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Wilhelm Lütgert and his Studies of the Apostles' Opponents: Aspiring to a Better Understanding of the New Testament Letters

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'The freedom which Jesus gives is not a heathen lawlessness.'
—Wilhelm Lütgert in his 1919 commentary on Galatians

The work of Wilhelm Lütgert (1867-1938) in New Testament studies and systematic theology receives insufficient recognition today. The central topics of his theological work were (1) his critique of idealism, (2) the recovery of the doctrine of creation for epistemology and the recovery of 'nature' for the doctrine of God, and (3) the recovery of the significance of love in ethics.¹

Lütgert's exegetical work on numerous New Testament books was ground-breaking. He successfully broke away from Christian Baur's reigning tradition that James and Peter represented a legalistic and Paul an antinomian Christianity. Overall, Lütgert viewed Paul as being caught between two fronts that had formed:

Jewish-Christian legalists on one hand and Gentile, enthusiastic antinomians on the other. Against the legalists, Paul emphasized freedom from the law and life in the Spirit, and against the antinomians Paul emphasized that God's Spirit never endorses sin and that the Old Testament continues to be God's word.

I. Personal Background²

After completing his college preparatory studies in 1886, Lütgert studied theology in Greifswald under representatives of the so-called 'Greifswald School': Hermann Cremer (1834–

¹ These points are discussed in a longer version of this paper, available from the editor on request.

² On Lütgert, see Paul Althaus, Gerhard Kittel and Hermann Strathmann, *Adolf Schlatter und Wilhelm Lütgert zum Gedächtnis* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1938); Werner Neuer, 'Wilhelm Lütgert: Eine kleine Einführung in Leben und Werk eines vergessenen The-

1903), professor of systematic theology, and Lütgert's later longstanding friend and co-worker, Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938) from Switzerland.

After his move to Berlin, and in addition to attending lectures by Adolf von Harnack, he attended history lectures given by Heinrich von Treitschke. After his theological exams, Cremer invited him to pursue a doctorate. In 1892 he completed his licentiate in systematic theology on the topic 'The Method of Dogmatic Proof in its Development under Schleiermacher's Influence', becoming an associate professor of New Testament in 1895.

In 1898 Lütgert married Martha Sellschopp, with whom he raised seven children as a caring and warm father. In 1901, he obtained an additional doctorate for his research on the Johannine Christology, and the following year he was granted a full professorship. In 1913, he was named professor of systematic theology and became head of the seminary at Halle. In 1929 he moved to Berlin as a systematic theologian and director of the theological seminary.

In 1934, Lütgert spoke out against the use of Aryan paragraphs related to the church, and as a result the district leadership of the *National Socialist German Workers' Party* complained to the government. In 1935 he was removed from office and pro-

hibited from lecturing.³ In 1936 two of his lectures were forbidden before he could present them, whereupon he had them printed. Lütgert participated in the illegal examinations held by the confessing church,⁴ although he was very sceptical regarding Karl Barth's influence. In 1938 Lütgert died after a short illness.

II. Lütgert's Attitude towards the Historical-Critical Method

Nowhere did Lütgert deny the historical-critical method, nor did he explicitly endorse an interpretation of Scripture that began with its infallibility, as did for instance his contemporary Benjamin Warfield. His position is, however, free from all historical suspicion regarding the canonical text, and in introductory questions (about authorship and origin) Lütgert always concurred with the tradition.

As a typical example, at the beginning of his examination of the Pastoral Letters, Lütgert acknowledged that given the contemporary state of scholarship, the Pauline origin of the letters could not be presupposed. However, he added, 'I am personally convinced that Paul is the author of the letters.'⁵ The results of his study could be used to support this position, but the topic was settled for him. Similarly, in his study of the Johannine gospel and letters, he considered John the author without categorically representing the position that it could not be otherwise.

In his essay 'The Reliability of the

ologen', *Jahrbuch für evangelikale Theologie* 1 (1987): 108–24; Gerhard Bially, 'Wilhelm Lütgerts These vom 'Zweifrontenkrieg des Paulus gegen Nomisten und Enthusiasten' (M.Th. thesis, University of Wuppertal, 2000), 7–22; Jochen Eber, 'Lütgert, Wilhelm', *Biografisch-Bibliografisches Kirchenlexikon*, vol. 16 (2000): 870–74, which contains the longest bibliography.

3 Bially, 'Wilhelm Lütgerts These', 16–17.

4 Ibid., 120.

5 Wilhelm Lütgert, *Die Irrlehrer der Pastoralbriefe* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1909), 7.

Image of Christ in the Gospels', Lütgert declared that 'the entire image of Christ is the same throughout all the Gospels.'⁶ Historically, he considered this image to be completely reliable. Thus he had no doubt, historically or with respect to his faith, about Jesus' confession that he was the Messiah. This picture emerges more fully from his study 'The Worship of Jesus'.⁷

Lütgert's affirmation of the ascriptions of authorship presented in the New Testament and believed by the early church was a great hindrance to his acceptance in German historical-critical research. For that very reason, evangelical theologians should consider it an honour to maintain Lütgert's legacy.

III. Lütgert's Main Thesis

In a 1935 letter, Lütgert reflected on his several decades of preoccupation with the topic of Paul's opponents:

According to the theological tradition which was brought to a close by Ritschl, the Pauline gospel rested on a rejection of the law. According to this, Marcion appeared as the consistent representative of the Gospel. It is no accident that the last large theological work by Harnack dealt with Marcion. The rejection of the Creator was also at this point tied to the rejection of the lawgiver. With it the current crisis was initiated. It had long been

clear to me that in complete opposition to it, Paul's gospel rested on an acknowledgement of the law. From that there came the knowledge that Paul was not only in opposition to the legalists, but also in opposition to the antinomians. Given this, there was not only a new point of view with respect to the explanation of several of the Pauline letters, but also a notion of the history of the Apostolic era which went beyond that of the Tübingen School as well as that in Ritschl's 'The History of the Formation of the Old Catholic Church.' In a number of individual studies I have pursued my notion of the history of Jewish Christianity up into the second century and back into Judaism at the time of Christ. A summarized presentation of this course of history, which also includes the emergence of the first persecution of Christians, is the next larger task which is placed before me in my studies. I have the urgent desire to still achieve this wish. This is due to the fact that from the opinions about my investigations which have been published up to now, I see that otherwise the recognized results of this work would be for naught and that beyond the details no discussion regarding the overall concept of early Christianity would occur. I delayed this work because, instead of New Testament theology, I assumed the responsibility for systematic theology. Late, too late, did I achieve my scholarly goal.⁸

⁶ Wilhelm Lütgert, 'Die Glaubwürdigkeit des Christusbildes der Evangelien', in his *Gottes Sohn und Gottes Geist: Vorträge zur Christologie und zur Lehre vom Geiste Gottes* (Leipzig: A. Deichert'sche Verlagsbuch, 1905), 22.

⁷ Wilhelm Lütgert, *Die Anbetung Jesu* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1904), 49–66.

⁸ Wilhelm Lütgert, *Antwort auf die mir am 7. Mai überreichte Adresse* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1935).

Following is a chronological review of Lütgert's exegetical studies on Paul's letters.

1. Corinthians: Libertine Spirituality

Ferdinand Christian Baur and the Tübingen School assumed that in New Testament times, there was on one hand a legalistic Jewish Christianity represented by Peter and James, and on the other hand an antinomian Gentile Christianity with Paul, a Jew, as its spokesman. What came from this, according to Hegel's scheme, was the synthesis of early Catholicism. Baur's interpretation determined the prevailing understanding of 1 Corinthians for a long time; he saw the same Jewish opponents in the Christ 'party' that he saw in the letter to the Galatians.

In 1908, Lütgert opened his investigation of the opponents in Paul's letters with 'The Preaching of Liberty and the Spirits of Enthusiasm in Corinth: An Article Concerning the Characteristics of the Christ "Party"',⁹ which above all was directed against Baur's representation of history. In the opening sentence he wrote, 'The Christian church has, from the beginning, had to stand between two fronts ... the circle of Apostles had opponents on both sides.'¹⁰

As Lütgert saw it, Paul stood between Jewish Christian legalists and Gentile Christian antinomians: 'In [Paul's] view, freedom from the law was always just as far from antinomi-

anism as it was from legalism.'¹¹ Whoever is free from the law, according to Lütgert's understanding of Paul, is in fellowship with God and for that reason free from sin.¹² This means that to be a Christian is demonstrated in the fact that the Christian wants to avoid sin. The law is not abolished; rather, it is fulfilled in life.

Lütgert closed his investigation with these words:

It was with certainty that Paul maintained freedom in his struggle against legalistic Judaism; he exhibited the same certainty when the issue was the validity of the law in his struggle with the antinomians. The clarity with which he knew how to unite the two tendencies is paradigmatic for all times.¹³

To Lütgert, the antinomians were 'libertine spiritualists'¹⁴ and Gnostics. The faith, however, does not rest on human wisdom, but rather 'on God's power'¹⁵ (1 Cor 2:5). For that reason, the church does not have to seek *gnosis* but rather faith. 'Preaching does not save those who understand, the wise, but rather those who believe. ... What we have in the Corinthian church is for the first time a Gnosticism in the sense that it is a gnosis that surpasses faith, which rests upon revelation and the possession of which accounts for Christian perfection and counts as the essence of Christianity.'¹⁶

Lütgert's view has been disputed; he claimed that asceticism was sup-

9 Wilhelm Lütgert, *Freiheitspredigt und Schwarmgeister in Korinth: Ein Beitrag zur Charakteristik der Christuspartei* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1908).

10 Lütgert, *Freiheitspredigt*, 7.

11 Lütgert, *Freiheitspredigt*, 143.

12 Lütgert, *Freiheitspredigt*, 16.

13 Lütgert, *Freiheitspredigt*, 157.

14 Lütgert, *Freiheitspredigt*, 86.

15 Lütgert, *Freiheitspredigt*, 112.

16 Lütgert, *Freiheitspredigt*, 111, 134.

pressed libertinism and assumed that both stemmed from the same movement, instead of seeing two contradictory deviations from God's creation ordinances.

2. Philippians: The Perfected Ones

In 1909 Lütgert published an examination of 'The Perfected Ones in the Letter to the Philippians'. As his point of entry, Lütgert argued that Philippians 3 makes it clear that Paul stood between two fronts.¹⁷

When Paul was active in Philippi and when he wrote this letter, according to Lütgert, there were a large number of libertines in Philippi. They denied the preaching of the cross and thought they had already achieved the resurrection, making the hope of a resurrection and of the *parousia* irrelevant. The fear of God, humility and obedience were for them a lower form of piety.¹⁸

The Jews treated the Pauline gospel as deserving to be thrown into the same pot with these notions. In Paul's view, they shared several features with the libertines: the rejection of humility and of the cross, the lack of proper fear of God, and their scepticism regarding the hope of resurrection.¹⁹

Lütgert took the unusual position that the terms 'mutilators of the flesh' and 'dogs') in Philippians 3:2 do not concern mockery of Jewish circumcision—something that he believed

would have been unthinkable for Paul—but rather a reference to pagan circumcision rites. Lütgert maintained this stance in his view of the term 'emasculate' in Galatians 5:12.

3. Thessalonians: The Enthusiasts

Also in 1909, within the same volume, Lütgert published 'The Enthusiasts in Thessalonica'. There is no generally accepted answer surrounding the historical situation of the letters.²⁰ Whether both letters to the Thessalonians addressed the same situation is also unresolved, although Lütgert ultimately affirmed this and considered the second letter's authenticity to be important.²¹

Describing the overall picture of the early Christian church, Lütgert suggested that 'in the Apostolic era there were more trends and tendencies, that the life of the community was richer, more colorful, and more diverse than it appears in the traditional historical view.'²² For him it was amazing that 'Christian literature begins with a polemic against libertine enthusiasts and those who denied the resurrection. With this the portrayal of history is significantly changed.'²³

4. The Pastoral Letters: Order instead of Gnosis

Still in 1909, Lütgert's study 'The False Teaching of the Pastoral Letters' appeared. He understood this work

17 Wilhelm Lütgert, 'Die Vollkommenen im Philipperbrief', in his *Die Vollkommenen im Philipperbrief und die Enthusiasten in Thessalonich* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1909), 1.

18 Lütgert, 'Die Vollkommenen', 53-54.

19 Lütgert, 'Die Vollkommenen', 54.

20 Wilhelm Lütgert, 'Die Enthusiasten in Thessalonich', in his *Die Vollkommenen im Philipperbrief und die Enthusiasten in Thessalonich* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1909), 55.

21 Lütgert, 'Die Enthusiasten', 81.

22 Lütgert, 'Die Enthusiasten', 102.

23 Lütgert, 'Die Enthusiasten', 102.

as a direct continuation of his examination of the Corinthian letters.²⁴ To Lütgert, the false teachers in the pastoral letters were Jewish antinomians who preached freedom from the law. As spiritualists, they were Gnostics who claimed a higher knowledge than the Scriptures. They were shaped by asceticism and a rejection of every kind of order. Antinomianism, asceticism, Gnosis, and enthusiasm were the catchwords by which they were distinguished, as well as an unwillingness to suffer.²⁵

Again here, the central point is the correct integration of the law into the Gospel. Like Romans 2:16 and 7:12, according to Lütgert, 1 Timothy 1:9 also correctly understood law as an ethical order integrated into the Gospel.²⁶ The defence of the correct use of the law is at the same time a defence of the Scriptures, as in particular 1 Timothy 3 makes clear: 'In that the false teachers wanted to lead the congregation beyond the Scriptures, they also rip themselves loose from a connection with the piety of Israel.'²⁷

What the opponents of the Corinthian letters have in common with the opponents of the pastoral letters is that as liberal Jewish antinomians they distort the preaching of freedom. They invoke wonders, visions and a knowledge that is independent of the Scriptures. Both reject suffering and lowliness as well as the hope of resurrection. 'The difference consists in the fact that Paul's opponents in Corinth were libertines and the false

teachers of the pastoral letters were ascetics. Still, this asceticism is only a suppressed libertinism.'²⁸

5. The Letters of John: Office and Spirit

In 1911, Lütgert devoted himself primarily to First John in the first part of his work *Service and Spirit in Battle*. He found John to be disputing against libertines, among others. The author emphasized that love also always means freedom from sin.

1 John 5:17 ('All wrongdoing is sin') was central for Lütgert. The church has 'no privileged wrongdoing'.²⁹ 'What is sin for the rest of the world is sin for them. Their freedom does not consist in there no longer being sin for them.'³⁰

This is how Lütgert understands the disputed statement in 1 John 1:8 and 20 about being sinless. The false teachers do not consider themselves sinless because they actually do not sin, but rather because they no longer consider what they do to be sin.³¹ 'Antinomianism and perfectionism are therefore tied together.'³² I consider this observation to be exegetically justified and a central insight for eth-

²⁴ Lütgert, *Die Irrlehrer der Pastoralbriefe*, 73.

²⁵ Lütgert, *Die Irrlehrer*, 73.

²⁶ Lütgert, *Die Irrlehrer*, 13–14.

²⁷ Lütgert, *Die Irrlehrer*, 68.

²⁸ Lütgert, *Die Irrlehrer*, 92.

²⁹ Wilhelm Lütgert, 'Johannes und die Antichristen', in his *Ant und Geist im Kampf: Studien zur Geschichte des Urchristentums* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1911), 23.

³⁰ Lütgert, 'Johannes', 23.

³¹ Lütgert, 'Johannes', 23–24.

³² Lütgert, 'Johannes', 24. It is interesting that Lütgert views this perfectionism as justified, although he was familiar with another type of perfectionism of his time, as is demonstrated in his talk *Sündlosigkeit und Vollkommenheit: Ein Vortrag* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1897).

ics.

Lütgert made more use of John's letters in both of his large works on love than practically all Protestant ethicists. The church must to be protected against the 'lax feature' of the false prophets:³³ 'I write this to you so that you will not sin' (1 John 2:1).

Also characteristic of John's letters is the struggle against Docetism and the denial of the hope of resurrection. Furthermore, one again finds an emphasis on knowledge as opposed to apostolic preaching and the commandments:

The false prophets are therefore libertine Gnostics. Because they are Gnostics, *gnosis* stands out so strongly in John. The letter speaks much more frequently about knowledge (2:3, 4, 13, 14; 3:1, 6, 20; 4: 6, 7, 8, 16; 5:20) than it does about faith. To know God and to obey him are the two most important parts of Christianity as far as this letter is concerned.³⁴

Within the framework of his results, Lütgert draws parallels between the false teachings in John's letters and those considered in his previous studies. He arrived at this arrangement:

Antinomian libertines: Corinthians, Philippians, Thessalonians

Enthusiasts: Corinthians, Pastorals

Gnostics: Corinthians, Pastorals

Spiritualistic deniers of the resurrection: Corinthians, Pastorals (the resurrection has already occurred), Philippians (the resurrection has already been achieved)

Christians who wanted to rescind the internal contrast between the church and the world: Corinthians
Absence of love as characteristic: Corinthians

Aversion to the death of Christ: Corinthians, Philippians

'All of these phenomena are features of a movement', he concluded.³⁵

6. The Letter of Clement and the Letter of Ignatius: Service and Spirit

Together with his study of John's letters, Lütgert continued his investigation of the opponents of the early Christian documents beyond the New Testament.

In 'Turmoil in Corinth' he primarily studied Clement's first letter, addressing Clement's second letter briefly in an appendix.³⁶ He emphasized the close relationship between those letters from the time of Paul. Among the opponents, he simultaneously found asceticism and sexual excesses of the worst order.³⁷

In 'Separation among the Churches of Asia Minor' he looked into Ignatius's letters. Ignatius's opponents recognized the gospel but rejected the authority of the Old Testament which was held up to them; that is to say, they rejected all Scriptural evidences.³⁸ Here, Lütgert saw parallels

³⁵ Lütgert, 'Johannes', 48–49.

³⁶ Wilhelm Lütgert, 'Der Aufruhr in Korinth', in *Amt und Geist im Kampf: Studien zur Geschichte des Urchristentums* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1911), 111–18.

³⁷ Lütgert, 'Der Aufruhr', 79.

³⁸ Wilhelm Lütgert, 'Die Separation in den kleinasiatischen Gemeinden', in *Amt und Geist im Kampf: Studien zur Geschichte des*

³³ Lütgert, 'Johannes', 48.

³⁴ Lütgert, 'Johannes', 47.

to the false teachers referred to in the Pastorals and John's letters.³⁹

To the best of my knowledge, the studies Lütgert conducted on these earliest writings by church fathers have not been taken up in scholarly discussion, although their content lies not far from the present-day consensus.

7. Romans: Antinomianism, Anti-Semitism, and Revolution

In 1913 Lütgert continued his investigation of New Testament books by addressing Romans.⁴⁰ Lütgert assumed that Romans defends against many misunderstandings prevalent among Gentile Christians. Otto Michel briefly summarized Lütgert's concerns:

According to W. Lütgert it is incorrect to understand Romans only in an anti-Jewish sense. Many remarks (e.g. Rom 3:31; 8:4; 13:8–10) teach a positive evaluation of the law and appear completely inexplicable in an anti-Jewish sense. It is more probable that Paul had to address a Gentile antinomianism. Indeed the Apostle himself stood under suspicion of being a participant in the emergence of this antinomianism (Rom 3:1–8). That Romans 6 is directed against libertine tendencies is generally admitted. Romans 9–11 captures a more lively picture, if one understands this section historically and assumes an anti-Semitic Christian-

ity that enjoys a haughty disdain of Israel.⁴¹

Lütgert himself summarized the results of his study as follows:

Romans is meant to protect the predominantly Gentile church in Rome from an antinomian Christianity, which at the same time joins a disdain for Israel and a Jewish-Christian lack of freedom and feeds revolutionary tendencies in the church. This Christianity is rampant in the Gentile churches, initially invoking Paul but already having begun to move in opposition to him. Paul therefore has reason to demarcate the Gospel with respect to what these people were saying, to warn the Roman church about them, and in so doing to ensure acceptance which is necessary for effectiveness in the Roman church. From this it can be explained why he emphatically expresses his positive stance in Romans towards the law and why he gives his teaching on grace the form of a teaching on justification. With this approach his positive relationship to the law can be absorbed into his teaching on grace. ... Paul is compelled to embrace the law and Jewish Christianity against Gentile Christians.⁴²

In Romans, therefore, Paul addresses disdain for the law (antinomianism⁴³), disdain for Israel (anti-Semitism⁴⁴), and revolutionary tendencies in the Roman church.⁴⁵ With the third

Urchristentums (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1911), 153.

³⁹ Lütgert, 'Die Separation', 137, 163–64.

⁴⁰ Wilhelm Lütgert, *Der Römerbrief als historisches Problem* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1913).

⁴¹ Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 40.

⁴² Lütgert, *Der Römerbrief*, 111–12.

⁴³ Lütgert, *Der Römerbrief*, 69–79.

⁴⁴ Lütgert, *Der Römerbrief*, 79–90.

⁴⁵ Lütgert, *Der Römerbrief*, 98–111.

point, Romans 13:1–7 receives its natural place, as does the end of chapter 12. Based on the first two points, there is reason to clarify the relationship between the Gentile Christian church and Old Testament revelation. Romans 9–11 then becomes a truly integral component of Romans.

8. Galatians: Law and Spirit

The culmination of Lütgert's studies regarding the opponents in New Testament letters is surely his 1919 study of Galatians, 'Law and Spirit'.⁴⁶ A central passage for Lütgert is Galatians 5:13. The Galatians are 'called to be free', but must 'not use ... freedom to indulge the sinful nature' but 'rather, serve one another in love.'

Galatians itself reports on controversy in the church. The clearest example is Galatians 5:15: 'If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.'⁴⁷ It is unlikely that this passage deals simply with personal quarrels between individual church members, but rather it presumably involves disputes about the stance towards Old Testament law. The same applies to Galatians 5:26: 'Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.'

Since the Galatian church consisted predominantly of Gentile Christians but Jewish-Christian problems were also prevalent, it stands to reason that the letter would address the false teaching of both Jewish and Gentile opponents.⁴⁸

It is unlikely that a largely Jewish-Christian church would have opened itself completely to the Jewish temptation. If, however, some Gentile Christians had followed the Jewish corrupters and others rejected the Jewish temptation—not necessarily with Apostolic arguments—then that would explain why the letter speaks repeatedly about contention among believers.⁴⁹

Only a part of the church is addressed in Galatians 3:1, where Paul refers to 'you who are spiritual'.⁵⁰ Here we are dealing with Christians who consider themselves more spiritual than the rest of the church. Theodore Zahn⁵¹ called this group 'spiritualists', correctly equating them with the 'strong' Gentile Christians in Romans 14–15 who elevate themselves above the 'weak' Jewish Christians.

Lütgert's view of Galatians was taken up by James Hardy Ropes⁵² in 1929 and Frederic R. Crownfield⁵³ in 1945. The fact that Paul did not rescind the validity of the moral law was confirmed by the Swedish Lutheran Ragnar Bring in his commentary on Galatians.⁵⁴

49 Lütgert, *Gesetz und Geist*, 11.

50 Lütgert, *Gesetz und Geist*, 12–13.

51 Theodor Zahn, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Galater* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1922, rpt. 1990), 270–72; Lütgert refers to Zahn in *Gesetz und Geist*, 13–14.

52 James Hardy Ropes, 'The Singular Problem of the Epistle to the Galatians', *Harvard Theological Studies* 14 (1929).

53 Frederic R. Crownfield, 'The Singular Problem of the Dual Galatians', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 64 (1965): 491–500.

54 Ragnar Bring, *Commentary on Galatians* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961).

46 Wilhelm Lütgert, *Gesetz und Geist: Eine Untersuchung zur Vorgeschichte des Galaterbriefes* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1919).

47 See Lütgert, *Gesetz und Geist*, 9.

48 Lütgert, *Gesetz und Geist*, 9–11.

IV. Reactions to Lütgert

The reactions to Lütgert have varied greatly. The most heated response concerned his view of the Corinthian letters; his work on Romans was the least disputed. That result may have been affected by the fact that Adolf Schlatter relied on Lütgert's work in his monumental commentary on the Corinthian letters. Though Schlatter made considerable new contributions, he adopted Lütgert's description of Paul's opponents as enthusiasts.⁵⁵

In 2001 Michael D. Goulder acknowledged that Lütgert had a central place in investigations of the Corinthian letters,⁵⁶ although he took a different position in his designation of the Christ party.⁵⁷ As Goulder saw it, Lütgert in 1908 was the first to exhaustively criticize Baur's reconstruction of the parties in the early church:

Lütgert's analysis convinced many and is a basis for the modern discussion of the two letters, even if parts of it have been discarded. It is on account of his sharp thinking that the Tübingen theory lost its position among the wise and those in the know.⁵⁸

In 1995 Will Deming described

Lütgert's interpretation of the Corinthian letters as a radical change, writing, 'In one way or the other Lütgert's explanation has received broad support.'⁵⁹ According to Deming, Lütgert's convincing insight was to trace libertinism and asceticism back to the same source. To Deming, Lütgert's viewpoint and later variations of it were eventually substituted by Ernst Käsemann's similar thesis that not Gnostic but rather apocalyptic movements related to 'realized eschatology' were in the background of these letters. Deming himself supported Käsemann in his critique of Lütgert's viewpoint.⁶⁰

V. The Gnosis Discussion

A longstanding discussion in religious studies, as well as in research on the New Testament and the early church, concerns the question of 'Gnosis.' According to Adolf Harnack,⁶¹ this was a Christian heresy that emerged out of Judaism and Christianity. For the representatives of the so-called history-of-religions school, it was an independent pre-Christian and non-

⁵⁵ Adolf Schlatter, *Paulus, Der Bote Jesu: Eine Deutung seiner Briefe an die Korinther* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1969), 42, cf. 20–46; Schlatter, *Die Theologie der Apostel* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1922, rpt. 1997), 403–32.

⁵⁶ Michael D. Goulder, *Paul and the Competing Mission in Corinth*, (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 2001), 13–15, 25–29.

⁵⁷ Goulder, *Paul and the Competing Mission*, 27–29.

⁵⁸ Goulder, *Paul and the Competing Mission*, 14.

⁵⁹ Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 22..

⁶⁰ Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy*, 31–32. As a further example of a newer appraisal of Lütgert's studies of Paul's opponents, see Robert Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms: A Study in Their Use in Conflict Settings* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 19–20.

⁶¹ Adolf von Harnack, 'Rezension über: Wilhelm Bousset, Hauptprobleme der Gnosis' (originally published 1908), in Kurt Rudolph (ed.), *Gnosis und Gnostizismus* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), 231–37.

Christian religion that then became mixed with Christianity. With respect to the New Testament, there was the additional question of whether a first-century Gnostic religion influenced Christianity and in particular Paul, or whether the New Testament, especially Paul, fought vehemently against this impulse. Primarily Rudolf Bultmann and his students held the former view; in theology Walter Schmithals is above all associated with the latter position, and in religious studies the leading name is Kurt Rudolph.⁶² Theologian Martin Hengel is associated with the denial of the latter position.⁶³

With all due respect to Hengel's arguments, he can maintain his view only on the basis of a late dating of several New Testament writings. The famous warning in 1 Timothy 6:20–21 against 'what is falsely called knowledge' is, for Hengel as well as for Lütgert, directed against Gnostics. However, contrary to Lütgert, the warning is not Pauline: 'The earliest evidence for a Christian "Gnosis", 1 Timothy 6:20, belongs in the beginning of the second century.' Hengel dates the book in 110–120 AD, and he does the same with Ignatius's letters.⁶⁴

The question of the origins of Gnosticism is nowadays farther away than ever from being cleared up.

Hans-Martin Schenke correctly wondered whether, in light of the controversies and breadth of the textual findings, a summary presentation of Gnosis is possible.⁶⁵ H. J. W. Drijvers declared, after modern discoveries of many new sources relating to Gnosis, 'The problem of the origins of Gnosticism is today one of the most disputed questions in the field of religious studies.'⁶⁶

Lütgert is responsible for initiating the discussion of the relationship between Gnosis and the New Testament. It is for this reason that Bultmann, of all people, interacted with him extensively.⁶⁷ But Lütgert had nothing to do with the viewpoint that Paul himself was influenced by Gnosis, since he implicitly rejected it. Philosopher Hans Leisegang wrote in 1924, in his classic presentation of Gnosis, that the gospels 'were all more or less filled and infiltrated with Gnostic motives' and that 'the apostle Paul lived in the world view of Gnosis and thought along its lines.'⁶⁸ In 1927

⁶⁵ Hans-Martin Schenke; 'Hauptprobleme der Gnosis' (originally published 1965), in Kurt Rudolph (ed.), *Gnosis und Gnostizismus* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), 586.

⁶⁶ H. J. W. Drijvers, 'Die Ursprünge des Gnostizismus als religionsgeschichtliches Problem', in Rudolph (ed.), *Gnosis und Gnostizismus*. 841.

⁶⁷ See Walter Schmithals, *Die Gnosis in Korinth: Eine Untersuchung zu den Korintherbriefen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965, revised 1969), 113–16; Schmithals. *Neues Testament und Gnosis* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984), 25, 29–30 on Lütgert and Adolf Schlatter's significance to Bultmann and the Bultmann school's critique of Lütgert.

⁶⁸ Hans Leisegang, *Die Gnosis* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1924, rpt. 1985), 2–3; see also Hans

⁶² Kurt Rudolph. *Gnosis: Wesen und Geschichte einer spätantiken Religion* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990).

⁶³ Martin Hengel, 'Paulus und die Frage einer vorchristlichen Gnosis', in his *Kleinere Schriften 3: Paulus und Jakobus*. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 473–510. The most important literature is mentioned in the notes on pp. 474–76.

⁶⁴ Hengel, 'Paulus', 492.

Richard Reitzenstein named Paul 'not the first, but arguably the greatest of all Gnostics'.⁶⁹ For Lütgert, in contrast, it was beyond question that Paul was the greatest debunker of Gnosis.

As far as Lütgert is concerned, the concepts 'Gnosis' and 'Gnostic' have no relationship to Gnosis in church history. He does not mention any precursors of later movements. To consider his position disproved by subsequent research would do him an injustice. For Lütgert, 'Gnostic' describes a movement in which the acts of God or salvific revelation but rather a higher knowledge is at the centre. Here is his definition: 'With the Corinthian church we have for the first time Gnosticism in the sense that Gnosis surpasses faith, with that Gnosis based on revelation so that the possession of it makes for Christian perfection, the essence of Christianity.'⁷⁰

As Hengel correctly indicates, the idea of Gnosis was not precisely defined until around 1960, and before that point various meanings were attached to the notion. Not until Schmithals was the term defined more precisely.⁷¹ One should not look at Lütgert's writings prior to World War I in light of the discussions that occurred between the World Wars or since 1960, although Lütgert played a large part in initiating the discussions surrounding the relationship between Gnosis and the New Testament. Lütgert's outlook can be reconciled with Hengel as well as with Schmithals; in contrast, Bultmann's view that Paul

was himself a Gnostic was an abuse of Lütgert's position. For Lütgert it was clear that Paul fought relentlessly against Gnosis everywhere.

Whether one describes Paul's opponents as Gnostic, proto-Gnostic, libertine or antinomian (all of which notions are contestable in one way or another) does not alone decide what these opponents stood for. The most important issue is what they advocated or what Paul opposed, even if the origin of these perceptions is not always clear. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 6:16–20 some people visited prostitutes without seeing themselves as having breached God's will, while others practiced sexual abstinence in marriage. These circumstances are important for our exegesis as well as for our systematic theological evaluation, regardless of whether we can reconstruct the provenance of the points of view and find the exact terms to describe them.

At the time of 1 Corinthians, the church in Corinth was divided with respect to numerous questions. One person did not eat meat sacrificed to idols, and another participated in an observance of an idol in order to eat this meat. One individual favoured sexual laxness, whereas another rejected even sexuality in marriage. Paul, however, practically never conceded a point to one or the other Corinthian party. He equally admonished both parties in Corinth, since neither opinion corresponded to godly thinking. This undisputed initial position should play a much larger role in the overall interpretation of the letter as well as in doctrinal evaluation, instead of getting lost in the question of the anterior historical reconstruction.

Leisegang, *Denkformen*. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1928), 87–127.

69 Quoted by Hengel, 'Paulus', 473.

70 Lütgert, 'Freiheitspredigt', 134.

71 Lütgert, 'Freiheitspredigt', 474.

VI. Law and Freedom

Lütgert also supported the principle of law and freedom outside of theology, even if he initially derived the principle from theology. In his 1917 lecture 'Law and Freedom', delivered when he assumed the position of rector at the University of Halle-Wittenberg, he made the following statement, which summarized his world view: 'Law and freedom are the two poles, the two focal points of our lives. Neither of the two lets itself be reduced to the other. Such a duality points to a uniform will, which re-

veals itself in both of these norms.'⁷²

I believe that the necessity of defending the Christian faith against legalism as well as lawlessness, which Lütgert demonstrates to be a central theme in many New Testament documents, remains an important legacy for evangelical theology, which continues to find itself struggling on these same two fronts.

⁷² Wilhelm Lütgert, 'Gesetz und Freiheit', *Hallische Universitätsreden 6* (Halle an der Saale: Max Niemeyer, 1917), 18.