

Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians

Publication Details(1)

Introduction

There is one book that Luther himself likes better than any other: his Commentary on Galatians.

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 octavo, 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....

A word 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: 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.

Endnotes

1 (Popup - Popup)

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