THE RECEPTION OF PAUL IN HEIDELBERG: 
THE PAULINE COMMENTARIES OF CASPAR OLEVIANUS

R. Scott Clark

Introduction

For a variety of historiographic reasons, the Heidelberg Calvinists have not always received the attention they deserve. In fact, however, that small coetus gathered by the Elector Frederick III from 1559 to 1575 and later scattered west to Neustadt an der Weinstrasse and north to Herborn, played a significant role not only in the development of late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century Reformed theology but also in international politics and political theory in the period between the Pax Augustana and the Thirty-Years War. Though scholarly attention tends to focus on Geneva, many students went to the Palatinate and later to Neustadt and Herborn (just outside the Palatinate) to study Reformed theology from the early 1560s to 1618.

Those students were attracted by a constellation of stars including Caspar Olevianus (1536–87) and Zacharias Ursinus (1534–83) famous for their role in the creation of the Heidelberg Catechism; Petrus Dathenus (c.1531–88), Girolamo Zanchi (1516–90), Immanuel Tremellius (1510–80), Daniel Tossanus (1541–1602), Pierre Boquin (d.1582), and others. Caspar Olevianus, upon whom this essay is focused, is best known today for his role in the development of the Heidelberg Catechism and Reformed federal (or covenant) theology, but in his own time, he was just as well known for other works. He was also known as a commentator on the Apostles’ Creed (he wrote three such commentaries) and as biblical commentator. Among his biblical commentaries, he focused most of his attention upon the Pauline Epistles, writing and

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1 E.g. Johann Casmir (1543–92), third son of Frederick III, was a major Protestant political and military leader. It was he who established Ursinus’ school in Neustadt as the Collegium Casmirianum. Herborn produced a major political theorist, Johannes Althusius (1557–1638), most famous for his Politica, methodice digesta et exemplis sacris et profanis illustrata (Herborn, 1603).
publishing commentaries on Galatians (1578), Romans (1579), Philippians (1580), and Colossians (1580).² The last, on Ephesians (1588) was published posthumously by his son, Paul.³

Method, Literature, and Thesis

Considered cumulatively, Olevianus produced over 1200 octavo pages of Latin commentary on five Pauline epistles.⁴ Since it is not possible to survey this body of literature comprehensively, the scope of this essay shall be limited to considering Olevian’s stance toward each of the Pauline epistles on which he commented. This essay will proceed by comparing primarily the first chapters from each of the commentaries where he set forth his exegetical, hermeneutical, and theological agenda for each epistle.

Considered generally, Olevianus exerted considerable influence on the shape of Reformed theology. As a teacher and pastor in Heidelberg and Herborn he taught hundreds of students who transmitted his ideas across Europe and Britain. Among academic writers from the 17th century to the present Olevianus has been pigeon-holed as a “covenant” or “federal” theologian.⁵ He has been cited mainly in general terms or in reference to his covenant theology or his alleged views on active obedience.⁶ Non-academic readers would have had most ready access


³ Caspar Olevianus, In epistolam d. Pauli Apostoli ad Ephesios notae (Herborn, 1588).

⁴ Olevianus did not doubt the Pauline authorship of any of these epistles. Because this is an historical essay, it is anachronistic to introduce modern source-critical questions concerning Pauline authorship. Therefore, I refer to these epistles as Olevianus considered them.


⁶ E.g. Matthias Martini, Methodus s.s. theologiae, in quattuor libellos divisa (Herborn, 1603), p. 472. Following Piscator, Peter van Mastricht classed Olevianus with Piscator and Karg as one who denied the imputation of active obedience. See Peter Van Mastricht, Theoretico-practica theologia (Utrecht, 1699), p. 711.