

Martin Luther and the Divorce-Remarriage Controversy

by William V. Beasley

Because of his misunderstanding of justification, and the gospel of Jesus Christ, Martin Luther believed that there was a conflict between the writings of the Apostle Paul and the little epistle of James. The writings of Paul were, in Martin Luther's estimation, evangelical and ought to be in the canon of Scripture. In contrast, the Epistle of James, in Luther's view, was at best deuterocanonical (secondary) and at worst the product of the mind of man.

Martin Luther's estimate of the Epistle of James can readily be seen in quotations from his pen (as quoted by R.C.H. Lenski, a Lutheran, in his commentary, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and The Epistle of James*): "If one wants to preach the gospel, it must, in short, be on the resurrection of Christ. He who does not do that is no apostle; for this is the main part of the gospel. And those are the right, noblest books, which teach and impress this, as stated above. Hence one can well feel that the Epistle of James is not right apostolic epistle, for there is hardly a thing of this in it Therefore St. James's Epistle is a right strawy epistle . . . compared with them (i.e., John's Gospel, Paul's Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and First Peter), for it bears no evangelical character But this James does no more than drive to the law and its works, and in a disorderly way throws one thing into another, so that I imagine it was some good pious man, or other who took up a few statements from the disciples of the apostle and so threw them on paper, or perhaps out of his sermon the thing was composed by another" (Lenski 515).

Although a Lutheran, Mr. Lenski recognized that Martin Luther was a mere man subject to error. "Nowhere in the New Testament is there a tract of conflict between James and any of the apostles, including in particular Paul James and Paul, like the Twelve, are in fullest agreement on the doctrine of justification. Those who assume a conflict between James and Paul regarding this doctrine do not properly understand James 2:14-26 and often also Paul's teaching" (Lenski 510). To these words from the pen of Mr. Lenski, I would offer a hardy "Amen." We might disagree as to proper understanding of the writings of James and Paul, but would agree that misunderstanding might well be the reason for believing that there is a controversy between Paul and James.

Martin Luther's doctrine of justification was more important to him than was the truth of God, revealed in the Epistle of James. It was indeed "Martin Luther's doctrine" or else there would not have been a conflict, in his mind, between Paul and James. While there is no conflict between Paul and James, there was certainly a controversy between James and "Martin Luther's doctrine." Instead of being taught of God, through the Epistle of James, Martin Luther rejected the Epistle of James as a strawy epistle or the product of the mind of a second or third generation Christian.

What does all this have to do with the Divorce-Remarriage controversy? Absolutely nothing, except for the attitude of Martin Luther toward that portion of God's word which was in conflict with his (mis)understanding of doctrine. Today there are members of the church who know that Matthew 5:31-32; 19:9 are in conflict with their (mis)understanding of the doctrine of Divorce/Remarriage, so they, like Luther, must reject the source of the conflict. So far as I know, no one has called the Gospel of Matthew a strawy gospel, but there are some who have decided that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are Old Testament books, and, therefore, not binding upon the Christian today. Instead of being taught of God, through the Gospel of Matthew, some reject the relevancy of the Gospel of Matthew labeling it an Old Testament book. If the gospels are Old Testament books, these Old Testament books were written after Jesus had fulfilled the law of Moses and had, by his fulfillment thereof, nailed the "bond written in ordinances that was against us" to the cross (Col. 2:14).

Please note that I have, at no time in this article, questioned the honesty of Martin Luther or the integrity of my brethren. Being honest and sincere does not, as we should all know, determine the validity of what is taught.