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The Holy Spirit in Luther's Commentary on Galatians

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THE 1531 VERSION of Martin Luther's Commentary on Galatians was the third commentary Luther wrote on this, his favourite Epistle of the Apostle Paul. Originally it was a course of lectures given to his students in the University of Wittenberg, but in 1535 it was published from the corrected and revised class-notes of one of these students. It is a lengthy work and, like all scriptural commentaries, is unsystematic in its treatment of the doctrine at hand. If one were to seek out the main theme it would be Luther's teaching on justification by faith. This prominence of faith in the Epistle probably explains Luther's great predilection for it. It gave him ample opportunity to set out, in a complete if haphazard fashion, his own teaching on faith, justification, and works.

Our concern with the commentary will be to see how the Holy Spirit enters into the process of justification according to Luther. There is no one place in the commentary where he discusses the Holy Spirit fully, but scattered throughout are references to the Spirit's work and in a few places considerations of some length on his part in the justification of the Christian man.

The Holy Spirit is present at the first moment of justification, influencing a man to receive the work of the Gospel in faith. It is he who then empowers one to live a truly Christian life and to do the works of the Law as they should be done. It is he who is our great support in temptation and who preserves us from despair. Finally, it is he who intercedes for us with the Father. In the course of this essay we shall see more fully how this activity of the Spirit is carried out.

We must realize that Luther is not concerned with the Holy Ghost as a person in himself. His treatment is not an abstract consideration of the Divinity but rather a practical consideration of the Spirit's activity. At the same time, Luther never actually discusses *how* the Spirit dwells in the Christian. He continually states that the Holy Ghost dwells in the just; he says that the Spirit is sent by Christ; but never does he elaborate on what one might call the speculative implications of this indwelling. He is insistent, however, that we believe in the Spirit's presence. Note his comment on the verse: "Because you are sons, God hath sent the spirit of his Son into your hearts" (Gal. 4:6):

We ought not therefore to doubt whether the Holy Ghost dwelleth in us or not;

but to be assuredly persuaded that we 'are temples of the Holy Ghost' as Paul saith.¹

In other texts he speaks of our falling into sin if the Spirit deserts us, or, again, of performing the work of the Law rightly only if we first possess the Holy Spirit.

How does the Christian come into possession of the Spirit? Luther mentions the sending of the Spirit in many contexts but basically the gift of the Spirit is bound up with the hearing of the word of the Gospel and with the faith by which one receives the Gospel. However, the interaction of faith, the word, and the Spirit is by no means simple. Luther assigns to the word (and he seems to mean the spoken word of the Gospel) the role of initiating the process. The hearing of the Gospel is always the first step in justification. The word does not, for all that, precede the Holy Ghost; rather, when the word is received then also is the Spirit received who works in the heart to enable one to take hold of the word. This taking hold of the word is done through faith. The total process, then, is a hearing of the word through preaching and a receiving of the word by the working of the Spirit in our hearts, a working which is through faith.

Wherefore it [the Gospel] is a kind of doctrine that is not learned or gotten by any study, diligence, or wisdom of man, nor yet by the law of God, but is revealed by God himself, as Paul saith in this place; first by the external word, then by the working of God's spirit inwardly. The Gospel therefore is a divine word that came down from heaven and is revealed by the Holy Ghost, who was also sent for the same purpose: yet in such sort notwithstanding, that the outward word must go before. For Paul himself had no inward revelation, until he had heard the outward word from heaven, which was this, 'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?' First, therefore, he heard the outward word, then afterwards followed revelations, the knowledge of the word, faith and the gifts of the Holy Ghost. (Luther, p. 84.)

For the word cometh from the mouth of the Apostle or of the minister and entereth into the heart of him that heareth it. There the Holy Ghost is present and imprinteth the word in the heart, so that it consenteth unto it (p. 411).

The Gospel that is preached is the Gospel of faith in Christ, our Propitiator. At this point we meet the central thesis of Luther's doctrine—justification by faith. He is insistent, time and time again, that the Spirit is given not because of works done, or precepts of the law kept, but only through faith. It is Cornelius, the pagan, who was not under the law and who, nevertheless, received the gifts of the Spirit at Peter's preaching that Luther uses here to prove his point (pp. 201-7). Again, his comment on the opening verse of chapter 2 speaks of the Gentiles in general who are constantly recorded as receiving the Holy Spirit for their faith.

Wheresoever we preached among the Gentiles, the Holy Ghost came and fell upon those who heard the word. . . . But we preached not circumcision, neither did we require the keeping of the law, but we preached only faith in Jesus

1. Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, revised translation based on "Middleton" edition of 1575 (London: James Clarke, 1953), p. 362.

Christ; and at this preaching of faith, God gave to the hearers the Holy Ghost (p. 90).

Verse 2 of chapter 3, "Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith," affords Luther an occasion of gathering together most of his teaching on the relationship between preaching, faith, and the reception of the Spirit—the true doctrine of justification as opposed to the false doctrine of justification through works. The whole of the Acts of the Apostles, in his mind, was written to illustrate this great Christian truth.

Wherefore we must diligently weigh and consider the force of this argument, which is so often repeated in the Acts of the Apostles. Which book is written to confirm and establish this argument: for it teacheth nothing else but that the Holy Ghost is not given by the law, but by the hearing of the Gospel (p. 201).

In amplifying this central theme, he explains that faith, the principle of justification, was operative in the Old Testament. Abraham is Paul's own great example of the man of faith. However, in the former covenant, it was a faith in Christ yet to come, whereas in the latter, it is faith in Christ already come.

There are a number of reasons for Luther's emphasis on the reception of the Holy Spirit through "mere" preaching and faith. One of the foremost is his constant concern to protect the gifts of the Spirit, as all other supernatural gifts, from being, in any way, a reward of works. Justification is God's free gift. Our role is to cling to Christ by faith and to accept it. Because it is seemingly extraordinary that we should do nothing to receive so great a treasure, Luther is at pains to point out the absolute gratuitousness of our salvation.

Man's heart doth not understand nor believe that so great a treasure, namely, the Holy Ghost, is given by the only hearing of faith; but reasoneth after this manner: forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death, the giving of the Holy Ghost, of righteousness and everlasting life, are great things: therefore if thou wilt obtain these inestimable benefits, thou must perform some other great and weighty matter. . . . But this we must needs learn, that forgiveness of sins, Christ and the Holy Ghost are freely given unto us at the only hearing of faith, notwithstanding our horrible sins and demerits (p. 210).

The sending of the Holy Ghost in the primitive Church seems to differ from the sending of the Spirit in these latter times. On Pentecost, there was an external sign, a "manifest and visible appearance," whereas now the Holy Ghost "is sent by the word into the hearts of believers" (p. 360). One might be led by this passage of the Reformer to contrast the coming of the Holy Spirit in the primitive Church and his coming in our day. But in reality there is no contradiction implied in the passage. The "manifest and visible appearance" he speaks of was the "likeness of a dove" and "manifest miracles." True enough, such appearances have ceased in the Church but these signs were always accompanied by an inward change in the man himself. It was this inward change that assured a man he possessed the

Spirit and was justified. In one place, Luther calls this change an "inward fervency and light whereby we are changed and become new creatures" (p. 360). This inward fervency, linked to a hearing of the word, has always been present in the Church and is the continuing assurance of the Spirit's presence in our hearts.

Once the Christian has received the Spirit, he begins to lead a new life, a life that manifests itself in his attitude towards God and his neighbour. This new life is itself a sign, an outward sign, by which one can recognize the Spirit's presence. At one point, Luther enumerates some of its manifestations:

The outward signs . . . are gladly to hear of Christ, to preach and teach Christ, to render thanks unto him, to praise him, to confess him . . . to do our duty according to our vocation (p. 364; cf. p. 530).

Another indication that we possess the Spirit is the press of persecution. If the world misunderstands us and inveighs against us, if we are harried by the seeming righteous, if our doctrine is contradicted and mocked, then we should be assured in our hearts that we possess the Spirit. Here Luther takes for his model Paul, who often repeats this theme.

Ye, saith he [Paul], have believed and believing have done miracles, and have shewed many notable signs; and moreover ye have suffered many afflictions, all which things are the effects and operations, not of the law, but of the Holy Ghost (p. 220; cf. pp. 430-6).

The most important of these signs of the Spirit in us is the doing of the law in faith. To this work we shall devote a more lengthy consideration. We have already seen that the Spirit is operative in justifying the Christian. Hence where true faith is there is also the Spirit. Once we have received this justification a whole new life opens to us "wherewith we being lightened and made new creatures, begin to do the law, that is to say, to love God and our neighbor" (p. 247). It is the Spirit who enables us to perform these works of the law in truth, for "to do, is first of all to believe, and so through faith to perform the law. We must first receive the Holy Ghost" (p. 247). The works of the law thus retain a place in the economy of salvation but they are the result of justification not its cause. Luther's comment on Galatians 3:10 is a long exposition of this relationship between the true and false doing of the law (pp. 241-61). The law is necessary because the law is good and commanded by God. The law keeps peace and order; the law furthers concord among Christians. But the law cannot justify. If Luther is sometimes sharp on this point it is because he is trying to prevent a misconception of the law's role.

Wherefore if thou wilt define truly and plainly what it is to do the law, it is nothing else but to believe in Jesus Christ, and when the Holy Ghost is received through faith in Christ, to work those things which are commanded in the law (p. 247; cf. p. 526).

Once more we find ourselves at the central point of Luther's doctrine. It is God alone who, through the working of the Spirit, justifies a man. Man's actions, good though they may be and necessary, do not enter essentially into the process of justification. They are always subsequent to the initiatory activity of the Spirit.

But if we still find virtue difficult in this life, it is because we still live in the flesh and have received here only the "first-fruits of the Spirit" and, though we begin to love, we do it "very slenderly" (p. 496). Frequently, Luther will return to this theme of the first-fruits of the Spirit. The Spirit pours forth charity into our hearts according to the word of the Apostle, but that charity is not yet perfect. We have a beginning of justification, but not the fullness of it. As a result, we need faith and imputation. We still feel within us the conflict of the spirit with the flesh.

The latter section of chapter 5 of the Epistle explains at length this struggle within us.

There be two contrary captains in you, the Spirit and the Flesh . . . for the Spirit wrestleth against the Flesh, and the Flesh against the Spirit. Here I require nothing else of you, but that ye follow the Spirit as your captain and guide, and that ye resist that captain the Flesh; for that is all that ye be able to do. . . . Therefore when I teach you to observe the law, and exhort you to love one another, think not that I go about to revoke that which I have taught concerning the doctrine of faith, and that I now attribute justification to the law or to charity; but my meaning is that ye should walk in the Spirit, and that ye should not fulfill the lusts of the Flesh (p. 497).

Although by the Spirit the Christian has been freed in his spirit from the law, yet in his flesh he is still under the law insofar as the law commands certain works to be done. He may even fall into sin because of the weakness of the flesh. But whereas before justification he would have despaired, now he has hope. For he knows that though he may be weak and may even sin, yet if he keeps firm his faith in Christ, he is saved. It is the Spirit who has given liberty to his spirit even though the flesh is not yet fully freed of the law and sin (p. 505). Now the Holy Spirit enables him to "walk in the Spirit" and though sin may be present in him, it has no power over his spirit. "To walk in the Spirit" is for Luther a formula that expresses the ideal of life on this earth. It means to live, not according to the flesh and its works—sin and corruption—but to walk in holiness and justice. This life in the spirit is the full Christian life. There are a few occasions on which Luther permits himself to look at what one might call the flowering of the Spirit.

'If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit,' that is to say: let us abide in the doctrine of truth which has been taught unto us, in brotherly love and spiritual concord; and let us preach Christ and the glory of God in simplicity of heart, and let us confess that we have received all things of him: and let us not think more of ourselves than of others; let us raise up no sects (p. 530).

One more aspect of the Spirit's function is important in Luther's theology, where faithful confidence is the ground of all our salvation. The Spirit does much for us in empowering us to lead a truly religious life but he does even more when he pleads for us before God. Luther devotes a long commentary to the verse, "God hath sent the spirit of his Son into your hearts crying, 'Abba, Father'" (Gal. 4:6). We have deep need of God's help and grace but we ourselves are weak and powerless. So it is that the Spirit once more fills our need by pleading with a cry which "before God is a loud cry and unspeakable groaning":

This matter I have the more largely prosecuted, that I might plainly show what the office of the Holy Ghost is, and when he specially exerciseth the same. In temptation, therefore, we must in no wise judge thereof according to our own sense and feeling, or by the crying of the law, sin and the devil, etc. If we here follow our own sense, and believe those cryings, we shall think ourselves to be destitute of all help and succor of the Holy Ghost and utterly cast away from the presence of God. Nay rather let us then remember what Paul saith: that the Spirit helpeth our infirmities, etc.; also that it crieth, 'Abba, Father'; that is to say, it uttereth a certain feeble sighing and groaning of the heart (as it seemeth to us) which notwithstanding before God is a loud cry and unspeakable groaning. Wherefore, in the midst of thy temptation and infirmity, cleave only unto Christ and groan unto him. He giveth the Holy Ghost which crieth, 'Abba, Father' (p. 369).

We must have confidence then in the Spirit that we are not alone in the struggle but that we have help from God.

The Spirit's cry, "Abba, Father," brings forcefully to mind our relation to our heavenly Father. As sons of God we have a right to the inheritance that is ours but this right is not founded on works that we have done. It is a birthright freely bestowed on us through the Spirit who has made us sons.

For he that is a son, must also be an heir. . . . There is no work or merit that bringeth to him the inheritance, but his birth only: and so in obtaining the inheritance he is a mere patient, and not an agent. . . . So we obtain eternal blessings, namely the forgiveness of sins, righteousness, the glory of the resurrection, and everlasting life, not as agents but as patients, that is, not by doing, but by receiving. Nothing here cometh between, but faith alone apprehendeth the promise offered (p. 376).

The gratuitousness of our justification once more comes to the fore in this most glorious claim of the Christian, that he is a son of God.

We have come now to the end of Luther's considerations. Although the commentary on Galatians is not explicitly on the Holy Spirit, yet, because of the Spirit's close connection with the whole process of justification, it presents us with a fairly complete picture of his work. He is active at the first moment of our justification. It is he who furthers the work in us, moving us to act rightly and to battle temptation. Finally, it is he who will bring the life of charity, which now is but beginning in us, to full fruition in heaven.