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Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians

Martin Luther

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COMMENTARY ON THE EPISTLE TO THE

GALATIANS

(1535)

**By
Martin Luther**

Translated by Theodore Graebner

CONTENTS

PREFACE

FROM LUTHER'S INTRODUCTION, 1538

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 6

PREFACE

The preparation of this edition of Luther's Commentary on Galatians was first suggested to me by Mr. P. J. Zondervan, of the firm of publishers, in March, 1937. The consultation had the twofold merit of definiteness and brevity.

"Luther is still the greatest name in Protestantism. We want you to help us publish some leading work of Luther's for the general American market. Will you do it?"

"I will, on one condition."

"And what is that?"

"The condition is that I will be permitted to make Luther talk American, 'streamline' him, so to speak—because you will never get people, whether in or outside the Lutheran Church, actually to read Luther unless we make him talk as he would talk today to Americans."

I illustrated the point by reading to Mr. Zondervan a few sentences from an English translation lately reprinted by an American publisher, of one of Luther's outstanding reformatory essays.

The demonstration seemed to prove convincing for it was agreed that one may as well offer Luther in the original German or Latin as expect the American church-member to read any translations that would adhere to Luther's German or Latin constructions and employ the Mid-Victorian type of English characteristic of the translations now on the market.

"And what book would be your choice?"

"There is one book that Luther himself likes better than any other. Let us begin with that: his Commentary on Galatians..."

The undertaking, which seemed so attractive when viewed as a literary task, proved a most difficult one, and at times became oppressive. The Letter to the Galatians consists of six short chapters. Luther's commentary fills seven hundred and thirty-three octavo pages in the Weidman Edition of his works. It was written in Latin. We were resolved not to present this entire mass of exegesis. It would have run to more than fifteen hundred pages, ordinary octa-

vo (like this), since it is impossible to use the compressed structure of sentences which is characteristic of Latin, and particularly of Luther's Latin. The work had to be condensed. German and English translations are available, but the most acceptable English version, besides laboring under the handicaps of an archaic style, had to be condensed into half its volume in order to accomplish the "streamlining" of the book. Whatever merit the translation now presented to the reader may possess should be written to the credit of Rev. Gerhardt Mahler of Geneva, N.Y., who came to my assistance in a very busy season by making a rough draft of the translation and later preparing a revision of it, which forms the basis of the final draft submitted to the printer. A word should now be said about the origin of Luther's Commentary on Galatians.

The Reformer had lectured on this Epistle of St. Paul's in 1519 and again in 1523. It was his favorite among all the Biblical books. In his table talks the saying is recorded: "The Epistle to the Galatians is my epistle. To it I am as it were in wedlock. It is my Katherine." Much later when a friend of his was preparing an edition of all his Latin works, he remarked to his home circle: "If I had my way about it they would republish only those of my books which have doctrine. My Galatians, for instance." The lectures which are preserved in the works herewith submitted to the American public were delivered in 1531. They were taken down by George Roerer, who held something of a deanship at Wittenberg University and who was one of Luther's aids in the translation of the Bible. Roerer took down Luther's lectures and this manuscript has been preserved to the present day, in a copy which contains also additions by Veit Dietrich and by Cruciger, friends of Roerer's, who with him attended Luther's lectures. In other words, these three men took down the lectures which Luther addressed to his students in the course of Galatians, and Roerer prepared the manuscript for the printer. A German translation by Justus Menius appeared in the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's writings, published in 1539.

The importance of this Commentary on Galatians for the history of Protestantism is very great. It presents like no other of Luther's writings the central thought of Christianity, the justification of the sinner for the sake of Christ's merits alone. We have permitted in the final revision of the manuscript many a passage to stand which

seemed weak and ineffectual when compared with the trumpet tones of the Latin original. But the essence of Luther's lectures is there. May the reader accept with indulgence where in this translation we have gone too far in modernizing Luther's expression—making him "talk American."

At the end of his lectures in 1531, Luther uttered a brief prayer and then dictated two Scriptural texts, which we shall inscribe at the end of these introductory remarks:

"The Lord who has given us power to teach and to hear, let Him also give us the power to serve and to do."

LUKE 2 Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace,
Good will to men.

ISAIAH 40 The Word of our God shall stand forever.

THEODORE GRAEBNER

St. Louis, Missouri

FROM LUTHER'S INTRODUCTION, 1538

In my heart reigns this one article, faith in my dear Lord Christ, the beginning, middle and end of whatever spiritual and divine thoughts I may have, whether by day or by night.

CHAPTER 1

VERSE 1. Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead).

St. Paul wrote this epistle because, after his departure from the Galatian churches, Jewish-Christian fanatics moved in, who perverted Paul's Gospel of man's free justification by faith in Christ Jesus.

The world bears the Gospel a grudge because the Gospel condemns the religious wisdom of the world. Jealous for its own religious views, the world in turn charges the Gospel with being a subversive and licentious doctrine, offensive to God and man, a doctrine to be persecuted as the worst plague on earth.

As a result we have this paradoxical situation: The Gospel supplies the world with the salvation of Jesus Christ, peace of conscience, and every blessing. Just for that the world abhors the Gospel.

These Jewish-Christian fanatics who pushed themselves into the Galatian churches after Paul's departure, boasted that they were the descendants of Abraham, true ministers of Christ, having been trained by the apostles themselves, that they were able to perform miracles.

In every way they sought to undermine the authority of St. Paul. They said to the Galatians: "You have no right to think highly of Paul. He was the last to turn to Christ. But we have seen Christ. We heard Him preach. Paul came later and is beneath us. It is possible for us to be in error—we who have received the Holy Ghost? Paul stands alone. He has not seen Christ, nor has he had much contact with the other apostles. Indeed, he persecuted the Church of Christ for a long time."

When men claiming such credentials come along, they deceive not only the naive, but also those who seemingly are well-established in the faith. This same argument is used by the papacy. "Do you suppose that God for the sake of a few Lutheran heretics

would disown His entire Church? Or do you suppose that God would have left His Church floundering in error all these centuries?" The Galatians were taken in by such arguments with the result that Paul's authority and doctrine were drawn in question.

Against these boasting, false apostles, Paul boldly defends his apostolic authority and ministry. Humble man that he was, he will not now take a back seat. He reminds them of the time when he opposed Peter to his face and reproved the chief of the apostles.

Paul devotes the first two chapters to a defense of his office and his Gospel, affirming that he received it, not from men, but from the Lord Jesus Christ by special revelation, and that if he or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel than the one he had preached, he shall be accursed.

The Certainty of Our Calling

Every minister should make much of his calling and impress upon others the fact that he has been delegated by God to preach the Gospel. As the ambassador of a government is honored for his office and not for his private person, so the minister of Christ should exalt his office in order to gain authority among men. This is not vain glory, but needful glorying.

Paul takes pride in his ministry, not to his own praise but to the praise of God. Writing to the Romans, he declares, "Inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office," i.e., I want to be received not as Paul of Tarsus, but as Paul the apostle and ambassador of Jesus Christ, in order that people might be more eager to hear. Paul exalts his ministry out of the desire to make known the name, the grace, and the mercy of God.

VERSE 1. Paul, an apostle, (not of men, etc.)

Paul loses no time in defending himself against the charge that he had thrust himself into the ministry. He says to the Galatians: "My call may seem inferior to you. But those who have come to you are either called of men or by man. My call is the highest possible, for it is by Jesus Christ, and God the Father."

When Paul speaks of those called "by men," I take it he means those whom neither God nor man sent, but who go wherever they like and speak for themselves.

When Paul speaks of those called "by man" I take it he means those who have a divine call extended to them through other persons. God calls in two ways. Either He calls ministers through the agency of men, or He calls them directly as He called the prophets and apostles. Paul declares that the false apostles were called or sent neither by men, nor by man. The most they could claim is that they were sent by others. "But as for me I was called neither of men, nor by man, but directly by Jesus Christ. My call is in every respect like the call of the apostles. In fact I am an apostle."

Elsewhere Paul draws a sharp distinction between an apostleship and lesser functions, as in I Corinthians 12:28: "And God hath set some in the church; first, apostles; secondarily, prophets; thirdly, teachers." He mentions the apostles first because they were appointed directly by God.

Matthias was called in this manner. The apostles chose two candidates and then cast lots, praying that God would indicate which one He would have. To be an apostle he had to have his appointment from God. In the same manner Paul was called as the apostle of the Gentiles.

The call is not to be taken lightly. For a person to possess knowledge is not enough. He must be sure that he is properly called. Those who operate without a proper call seek no good purpose. God does not bless their labors. They may be good preachers, but they do not edify. Many of the fanatics of our day pronounce words of faith, but they bear no good fruit, because their purpose is to turn men to their perverse opinions. On the other hand, those who have a divine call must suffer a good deal of opposition in order that they may become fortified against the running attacks of the devil and the world.

This is our comfort in the ministry, that ours is a divine office to which we have been divinely called. Reversely, what an awful thing it must be for the conscience if one is not properly called. It spoils one's best work. When I was a young man I thought Paul was making too much of his call. I did not understand his purpose. I did not

then realize the importance of the ministry. I knew nothing of the doctrine of faith because we were taught sophistry instead of certainty, and nobody understood spiritual boasting. We exalt our calling, not to gain glory among men, or money, or satisfaction, or favor, but because people need to be assured that the words we speak are the words of God. This is no sinful pride. It is holy pride.

VERSE 1. And God the Father, who raised him from the dead.

Paul is so eager to come to the subject matter of his epistle, the righteousness of faith in opposition to the righteousness of works, that already in the title he must speak his mind. He did not think it quite enough to say that he was an apostle "by Jesus Christ"; he adds, "and God the Father, who raised him from the dead."

The clause seems superfluous on first sight. Yet Paul had a good reason for adding it. He had to deal with Satan and his agents who endeavored to deprive him of the righteousness of Christ, who was raised by God the Father from the dead. These perverters of the righteousness of Christ resist the Father and the Son, and the works of them both.

In this whole epistle Paul treats of the resurrection of Christ. By His resurrection Christ won the victory over law, sin, flesh, world, devil, death, hell, and every evil. And this His victory He donated unto us. These many tyrants and enemies of ours may accuse and frighten us, but they dare not condemn us, for Christ, whom God the Father has raised from the dead is our righteousness and our victory.

Do you notice how well suited to his purpose Paul writes? He does not say, "By God who made heaven and earth, who is Lord of the angels," but Paul has in mind the righteousness of Christ, and speaks to the point, saying, "I am an apostle, not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead."

VERSE 2. And all the brethren which are with me.

This should go far in shutting the mouths of the false apostles. Paul's intention is to exalt his own ministry while discrediting theirs. He adds for good measure the argument that he does not stand alone, but that all the brethren with him attest to the fact that his doctrine is divinely true. "Although the brethren with me are not apostles like myself, yet they are all of one mind with me, think, write, and teach as I do."

VERSE 2. Unto the churches of Galatia.

Paul had preached the Gospel throughout Galatia, founding many churches which after his departure were invaded by the false apostles. The Anabaptists in our time imitate the false apostles. They do not go where the enemies of the Gospel predominate. They go where the Christians are. Why do they not invade the Catholic provinces and preach their doctrine to godless princes, bishops, and doctors, as we have done by the help of God? These soft martyrs take no chances. They go where the Gospel has a hold, so that they may not endanger their lives. The false apostles would not go to Jerusalem of Caiaphas, or to the Rome of the Emperor, or to any other place where no man had preached before as Paul and the other apostles did. But they came to the churches of Galatia, knowing that where men profess the name of Christ they may feel secure.

It is the lot of God's ministers not only to suffer opposition at the hand of a wicked world, but also to see the patient indoctrination of many years quickly undone by such religious fanatics. This hurts more than the persecution of tyrants. We are treated shabbily on the outside by tyrants, on the inside by those whom we have restored to the liberty of the Gospel, and also by false brethren. But this is our comfort and our glory, that being called of God we have the promise of everlasting life. We look for that reward which "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath entered into the heart of man."

Jerome raises the question why Paul called them churches that were no churches, inasmuch as the Galatians had forsaken the grace of Christ for the law of Moses. The proper answer is: Although the Galatians had fallen away from the doctrine of Paul, baptism, the Gospel, and the name of Christ continued among them. Not all the Galatians had become perverted. There were some who clung to the

right view of the Word and the Sacraments. These means cannot be contaminated. They remain divine regardless of men's opinion. Wherever the means of grace are found, there is the Holy Church, even though Antichrist reigns there. So much for the title of the epistle. Now follows the greeting of the apostle.

VERSE 3. Grace be to you, and peace, from God the Father,
and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

The terms of grace and peace are common terms with Paul and are now pretty well understood. But since we are explaining this epistle, you will not mind if we repeat what we have so often explained elsewhere. The article of justification must be sounded in our ears incessantly because the frailty of our flesh will not permit us to take hold of it perfectly and to believe it with all our heart.

The greeting of the Apostle is refreshing. Grace remits sin, and peace quiets the conscience. Sin and conscience torment us, but Christ has overcome these fiends now and forever. Only Christians possess this victorious knowledge given from above. These two terms, grace and peace, constitute Christianity. Grace involves the remission of sins, peace, and a happy conscience. Sin is not canceled by lawful living, for no person is able to live up to the Law. The Law reveals guilt, fills the conscience with terror, and drives men to despair. Much less is sin taken away by man-invented endeavors. The fact is, the more a person seeks credit for himself by his own efforts, the deeper he goes into debt. Nothing can take away sin except the grace of God. In actual living, however, it is not so easy to persuade oneself that by grace alone, in opposition to every other means, we obtain the forgiveness of our sins and peace with God.

The world brands this a pernicious doctrine. The world advances free will, the rational and natural approach of good works, as the means of obtaining the forgiveness of sin. But it is impossible to gain peace of conscience by the methods and means of the world. Experience proves this. Various holy orders have been launched for the purpose of securing peace of conscience through religious exercises, but they proved failures because such devices only increase doubt and despair. We find no rest for our weary bones unless we cling to the word of grace.