



Luther on Galatians

ARLAND J. HULTGREN

*Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota*

DURING HIS LIFETIME NO FEWER THAN SIX EDITIONS OF MARTIN LUTHER'S lectures on Galatians were published. Of these six, five were in Latin, and one was in German.¹ Two of these have been translated for inclusion in the American edition of *Luther's Works*.² The one is translated from the 1519 Latin edition (based on lectures in 1516-1517), published during the early years of Luther's career, and the other is translated from the 1535 Latin edition (based on lectures in 1531), published at a later point in Luther's life. The two editions, from lectures given a decade and a half apart, are quite different in many respects, reflecting two very different times in Luther's life and career.

Luther's teaching career was marked on many occasions with study and lecturing on Paul's Letter to the Galatians, often called the Magna Carta of Christian

¹These were published in the years 1519, 1523, 1525, 1534, 1535, and 1538, according to Kenneth Hagen, *Luther's Approach to Scripture as Seen in His "Commentaries" on Galatians 1519-1538* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1993) vii. The 1525 edition was published in German; the others in Latin.

²Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1519) and *Lectures on Galatians* (1535). These are published in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1955-76), as volumes 26 and 27. Hereafter cited as *LW* 26 and 27, respectively.

ARLAND J. HULTGREN is professor of New Testament. He is the author of a forthcoming commentary on the parables of Jesus to be published by Eerdmans.

Luther's Galatians commentaries contain many of his most characteristic teachings: simul justus et peccator, distinguishing law and gospel, Christ as "Lord over Scripture," the "happy exchange," and the primacy of the doctrine of justification. Luther masterfully represents Paul's own teaching in new circumstances.

liberty, but called “my Katie von Bora” by Luther himself.³ In what follows the focus will be limited to the two sets of lectures published in the American edition.

I. LUTHER ON MATTERS OF TEXTS AND TRANSLATION

Luther made use of both the Greek New Testament and the Latin Vulgate in his work on Galatians. The Greek text used for the 1519 edition was that of Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, which had been published in 1516. Luther’s subsequent exegetical work continued to make use of the Greek New Testament of Erasmus, which was revised and republished several times during the lifetime of these two contemporaries.⁴ Luther speaks of Philip Melancthon as his instructor in Greek, saying about him that he is one “who, though young in body, is a venerable old graybeard in intellect and whom I avail myself of as my instructor in Greek.”⁵

There are a couple of occasions on which Luther makes remarks on preferred textual readings of the Greek text,⁶ but they are of little consequence for his exegesis. More important are his exegetical observations based on Greek words, grammar, and syntax. He frequently remarks on the meaning of a Greek word or phrase,⁷ and on one occasion at least makes a comparison between a reading in the Septuagint and the Hebrew text of the Old Testament.⁸ His use of Greek is especially effective in his argument that the name Κηφᾶς (“Cephas,” Gal 1:18; 2:9, 11, 14) is not related to the Greek term κεφαλή (“head,” referring then to Peter as head of the church), as some were claiming, but is a Semitic term that corresponds to the Greek word πέτρα (“rock”).⁹ Then, too, his exegesis of Gal 3:1 on the basis of the Greek text is impressive, in which he departs from other interpreters before him (Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, and Erasmus).¹⁰ On the other hand, Luther is capable in one instance of making a flat-out mistake in his analysis of a Greek verb.¹¹

II. LUTHER AS EXEGETE AND EXPOSITOR

Taking the lectures on Galatians as a case study (apart from the larger question of Luther as an expositor¹²), one finds careful, intense, and sensitive treatments of Paul’s letter. In both editions the treatment is conducted line by line, sometimes phrase by phrase, as in typical modern commentaries. Attention is

³Jaroslav Pelikan, “Introduction to Volume 26,” *LW* 26:ix.

⁴The text of Erasmus was published in five editions (1516, 1519, 1522, 1527, and 1535); the second (1519) edition was the basis for Luther’s German translation of the New Testament in 1522.

⁵*LW* 27:377.

⁶*LW* 27:175, 291, 338-339.

⁷*LW* 26:420; *LW* 27:218, 244-245, 289-291, 301-302, 307, 369.

⁸*LW* 27:261.

⁹*LW* 27:218.

¹⁰*LW* 27:245-246.

¹¹*LW* 27:176. He speaks of μετὰσπρέψαι (Gal 1:7) as a future infinitive; it is an aorist infinitive.

¹²On this topic, cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor: Introduction to the Reformer’s Exegetical Writings* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959).

given to matters that are familiar to anyone who makes use of a modern commentary: textual variants, philological and grammatical questions, historical probings, and exposition for the sake of proclamation. In one place he says that readers should not impose their own ideas on Scripture. Instead, he says:

What they should do is to come to it empty, to derive their ideas from Sacred Scripture, then to pay careful attention to the words, to compare what precedes with what follows, and to make the effort of grasping the authentic meaning of a particular passage rather than attaching their own notions of words or phrases that they have torn out of context.¹³

Moreover, as many a modern interpreter would say, Luther says that his intention in producing his commentary of 1519 was to clarify what Paul says in his letter and to kindle an interest in Paul's theology on the part of others.¹⁴

But there are differences between Luther's commentaries and modern ones as well, and they are fascinating. Luther lived and worked at a time when the fourfold method of biblical interpretation was still in vogue, in which the interpreter seeks the literal, tropological (or moral), allegorical, and anagogical (or heavenly) senses of the biblical texts. Luther is familiar with the method, but he speaks of it as a "game" by which interpreters tear Scripture apart into many meanings;¹⁵ in the end, the plain meaning is then not derived from it.

In one place Luther actually speaks of his own work as an interpreter. He maintains that Scripture is not to be understood only in terms of its historical setting, important though that is, but is to be applied to our own lives in the present. Otherwise the Scriptures remain cold and dead.¹⁶ He gives, in fact, relatively little attention to the historical setting of Galatians. What he does give is primarily a sketch of where the churches of Galatia were located and what the opponents of Paul taught there.¹⁷ Otherwise he reads and interprets the letter as though it speaks rather directly to his own day. He compares Paul's struggle with the opponents of Paul's time—persons who sought to undo his work in Galatia—to opponents of Luther's own, who seek to undermine his work. The comparison is so strong that the struggles of Paul and Luther are virtually identical: as Paul the Pharisee had pursued the traditions of his forebears, so had Luther done in his years as a monk;¹⁸ as Paul suffered for preaching the gospel, so does Luther;¹⁹ and, particularly in the 1535 version, the opponents of Paul correspond to and illustrate the fanatics and sectarians of Luther's day.²⁰

¹³*LW* 27:29.

¹⁴*LW* 27:160.

¹⁵*LW* 26:440-441; 27:311-313.

¹⁶*LW* 27:386.

¹⁷Remarks on the location of the Galatian churches are made at *LW* 27:165-168; comments about the teachings of Paul's opponents appear in *LW* 26:14-15; 27:161, 167, 194, 205, and *passim*.

¹⁸*LW* 26:68.

¹⁹*LW* 26:13.

²⁰*LW* 26:45, 51, 192, 427-429.

What is most distinctive, however, about Luther the expositor of Galatians is his christocentric understanding of the whole of Scripture. At one place, while carrying on a discussion about faith and works, Luther acknowledges that there are many verses within the Bible that speak of works and rewards. How then shall we arbitrate among all the various passages concerning works on the one hand and justification by faith on the other? The reply he makes to an imaginary opponent is this:

Here is Christ, and over there are the statements of Scripture about works. But Christ is Lord over Scripture and over all works....I am not put off at all by passages of Scripture, even if you were to produce six hundred in support of the righteousness of works and against the righteousness of faith, and even if you were to scream that Scripture contradicts itself. I have the author and the Lord of Scripture, and I want to stand on His side rather than believe you.... You are stressing the servant, that is Scripture—and not all of it at that or even its more powerful part, but only a few passages concerning works. I leave this servant to you. I for my part stress the Lord, who is the King of Scripture.²¹

Here, in a most forceful way, Luther declares that the Scripture is servant of the King, who is Christ himself. This corresponds well to those other well-known passages of Luther from the early 1520s, in which he already speaks of the Scriptures as the place for finding Christ “wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in the manger,” or where he says that the Scriptures themselves are “the swaddling cloths and manger in which Christ lies.”²² Given this perspective on Scripture, Luther goes so far as to say twice that Christ spoke through the Psalms (in each case the passages from the Psalms appear also in the Passion Narratives of the gospels),²³ and that major figures of the Old Testament—“all the patriarchs, prophets, and devout kings”—had faith in the coming Christ.²⁴

It comes as no surprise that in both editions of Luther’s lectures on Galatians the theme of justification by faith should take center stage. The theme is, of course, a major one in Galatians itself (2:16-21; 3:6-11, 24; 5:4-5). For Luther, however, it is not simply a major theme; it is the heart of the matter. When he writes concerning the “argument” of the letter as a whole, Luther says that the letter sets forth “the doctrine of faith, grace, the forgiveness of sins or Christian righteousness.”²⁵ Distinctions are drawn again and again between “political” (or civic) righteousness and righteousness received by faith and distinctions between law and gospel.²⁶ The “real theologian,” he says, is one who “knows well how to distinguish the Gospel from the Law.”²⁷ The actual phrase “*simul justus et peccator*” is to be found in the

²¹LW 26:295.

²²Martin Luther, *A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels and Prefaces to the Old Testament*, in LW 35:122, 236, respectively, from the years 1521 and 1523.

²³LW 26:279, 456.

²⁴LW 26:210, 212.

²⁵LW 26:4.

²⁶Major discussions of the two kinds of righteousness appear in LW 26:7, 10; 27:219-225; and of the law/gospel distinction in LW 26:115-117, 208, 274-275, 308-309, 497.

²⁷LW 26:115.

1535 edition.²⁸ There too, in that series of lectures, Luther sets forth one of the most radical and eloquent comments ever penned on Gal 3:13 (that Christ became “a curse for us”):

All the prophets saw this, that Christ was to become the greatest thief, murderer, adulterer, robber, desecrator, blasphemmer, etc., there has ever been anywhere in the world....In short, He has and bears all the sins of all men in His body—not in the sense that He has committed them but in the sense that He took these sins, committed by us, upon His own body, in order to make satisfaction for them with His own blood....

Whatever sins I, you, and all of us have committed or may commit in the future, they are as much Christ’s own as if He Himself had committed them.²⁹

With these lines Luther has put forth an “objective” view of the atonement, the basis for the “happy exchange”:

By this fortunate exchange with us He took upon Himself our sinful person and granted us His innocent and victorious Person. Clothed and dressed in this, we are freed from the curse of the Law, because Christ Himself voluntarily became a curse for us.³⁰

Since the sins of the entire world are upon Christ, he says, “then they are not on the world,” and the “whole creation” has been “renewed”!³¹

III. DIFFERING TIMES, DIFFERENT EXPOSITIONS

The two editions of Luther’s works on Galatians, coming from very different times in his career, exhibit striking differences. It is clear that when Luther lectured on Galatians in 1531, he did not simply pull out his notes from 1516-1517 to repeat what he had said earlier. Nor did he simply “touch them up.” The printed edition of 1535 differs markedly from that of 1519; it is a new work altogether.

The most obvious differences between the two editions are that the 1535 edition is longer, more polemical, and less philological than the edition of 1519. It applies the text of Galatians more directly to events in Luther’s own time. In the 1519 edition Luther still identifies himself as an Augustinian.³² That is lacking in the 1535 edition.

What also becomes obvious in reading the two editions is that the 1535 edition has much to say about the “fanatics” and “sectarians” that assail Luther, the evangelical movement, and the church at large.³³ Luther refers, in fact, to his own work as a “movement,”³⁴ but also says that in Wittenberg a “form of a Christian

²⁸*LW* 26:232 (see footnote 49); cf. a similar expression in 26:235 and in 27:231 (note 39).

²⁹*LW* 26:277-278.

³⁰*LW* 26:284.

³¹*LW* 26:280, 282.

³²*LW* 27:153.

³³Some major passages are at *LW* 26:14, 17-18, 28, 50, 192, 222, 344, 429; 27:8.

³⁴*LW* 26:66. The “sectarians” use the term “Lutherans,” *LW* 26:50.

church” has been acquired over against the fanatics who would destroy it.³⁵ He faults the sectarians for claiming to have unmediated callings from God. Over against that view, Luther maintains that the calling to ministry known to him and his followers has been mediated from the apostles through their successors, the bishops, who have in turn called their successors down to the present “and so on to the end of the world.” Then Luther quips: “This is a mediated calling, since it is done by man. Nevertheless, it is divine.”³⁶

Another obvious difference between the two editions is that, while Luther speaks of justification on many occasions in the 1519 edition,³⁷ the term “doctrine of justification” does not appear there. It does appear, however, many times over in the 1535 edition.³⁸ What had formerly been proclamation has now become a formalized doctrine. Moreover, the centrality of this doctrine is affirmed:

As I often warn,...the doctrine of justification must be learned diligently. For in it are included all the other doctrines of our faith; and if it is sound, all the others are sound as well.³⁹

One of the major contrasts to be seen between the two editions is in Luther’s treatment of Gal 3:28 (“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”). In the 1519 edition Luther applies the passage to his time and place by saying that there is no distinction between rich and poor, handsome and ugly, citizen and farmer, Benedictine and Carthusian, or Minorite and Augustinian.⁴⁰ But in the 1535 edition Luther says that, while distinctions between persons (such as magistrate, subject, professor, teacher, student, servant, etc.) are of no account in regard to salvation, they do exist in law and in the world, nevertheless, and they are in fact necessary. In discussing distinctions between persons, Luther speaks of the duties each has within society, reciting a veritable “table of duties” for each of them.⁴¹ The change in Luther’s treatment of the verse from Galatians can be due in large part, no doubt, to the changed circumstances in Luther’s career, including the peasants’ revolt of 1525 and its aftermath.

IV. CLOSING COMMENT

Luther’s treatment of Galatians has affected most interpretations of the letter, at least among Protestants, up to the present time.⁴² One of the most glowing tributes to Luther’s work has been written by Hans Dieter Betz:

³⁵LW 26:45.

³⁶LW 26:17-18; the quotation is from p. 17.

³⁷Some examples: LW 27:168, 225, 238, 240, 270, 348.

³⁸LW 26:113, 209, 222-223, 229, 283, 302, 345, 413, 450, 453, 461; 27:19, 104, 120, etc.

³⁹LW 26:283. Cf. LW 26:26: “For if we lose the doctrine of justification, we lose simply everything.”

⁴⁰LW 27:281.

⁴¹LW 26:353-356.

⁴²So the assessment of J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians*, Anchor Bible 33A (New York: Doubleday, 1997) 35.

[The 1535 edition] expresses an extraordinary and profound understanding of what Paul intended to say....Luther's commentary is more than a scholarly commentary *upon* Galatians. It is a recreation *of* Galatians in the sixteenth century. Luther speaks as Paul would have spoken had he lived at the time when Luther gave his lectures.⁴³

That evaluation notwithstanding, problems with Luther's interpretations and perspectives have become evident in modern times, particularly in his understanding and treatment of Judaism in Paul's day.⁴⁴ Moreover, connections between his understanding of first-century Judaism, his portrayal of Paul's opponents in Galatia, and his descriptions of his own opponents are drawn too easily. Luther himself admitted that his commentary of 1535 was inadequate and, above all, too "wordy."⁴⁵ But every interpreter is bound by his or her social and temporal location to one degree or another. It remains clear that in Luther one finds a sympathetic hearing of the apostle Paul and a masterful performance in representing the teachings of the Letter to the Galatians in new circumstances. ⊕

⁴³Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians*, Hermeneia Commentary (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) xv.

⁴⁴Cf. Martyn, *Galatians*, 35. Some examples of Luther's harsh treatment of Jews and the law in ancient Jewish thought appear in *LW* 26:237, 243-244, 304-305, 340, 399; 27:147, 323-324.

⁴⁵*LW* 27:145, 147.