

MONERGISM EBOOK

— AN ORATION —
at the
**FUNERAL OF
MARTIN LUTHER**



BY
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An Oration at the Funeral of Martin Luther

Philipp Melancthon

MONERGISM BOOKS

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Published by Monergism Books
www.monergism.com

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Editor's Note

AS WE APPROACH THIS year's Reformation Day, it makes sense to read a funeral sermon for Martin Luther – especially one delivered by this friend and colleague, Philipp Melanchthon. It is only a short piece, but the subject and the author render it a significant work. We used Claude to generate a translation from the OCR available on Google Books. The title of the Latin original is *Oratio in funere reverendi viri D. Martini Lutheri*.

Original Title Page

Oration at the Funeral of the Reverend Dr Martin Luther

Delivered by Philipp Melanchthon

Wittenberg
In the Year 1549

Oration at the Funeral of the Reverend Dr Martin Luther

ALTHOUGH IN THIS PUBLIC mourning my voice is hindered by grief and tears, yet in so great an assembly something had to be said. This is not to be done as it was among the heathen, solely in praise of the dead. Rather, it is to remind this gathering of the wonderful governance and of the dangers of the Church, so that the younger may consider what ought to trouble them, what things they ought chiefly to seek, and to what examples they ought to direct their lives. For although profane men, amid such great confusion of life, suppose that all things are carried along at random and by chance, yet let us, confirmed by many clear testimonies of God, distinguish the Church from the profane multitude. Let us hold that it is truly ruled and preserved by God. Let us rightly regard its polity, recognise its true governors, consider their course, and choose suitable leaders and teachers, whom we may both follow and revere with godliness. It will be necessary both to think and to speak of these great matters whenever mention is made of the reverend Dr Martin Luther, our most beloved father and teacher. Although many profane men have hated him most bitterly, yet let us, who know that he was a minister of the Gospel raised up by God, love and approve him. Let us also gather the testimonies which show that his doctrine is not a set of seditious opinions scattered abroad by blind impulse, as Epicurean men judge.

Therefore, although in orations delivered on such an occasion much is customarily said about the private distinctions of those who are praised,

I shall leave that part of the oration aside. I shall speak only of this principal topic, namely, of his ecclesiastical office. For good minds will always judge thus: if he brought to light doctrine in the Church that is saving and necessary, then thanks must be given to God for having raised him up. His labours, faith, constancy and other virtues must also be praised, and his memory must be most dear to all good men.

Let this, then, be the beginning of our oration. The Son of God, as Paul says, sits at the right hand of the eternal Father and bestows good things upon men, that is, the voice of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit. In order to impart these, he raises up prophets, apostles, teachers and pastors. He takes them from this gathering of ours, that is, from the company of learners,¹ who read, hear and love the prophetic and apostolic writings. Nor does he call to this warfare only those who hold ordinary authority; rather, he often makes war upon those very men through teachers chosen from other ranks. And it is a delightful and profitable spectacle to behold the Church of every age and to consider the goodness of God. From time to time, he has sent saving teachers in so unbroken a succession that, as in a battle line, when the foremost fell, others at once stepped into their footprints.

The succession of the first fathers is well known: Adam, Seth, Enoch, Methuselah, Noah and Shem. While Shem was still living and dwelling in the neighbourhood of Sodom, the nations had already forgotten the doctrine of Noah and Shem and were everywhere worshipping idols. Abraham was then raised up to be Shem's colleague and partner in this supreme work of propagating true doctrine. He was succeeded by Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, who kindled the light of doctrine throughout all Egypt, which was then the most flourishing kingdom in the whole world. Then came Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Elijah and Elisha, whom Isaiah heard. Jeremiah heard Isaiah; Daniel heard Jeremiah; Zechariah heard Daniel. Then came Ezra and Onias. After him came the Maccabees. Then came Simeon, Zechariah, the Baptist, Christ and the apostles. It is a delight to behold this continuous succession, which is a clear testimony to the presence of God in the Church.

And after the apostles there follows a company which, although it was weaker, was nevertheless adorned with testimonies from God: Poly-

carp, Irenaeus, Gregory of Neocaesarea, Basil, Augustine, Prosper, Maximus, Hugh, Bernard, Tauler, and others elsewhere. For although this last old age is more squalid, yet God has always preserved some remnant. And it is manifest that the light of the Gospel has been kindled more brightly by the voice of Luther.

He must therefore be numbered among that most beautiful company of the greatest men whom God has sent to gather and restore the Church. We should understand them to be the chief flower of the human race.

Granted that Solon, Themistocles, Scipio, Augustus and their like were great men, who either founded or ruled great empires; yet they are far inferior to these leaders of ours: Isaiah, the Baptist, Paul, Augustine and Luther. It is fitting for us in the Church to understand these true distinctions.

What, then, are the great and true things which Luther brought to light, and which show that his course deserves praise? For many cry out that the Church has been thrown into confusion and that inextricable controversies have been scattered abroad. To these I reply that such is the governance of the Church. When the Holy Spirit convicts the world, dissensions arise because of the obstinacy of the ungodly. The fault lies with those who refuse to hear the Son of God, of whom the heavenly Father says: "Hear him." Luther brought to light true and necessary doctrine, for it is manifest that the darkness in the doctrine of *poenitentia* (penitence) was very dense. Having dispelled this darkness, he showed what true repentance is. He also showed what the harbour is, and what the firm consolation of the mind is that has been terrified by the sense of the wrath of God. He shed light on the doctrine of Paul, who says that a man is justified by faith. He showed the distinction between the Law and the Gospel, and between *iustitia spiritus* (the righteousness of the Spirit) and *iustitia politica* (civil righteousness). He showed the true invocation of God and recalled the whole Church from the heathen madness which imagines that God is invoked even when minds, oppressed by Academic doubt, flee from God. He commanded that invocation be made in faith and with a good conscience. Indeed, he led us to the one Mediator, the Son of God, who sits at the right hand of the eternal Father and inter-

cedes for us. He did not lead us to statues or dead men, as ungodly men, with horrible madness, invoke statues and dead men.

He also pointed out the other true works that are pleasing to God. He so adorned and fortified civil life that it has never been so adorned and fortified by any other writings. Finally, he separated from necessary works the childish pedagogy of human ceremonies, and the rites and laws which hinder the true invocation of God. And so that the heavenly doctrine, once brought to light, might be propagated to posterity, he translated the prophetic and apostolic writings into the German tongue with such clarity that this version by itself brings more light to the reader than most commentaries.

He himself also added many expositions, which even Erasmus used to affirm far surpassed all the expositions that are extant. It is written of those who were rebuilding Jerusalem that they built with one hand and held a sword with the other. In the same way, he fought with the enemies of true doctrine and at the same time composed expositions full of heavenly doctrine. He also brought help to the consciences of many by godly counsel.

And since a great part of this doctrine lies beyond human sight, such as the doctrine of the remission of sins and of faith, it must be acknowledged that he was taught by God. Many of us saw the struggles in which he learnt that we must hold by faith that we are received and heard by God.

Therefore, throughout all eternity, good minds will always celebrate the benefits which God has given to the Church through Luther. First, they will give thanks to God. Then they will declare that they owe much to the labours of the man himself, even though atheistic men, who mock the whole Church, judge these *κατορθώματα* [right actions; achievements] to be empty play or madness.

Nor have inextricable disputes been stirred up. Nor, as some falsely say, has an apple of discord been thrown before the Church. Nor have riddles of the *σφίγγα* [Sphinx] been set forth. For it is easy for those who are sound and godly, and who do not judge slanderously, to compare the opinions and see which agree with the heavenly doctrine and which do not. Indeed, there is no doubt that these controversies have already

been decided in the minds of all the godly. For since God wills that he and his will be seen in the prophetic and apostolic word, in which he has revealed himself, it must not be thought that that word is ambiguous, like the leaves of the Sibyl.

But some, who are not evil men, have nevertheless complained that Luther was harsher than he ought to have been. I dispute nothing on either side. Instead, I reply with what Erasmus often said: "Because of the magnitude of its diseases, God has given this last age a sharp physician." God raised up such an instrument against the proud and shameless enemies of the truth, as he says to Jeremiah: "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth, that you may destroy and build." Since he also willed to set him before them like this Gorgon, those men remonstrate with God in vain. Nor does God rule the Church by human counsels, nor does he will that his instruments be wholly alike. It is common, however, for middling and moderate natures to approve less of more ardent impulses, whether good or bad. Aristides saw Themistocles undertake great things with a vast impulse of spirit and carry them out successfully. Yet, although he congratulated the commonwealth on its success, he nevertheless strove to call back that man's excited spirit from that course.²

Nor do I deny that more vehement impulses sometimes err, for no one in this weakness of nature is entirely without fault. Yet if anyone is such as the ancients said of Hercules, Cimon and others, "*ἄκομψον μὲν, ἀλλὰ τὰ μέγιστα ἀγαθόν*" [unpolished indeed, but good in the greatest things], he is a good man and worthy of praise.³ And in the Church, if he fights rightly, as Paul says, holding faith and a good conscience, he is pleasing to God and is to be revered by us.

We know that Luther was such a man. For he both constantly defended the purity of doctrine and preserved the integrity of his conscience. No wandering lusts were ever observed in him, and no seditious counsels. On the contrary, he was more than once the advocate of laying down arms. He did not mingle with ecclesiastical causes any devices for increasing the power either of himself or of his own party. I judge this wisdom and virtue to be so great that it does not seem possible to obtain it by human diligence alone. Rather, minds must also be restrained by

God, especially those that are keen, lofty and ardent, as events show Luther altogether to have been.

What shall I say of his other virtues? I myself often came upon him while he was saying his prayers for the whole Church with tears. For almost every day he set aside a fixed time for reciting certain psalms, with which he mingled his own petitions with groans and tears. He often said that he was angry with those who claim, whether from sloth or because of their occupations, that it is enough to pray with a groan alone. He said that forms of prayer have been prescribed for us by divine counsel for this reason: so that reading may kindle our minds, and indeed so that our voice may also confess which God we invoke.

Accordingly, when many grave deliberations about public dangers frequently arose, we observed that he was endowed with immense strength of mind, was by no means *ψοφοδής* [easily frightened, literally "afraid of a noise"], and was never broken by any terrors. For he rested upon the sacred anchor, as the saying goes, that is, upon the help of God, and he did not allow his faith to be shaken from him.

Moreover, the keenness of his mind was so powerful that he alone, in obscure matters, saw most clearly what would be expedient. Nor was he, as many think, negligent in considering the commonwealth or in discerning the wishes of others. On the contrary, he knew the commonwealth well, and he perceived most shrewdly the opinions and wishes of all with whom he lived. And although the power of his intellect was very sharp, he nevertheless read most eagerly the ecclesiastical writings, both ancient and recent, and all histories. He applied their examples to present affairs with singular dexterity.

Lasting monuments of his eloquence are extant, in which he was, without doubt, equal to those in whom oratorical power is thought to have been greatest.

Such a man was endowed with the highest power of intellect, furnished with learning and trained by long experience. He was adorned with many excellent and heroic virtues, and chosen by God for the restoration of the Church. Finally, he embraced us all with a fatherly heart. We rightly grieve, for our own sake, that he has been called away from our fellowship. For we are very like orphans bereft of an outstand-

ing and faithful father. But since we must obey God, let us at least not allow the memory of his virtues and benefits to perish among us. Let us know that he was a saving instrument of God, and let us study his doctrine diligently. Let us also imitate, according to our modest measure, the virtues necessary for us: the fear of God, faith, ardour in invocation, integrity in the ministry, chastity, diligence in avoiding seditious counsels, and the desire to learn. We ought often and earnestly to think about the other godly governors of the Church whose histories are extant, such as Jeremiah, the Baptist and Paul. In the same way, let us often consider the doctrine and course of this man, and let us join to this thanksgiving and prayer, as it is fitting to do now also in this assembly. Therefore, say with me, in true godliness of heart:

We give thanks to you, almighty God, eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, founder of your Church, together with your coeternal Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. You are wise, good, merciful, a judge, truthful, mighty and supremely free. We thank you because you gather an inheritance for your Son from the human race, and preserve the ministry of the Gospel, and have now also restored it through Luther. With ardent petitions we pray that henceforth you would both preserve and rule your Church. We pray that you would seal true doctrine in us, as Isaiah prays concerning his disciples, and kindle our minds by your Holy Spirit, so that we may rightly invoke you and govern our conduct with godliness.

Next, the deaths of great governors often foretell punishments to posterity. Therefore I, and all to whom the office of teaching has been entrusted, solemnly entreat you to consider the dangers facing the world. In one place the Turks are raging; in another, civil wars threaten; other enemies threaten elsewhere. Everywhere, too, there is great wantonness of minds. Especially once they cease to fear Luther's censure, these minds will corrupt with greater audacity the doctrine that has been rightly handed down.

So that God may avert these evils, let us be more diligent in governing our conduct and our studies. Let us always keep this conviction fixed in our minds: so long as we retain, hear, learn and love the pure doctrine of the Gospel, we shall be the dwelling place of God and the Church.

As the Son of God says: “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him.” Let us kindle ourselves by this most ample promise to learn the heavenly doctrine. Let us know that the human race and civil polities are preserved for the sake of the Church. Let us contemplate in our minds that future eternity to which God has called us. He has not revealed himself by such illustrious testimonies in vain, nor sent his Son in vain; rather, he truly loves and cares for those who highly esteem these benefits.

I have spoken.

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1. Translator’s note: the printed text reads *discedentium* (of those departing), which is almost certainly a misprint for *discentium* (of learners).
 2. Translator’s note: the printed text is corrupt at this point; it may read *ex eo cursu* (from that course) or *caeco cursu* (from its blind course).
 3. Translator’s note: the Greek is badly corrupted in the printed text and has been restored according to the line of Euripides quoted by Plutarch.