

Luther's Commentary on Galatians 1519

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The plan for the seminar was to read Luther's early *Commentary on Galatians* published in 1519, a book which for no apparent reason has drawn less attention than many of his other writings. The commentary is of great interest, because it has its roots in the early *Lectures on Paul* (1515–1518) and in the *Second Lecture on the Psalms* (1519–1521), at the same time that it points ahead and can be compared to the large *Commentary on Galatians* of 1531/1535.

The text sets the scene for a range of research themes which were formulated in the introductory statement describing the program of the seminar: First, Luther's interpretation of Paul; second, Luther's understanding of the relation between faith and works (these two were possible links to the contemporary discussion of the relation between the »New Perspective on Paul« and Luther research, which was treated in the context of a keynote lecture at the Congress); third, Luther's reformatory theology – breakthrough or development; and fourth, Luther's interpre-

tation of the fact that the peace and grace of God are hidden, invisible and incomprehensible (WA 2; 456,32–34; 457,3–4). The seminar welcomed both systematic and historical contributions with relation to the chosen text.

The working group counted eleven participants, including the seminar leader (*William J. Wright, Kirsten Diemer, Ilmari Karimies, Erik Hermann, Bernhard S. Erling, Ville Hassinen, Diane Bowers, Sasja Emilie Mathiasen, Ken Jones, Lauge O. Nielsen* and *Anna Vind*) and many wished to present papers. This informed shape and content of the discussions. Of the topics formulated in the introductory statement, number one and four were taken up in the presentations. Furthermore, Luther's concept of honor was brought into focus, adding new insights to the reading of the commentary.

Initially we went through the interpretation history of Paul's letter to the Galatians and especially the understanding of the law, looking at Pauline scholarship from the second century, where the empha-

sis on the connection between law and salvation history became central. An attempt at that time was made – and carried on throughout history, even though it was criticized by Augustine – to reduce Paul's negative statements about the law by limiting them to ceremonial law. Luther himself even applied this distinction between ceremonial law and the Decalogue in his *Dictata super Psalterium*: here, Gal 3:19–4:1 is seen as describing Old Testament times, and in general all distinctions and dichotomies are applied to the Old as opposed to the New Testament. Nevertheless, we observe a shift in Luther's thinking by the time of the lecture on Romans and the increasing influence of Augustine, a shift towards the distinction between *lex literae* and *lex spiritus* with reference to faith, which we find fully developed, for instance, in the commentary to Gal 3:24–25 (WA 2; 528,15–529,19 – even without explicit mention of the concepts *spiritus* and *literae*). Such an interpretation of the law was wholly new in Pauline interpretation history (*Erik Hermann*).

Touching upon the relationship between the commentary and *De libertate Christiana* with special focus on Luther's anthropological

statements concerning the old and the new, the inner and the outer man (*Ken Jones*), the New Testament dimensions of the letter to the Galatians were also drawn up (*Bernhard S. Erling*) before we entered into four more specific presentations of Luther's interpretation.

Delving into Luther's interpretation of Gal 4, the story about Hagar and Sarah, we discussed the interpretation of the figure of Hagar with reference to contemporary literary-feminist exegesis (*Phyllis Trible*) and to different understandings of Luther's hermeneutics (*Gerhard Ebeling*, *James Preus*, *Kenneth Hagan*). In Genesis, as well as in Paul, the destiny of Hagar is hopeless and she is bound to represent law, slavery and sin. Luther continues this line of thought in his commentary, applying the difference between *lex literae* and *lex spiritus* to Hagar and Sarah in an allegorical interpretation: Hagar points to the Jews and all who trust in the law and work for justification, whereas Sarah is a picture of the true believer, God's free child of promise. Despite this quite negative use of the Hagar-figure, Luther seems to find another and more sympathetic place for Hagar in his later interpretation of Genesis

(1535–1545). Here, he sees her as an example of the sinner who repents and returns to God. Thus, as an example of the ungodly saint, or the damned but not abandoned church (*Diane Bowers*).

In the next two presentations, the focus shifted from Luther's biblical scholarship to the theme of ›invisibility‹ in the commentary. Going back to the *Dictata*, we looked for Luther's assertions on the nature of invisible things, finding numerous statements on the topic. We moved into a closer study of his understanding of sign and signified; temporality and eternity; creation and new-creation; visible, invisible and contrasting hidden realities; and finally of the Church and the believer as the center of it all. We observed the influence of Neo-Platonism present here, and set the reading up against the research results of former Luther scholars who focused on a more ›existential‹ interpretation (Gerhard Ebeling, Wilfried Joest). Lastly, the inquiry was applied to Luther's Galatians commentary, pointing to the fact that even though the more ›philosophical‹ ways of explaining the matter had decreased after 1516, the matter itself was still prominent in the interpretation of Paul (*Ilmari Karimies*).

With reference to specific parts of the Galatians commentary, we continued to develop the way in which Luther speaks of two kingdoms, the kingdom of grace versus the kingdom of glory, governed by God through faith and sight respectively. Again we discussed the fact that according to Luther man meets the world in two ways: through the senses and reason (the kingdom of the world) and through faith (the kingdom of grace). With his double anthropology divided between flesh and spirit he stands in this cleft – and the spiritual part of him, which through Christ's real presence in faith is truly the place for an ontological change of man (cf. the Finnish Luther research led by Tuomo Mannermaa), forms a hidden, incomprehensible, ›mysterious‹ reality here, which is hidden to the senses and reason but at the same time accessible through faith (*William J. Wright*).

At the end of the seminar, we heard a presentation of Luther's concept of honor with reference to Luther's statement *solī Dei honor et Gloria* in his German interpretation of the Lord's Prayer (1519). Taking honor to be a fundamentally relational concept describing man's relation to God and his neighbor, we defined honor here as