GOD’S SELECT VESSEL AND CHOSEN INSTRUMENT:
THE INTERPRETATION OF PAUL IN LATE REFORMATION
LUTHERAN THEOLOGIANS

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In the preface to his Galatians commentary Christoph Corner, professor of theology at Frankfurt/Oder, asserted that the church must always hold firmly to the teaching Paul so magnificently presents, that salvation comes through faith. Martin Luther had given this teaching of Paul to the church anew, Corner was convinced.1 Luther had invited Christians to take a fresh look at the apostle, Corner believed as the apostle wanted to be read. This conviction reflected the belief of all in the Wittenberg circle that had grown out of Luther’s reform. Paul served as an important partner in the conversation which theologians and preachers from Luther’s school conducted with hearers and readers. All in the Wittenberg circle regarded Paul as, to quote Matthias Flacius, “God’s select vessel and chosen instrument” (Acts 9:15).2

In the second half of the sixteenth century Lutheran preachers and professors alike took the Pauline texts as sources for their application of the biblical message to their people, mining them with the aid of Philip Melanchthon’s rhetoric and dialectic. They paid relatively little attention to Paul’s person though displayed some interest in his biography. Their use of the Pauline corpus fell into three categories. First, Paul provided at least part of the basis for significant parts—though not all!—of their public teaching, above all on the justification of the sinner through faith in Christ but also on many other doctrinal topics. Second, the apostle supplied material from which they constructed their

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1 Epistola D. Pavli ad Galatas scripta, eisqve partivm et Argumentorum dispositio . . . (Heidelberg, 1583), fol. [5b].
ethics. Third, the Pauline corpus contributed significant elements of their new definition of the pastoral office.

Paul’s words flowed from his epistles into a wide variety of genre, including sermons and sermon books, devotional writings, doctrinal and political treatises, and, of course, provided the subject matter for commentaries. Commentaries emerged almost always from lectures given to students preparing them for parish ministry though Mansfeld pastor Cyriakus Spangenberg created his German commentary series as he preached to his congregation. Although Luther’s and Melanchthon’s students disagreed with each other fiercely over some aspects of the proper interpretation of the Wittenberg legacy, and occasionally made their treatment of Paul a platform for criticizing their colleagues’ views, they agreed fundamentally on Paul’s person, authority, and his central message, justification. As they constructed a new way of thinking dogmatically on Scripture texts, they constructed new catenae of Bible passages to support their teaching, with Paul playing a prominent role in that process (although it is inaccurate to suggest that Paul dominated the doctrinal writings of the second and third generation of the Wittenberg circle to the exclusion of other biblical authors). The Syntagma Novi Testamenti of Johannes Wigand and Matthaeus Judex, the first Protestant biblical theology, obviously had to cite Paul in its topical summary of New Testament epistles, but they also cited Peter, John, James and Hebrews. Such dogmatic works invite a separate investigation of Paul’s influence on Lutheran theologizing; this essay focuses on expositions of the Pauline corpus in commentaries and postils.

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3 For instance, Pauline writings could serve instructors as an aid in practicing Latin while reviewing the fundamentals of faith. Leonhard Cullmann, In Divi Pauli ad Titum epistolam quæstiones pro triviálibus scholis… (Nuremberg, 1546).

4 Major, Primus tomus operum… Georgii Maioris Continens enarrationes epistolurum S. Pauli… (Wittenberg, 1569), I:384; Selnecker, In omnes epistolas D. Pauli apostoli Commentarius plenissimus (Leipzig, 1595), fol. (3a).

5 Ausslegung der Ersten Acht Capitel der Episteln S. Pauli an die Ro[e]mer (Strassburg, 1566); Ausslegung der Letzten Acht Capitel der Episteln S. PAULI an die Ro[e]mer (Strassburg, 1569); Die erste Epistel S. Pauli an die Corinthier (Frankfurt/Main, 1561); Die ander Epistel Pauli an die Corinthier (Strassburg, 1563); Die erste und andere Episteln des heyligen Apostels S. Pauli an die Thessalonicer (Strassburg, 1564); Die erste Epistel Pauli an Timotheum (Strassburg, 1564); Die Epistel S. Pauli an Titum (Strassburg, 1564).


7 Συνταγμα, seu Corpus doctrinae Chrishi, ex novo testamento… congestum (Basel, 1563).