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The Greatness of Luther's Commentary on Galatians

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faithfull christen congregacion in England. London, Richard Charlton.

The King's own printer published Tyndale's "Luther's New Testament in English."

Lucy told Cromwell a priest declared, "Ember days were named after one Luther, a paramour of a certain bishop of Rome."

When Jacob Schenk and Philip Moth were made Licentiates of Theology, on October 10, 1536, Luther presided at the disputation "On the Power of the Council," which Paul III on June 4 had called to Mantua for May 23, 1537. Dr. Barnes took part in the debate. Perhaps it was for the "honorable guests" that the city council sent eight cans of Rhine wine for the banquet at the Black Cloister, Luther's house.

Stephen Gardiner sent Henry Phillips and Gabriel Donne to arrest William Tyndale, the translator of the New Testament. In May, 1535, they had him in the great state prison of Vilvorde, near Brussels. With the King's consent Cromwell wrote Archbishop Carondelet and the marquis of Bergen. Thomas Poynts of the "English House" at Antwerp delivered the letters. Stephen Vaughan also made strenuous efforts to save the reformer. In vain. On October 6, 1536, he was strangled and burned — which he had long looked for. His last word was, "Lord, open the king of England's eyes!"

WM. DALLMANN.

The Greatness of Luther's Commentary on Galatians.

If some theologians and historians declare to have been disappointed with Luther's Galatians, it is because they looked for a commentary more learned and critical than popular.*) It was not intended to be a critical study in the present philological sense of the term. Nor does the work hold out the slightest shred of comfort to the Modernist. During the stormy years that gave birth to this commentary Luther had too much practical work of prior importance on his hands to find leisure for comparative and critical exegesis.

It still remains a marvel how he could pen a commentary so diffuse and yet so simple. Its thought- and sermon-stimulating properties are immense. It is not so much a commentary which deals with every iota of the original — although sincere exposition is by no means neglected — as a course of lectures on the chief Christian doctrine, justification by faith, and as set forth in St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians. There lies the reason why the commentary

*) Cp., e. g., Fife, *Young Luther*, pp. 214 ff.

has become such a tremendous spiritual force to all who came into devout and studious contact with it.

Martin Bucer (1491—1551), although often unionistically inclined and lacking that courage of conviction and confession which characterized Luther, was nevertheless a man of profound learning. Cranmer called him to England to further the cause of the Reformation there. Enjoying the freer spirit of the British Isles, Bucer stayed in England until his dying day, holding a professorship at Cambridge University. On receiving and reading a copy of Luther's Galatians, he jubilantly wrote to Spalatin: "Luther, by the divine lucubrations which he hath published, stands so high in my opinion that I look to him as an angelic guide in the interpretation of difficult passages of Scripture. How, then, think you, did I rejoice when one of our brethren brought me his commentary on the Galatians! After only a very slight perusal of it I felt like dancing for joy." (As reported by Milner, *History of the Church*, 1812.)

It is well known that the commentary indelibly impressed its benign influence upon the immortal dreamer of Bedford jail. Speaking of the conflicts of his soul, Bunyan writes:—

"I did greatly long to see some ancient godly man's experience who had writ some hundreds of years before I was born. Well, after such longings in my mind, the God in whose hands are all our days and ways did cast into my hand one day a book of Martin Luther; it was his comment on the Galatians, . . . the which when I had but a little way perused, I found my condition in his experience so largely and profoundly handled as if this book had been written out of my heart. This made me marvel; for, thus thought I, this man could not know anything of the state of Christians now, but must needs write and speak the experience of former days. Besides, he doeth most gravely in that book debate of the rise of these temptations, namely, blasphemy, desperation, and the like, showing that the Law of Moses as well as the devil, death, and hell hath a very great hand therein, the which at first was very strange to me; but considering and watching, I found it so indeed. But of particulars here I intend nothing; only this methinks I must let fall before all men, I do prefer this book of Martin Luther upon Galatians (excepting the Holy Bible) before all the books that ever I have seen, as most fit for a wounded conscience."

Indeed, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress* read this book on Galatians well, and he certainly got the point. Like the poor, so wounded consciences are always with us and always have been. Little wonder, then, that the book was read with so great an avidity immediately after its first publication and became so instrumental in promoting the glorious, soul-liberating cause of the Reformation.

This gives Luther's monumental work a superior claim to the

attention of the historian. It became one of the most powerful means of reviving the light of Scripture in the sixteenth century. Furthermore, it will in all ages be capable of doing the same, under the blessing of God, whenever men regard the oracles of divine truth and whenever souls shall be distressed with a sense of indwelling sin and guilt.

Canon Hare (1795—1855), chaplain in ordinary to the Queen, in 1839 preached a remarkable series of sermons, "In Vindication of Luther." Then, now nearly a hundred years ago, he said: "Not till the world's course has run out, will it be known to how many persons this commentary on the Galatians has been a blessed well-spring of spiritual light and consolation."

Archbishop Richard Trench (1807—1886) of Dublin, dean of Westminster, professor of New Testament exegesis at Cambridge, poet and scholar, did not overstate when he claimed that "Luther has done more to bring out the innermost spirit of St. Paul's writings than all other critics put together."

These are strong, but not too strong words of theologians outside the Lutheran communion. It is doubtful whether Luther's commentary will be relished at all by any but serious, humble, and contrite spirits. They are the only people in the world to whom the all-important article of justification will appear worthy of all acceptance.

The article of justification by faith we rightly hold to be that article by which the Christian Church stands or falls. It is the acid test, the true criterion, and "the only solid rock," as Luther describes it in the preface to his commentary.

Faith alone justifies. This divine truth gave direction to all of Luther's labors in the epistle of St. Paul's. Yet this master in the Scriptures warns that faith never excludes good works. Lest sinful man make his new-found liberty in Christ a cloak for maliciousness, Luther, following Paul meticulously, is very careful to explain that true faith is also infallibly connected with a spirit of true benevolence, the spirit of benevolence, or love, which regards the Law as a rule, but that the kingdom of God is attained not through the Law, or the works of the Law, but by faith. Everything is to be ascribed to faith, so that all our sufficiency is of God, from whom cometh every good and perfect gift.

The points of doctrine "which ought to be explained to the people" Luther finds laid down by the apostle in this order: Let a man first learn to despair of his own strength; let him hear the word of evangelical faith; hearing, let him believe it; believing, let him call upon God; calling upon Him, let him find, as he will, that he is being heard; being heard of God, let him receive the spirit of love; receiving this spirit, let him walk in the same and not fulfil

the lusts of the flesh, but let him crucify them; lastly, being crucified with Christ, let him rise from the dead and possess the kingdom of heaven.

This is the most masterful treatise on the difference and correlation between works and faith ever set down. Here is a practical manual of faith and works, valuable to layman and theologian alike. For has not this apparent contradiction between faith and works always been a bone of contention and cause of confusion to men of finite minds? But his clear delineation of the rise and progress of Christian faith and life in this epistle obviously shows that Luther fully understood the apostle's meaning. As a matter of fact, Luther was *the* man of God to write such a commentary on such an epistle of faith as the Galatians.

The great Reformer himself had plowed deep into the human heart. He well knew its native depravity. He had long labored to no purpose to gain peace of conscience by legal observances and moral works. He had counted himself among the "pious and just monks" and declared in 1533 that, if any son of the cloister could have earned salvation from the monastic profession, it would have been he. When his father feared that he might not be able to keep his vows, Luther shows himself "unpricked by conscience for any failure of this kind." In the commentary itself he declares: "Outwardly I lived good, just, and poor and cared nothing for the world." But it was the God-directed discovery that the just shall live by his faith that relieved him from his "most pungent anxiety." It was appointed in the eternal and mysterious counsels of the Godhead that Luther should teach mankind this great evangelical tenet after upwards of a thousand years of public obscurity. The angel with the everlasting Gospel was on the way.

Through the entire commentary the author proves from the inspired apostle that in justification before God all sorts of human works are excluded, moral as well as ceremonial. Men are declared righteous before God not because of what *they* have done or can or will do, but because of what Christ has done *for them*. Luther in his masterly exposition restored to the Christian world the true forensic sense of the term "justification" and rescued it from an erroneous sense in which it had been used for many ages, as though meaning "habits of virtue poured into the Christian (*gratia infusa*)," thus confounding justification with sanctification.

Luther, the incomparable theologian, once for all times here settled the true bonds and limits of the Law and the Gospel and clearly distinguished between being accepted by God and personal holiness. He is a doctor of the Scriptures indeed. To be accepted with God, he shows, is a free gift received through Christ alone by faith in the heart of the humbled sinner, whose pardon and reconciliation with

God is complete by His Son. Personal holiness remains imperfect in this life and perfection is sincerely pressed after, and such pressing after is delighted in. By this doctrine a new light breaks on the mind, and Christianity appears singularly distinct not only from popery, but also from all other religions.

Thus, throughout the commentary the observant reader will note Luther's clear-cut progress of thought by his running comments on each chapter and verse of this Pauline epistle. He begins with the basis of proper exposition and at the outset lays down what constitutes sound principles of interpretation. Then he launches full force into the theme of the book: justification by faith alone. This *sola fide* he carries out by numerous instances and examples, always most closely following his divinely inspired preceptor Paul. Then at the end of the book he beholds the new creature. Properly, and Scripturally, sanctification follows upon justification; the new man follows the new birth.

After a careful and continued study of Luther's commentary on Galatians of 1535 any one who at all ruefully realizes his need of a Savior will most heartily concur with Dr. Staupitz when he said to Friar Martin before the Reformation had actually begun:—

"I like the doctrine you preach exceedingly. It gives the glory and everything else to God alone and nothing to man. Now it is clearer than the day that it is impossible to ascribe too much glory, goodness, and mercy to God."

Fort McArthur, Cal.

R. T. DU BRAU.

über Bücherbesprechungen.

Jede Nummer unserer Zeitschrift enthält acht Seiten Bücherbesprechungen, und manchmal geben wir noch zwei Seiten zu. Es dürfte unsern Lesern nicht unlieb sein, wenn wir einmal ein Wort über die Absicht und den Nutzen solcher Bücheranzeigen sagen. Nach unserer Überzeugung haben diese Rezensionen einen dreifachen Zweck. Einmal wollen sie unsere Leser einigermaßen auf dem laufenden erhalten darüber, was in der theologischen Welt Amerikas und Europas vor sich geht, und wie sich dies in den neuerscheinenden Büchern zeigt. Zur theologischen Weiterarbeit des Pfarrers gehört eben auch dies, daß er orientiert ist und bleibt über den theologischen Betrieb seiner Zeit, auch wenn er kein der angezeigten Bücher kaufen oder lesen kann. Deshalb ist ein zweiter Zweck solcher Bücheranzeigen, nicht bloß einen, wenn auch noch so knappen, Einblick in den Inhalt des betreffenden Buchs zu gewähren, sondern zugleich in Verbindung mit der Besprechung dies oder jenes zur Sprache zu bringen, was direkt der Erweiterung der theologischen Kenntnisse dient. Eine Rezension, wie wir sie auffassen, ist zugleich ein Nagel, an den man noch etwas anderes hängen kann und soll, damit auch die Anzeige eines vielleicht völlig abzulehnenden Werkes doch fruchtbringend sei. Deshalb haben wir hin und wieder auch ein bedeutendes Werk, das uns nicht zu Rezensionszwecken zugeht, gekauft, entweder zum vollen oder