very wisely arranged and appointed things, and instituted the holy sacrament to be administered in the congregation as a place where we can come together, pray, and give thanks to God."²⁴ The congregation—the place where God speaks through word and sacrament—is the locus of Christ's presence amongst his people. Affirming Luther's sentiments, both Walther²⁵ and Pieper²⁶ understand the congregation to be word and sacrament ministry within a definite place.

Conclusion

Christ comes to a people and a place through the proclamation of God's word. We must, therefore, attend not only to the word but also the place in which it is spoken. Attention ought to be given to the particularities²⁷ of the physical location to which Christ is mysteriously present. The sermon needs to recognize the reciprocity

of relations²⁸ that exists within the place of God's speaking. Who sits in these pews? Who sat in these pews in the past? What are their names and vocations? Is their communal deliberation, discourse, or action unique to this place? Where is the pulpit within the physical space? Is there meaning conveyed by its location in the sanctuary? Who inhabits the land on which this church is built? Who inhabited this land before us? Is there an ancestral obligation to, and alliance with, the land? By attending to the specific details of location, we begin to foster respect and care for the people, place, and culture to which Christ comes.²⁹

Attending to the details of location is not the same as the narcissistic pride of individual congregations celebrating the stones, pillars, doors, and windows of their church structure. Rather, location can provide meaning and context by connecting individual congregations to martyrs and saints, heroes and villains from the history of the church. Are we located in the midst of oppression like God's people in Egypt? Are we situated in a place of societal power like Esther was in the palace of King Ahasuerus? Is the air we breathe filled with a cosmopolitan milieu like the church in Corinth? Is the ground beneath our feet parched like the barren land in Ezekiel? In this way, congregations can begin to see their places of worship as a part of a much larger set of saints triumphant throughout the ages.

By attending to the details of place, we are following in the pattern of God. In their powerful treatise on the church, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon write: "Jesus Christ is the supreme act of divine intrusion into the world's settled arrangements. In the Christ, God refuses to 'stay in his place.'"³⁰ God did not leave his place to enter into a nameless and placeless world; he was born to Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. He did not engage an abstract people to be his disciples; he called specific individuals by the names of Peter, James, Thomas, and Judas. He grieved the death of Lazarus because he knew Lazarus. Christ comes to his people—albeit mysteriously—today through the proclamation of God's word. This word is never directed toward an abstract place or people. Our proclamation is to engage a specific location with the mercy of Christ.

Endnotes

¹ Ray Oldenburg proposed the concept of third places in *The Great Good Place* (St. Paul: Paragon, 1989).

² John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 26, 135. Gaddis writes, "Historians have no choice but to engage in these manipulations of time, space, and scale . . . And what does all this have to do with the landscape of history? It's simply this: the possibility that historians may stand, in their relationship to the past, in something like the position states do in their relationship to territory and society. For in "mapping" the past, the historian too is laying down a grid, stifling particularity, privileging legibility, all with a view to making that past accessible for the present and the future."

³ Johnathon Mauk, "Location, Location, Location: The 'Real' (E)states of Being, Writing, and Thinking in Composition," *College English* 65, no. 4 (March 2003): 384. Mauk writes, "A wide range of factors suggests that college students are increasingly removed from traditional academic space. For example, students are increasingly less apt to study in, or even visit, university libraries."

⁴ Roxanne Mountford, "On Gender and Rhetorical Space," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 42.

⁵ Jeff Rice, "Urban Mappings: A Rhetoric of the Network," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 38 no. 2 (Spring 2008): 205. Rice writes, "The rhetoric of digital mapping by which "A given space—such as a city one lives and works in—may create various networked, rhetorical possibilities."

- ⁶ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, & Colonization*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 5.
- ⁷ Neil Leroux, "Luther's Am Neujahrstage: Style as Argument," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 12, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 2-3.
- ⁸ Heinrich Plett, *Rhetoric and Renaissance Culture* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 20-21.
- ⁹ Plato. *Gorgias*. n.p., n.d., 41.
- ¹⁰ Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 473.
- ¹¹ Mountford, "On Gender and Rhetorical Space," 42. "A MOO (MUD, object-oriented) is," according to Wikipedia, "a text-based online virtual reality system." <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MOO>.
- ¹² Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, 5.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 324.
- ¹⁴ The Apology of the Augsburg Confession Article IV states: God cannot be interacted with, God cannot be grasped, except through the word. So justification happens through the word, just as Paul says in Romans 1:16, "[The gospel] is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."
- ¹⁵ Robert Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 27.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.
- ¹⁷ Neil Leroux, "The Rhetor's Perceived Situation: Luther's Invocavit Sermons," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 28, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 72. Leroux tries "to shed rhetorical light on Luther's discourse, not as removed from but as integral to the "situation," . . . through an analysis of his perceptions of the issues, the constraints, and the audience."
- ¹⁸ *LW* 35:117-124, Olivier 44.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Timothy Saleska, "The Uses of Scripture in the Christian Community," *Inviting Community*, eds. Robert Kolb and Theodore J. Hopkins (Saint Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 2013), 79. Saleska writes, "Whenever God's Word is present in any of its forms, we expect to be encountered by God—to be found by him—and to ready to perform acts of submission to him. Through eyes and ears of faith, we look for him to address us and influence us in ways that change our lives."
- ²¹ *LW* 51:190. Emphasis added.
- ²² John Kleinig, *Grace Upon Grace: Spirituality for Today* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 282. "That meal is our theophany, the appearance of the triune God among us for our salvation."
- ²³ Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 204.
- ²⁴ *LW* 51:337.
- ²⁵ Francis Pieper, *Dogmatics* 3:420. Pieper states "Walther therefore defines also a Lutheran congregation as 'a gathering of believing Christians at a definite place among whom the Word of God is preached in its purity according to the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the holy Sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution as recorded in the Gospel.'"
- ²⁶ *Ibid.* Pieper, in his explanation *De Ecclesiis Particularibus*, states "This, then, is the definition of a congregation: A congregation is the assembly of believers who congregate about Word and Sacrament at a particular place."
- ²⁷ Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle: An Essay against Modern Superstition* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2000), 42. Berry warns our modern culture against a "rhetoric of nowhere, which forbids a passionate interest in, let alone a love of, anything in particular."
- ²⁸ Malea Powell, "Dreaming Charles Eastman: Cultural Memory, Autobiography, and Geography in Indigenous Rhetorical Histories," *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*, eds. Gesa Kirsch and Liz Rohan, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 115-127, esp. 121. Powell writes, "These large Gilded Age buildings like the Newberry manage the physical place upon which the Imperial society they represent has engaged in empire into a space of argument for the value of Western culture. The land on which the Newberry Library is built is land where Miamis hunted, gathered, and celebrated long before any city was built there, so a reciprocity of relations has long existed between that land and my ancestors."
- ²⁹ Charles Arand, "Inviting Community through the Church's Life Within Creation," *Inviting Community*, 127. Arand writes, "A dynamic interaction occurs between the church and its particular location on earth. The church brings the proclamation of the gospel to bear upon the needs of that place, a place where human creatures suffer and struggle, a place that shapes our life."
- ³⁰ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, Expanded 25th Anniversary Edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), 51.