

*Sheba Blake Publishing Corp.*

# A TREATISE ON GOOD WORKS

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**MARTIN LUTHER**

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*Martin Luther asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.*

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## *Introduction*

The Occasion of the Work. — Luther did not impose himself as reformer upon the Church. In the course of a conscientious performance of the duties of his office, to which he had been regularly and divinely called, and without any urging on his part, he attained to this position by inward necessity. In 1515 he received his appointment as the standing substitute for the sickly city pastor, Simon Heinse, from the city council of Wittenberg. Before this time he was obliged to preach only occasionally in the convent, apart from his activity as teacher in the University and convent. Through this appointment he was in duty bound, by divine and human right, to lead and direct the congregation at Wittenberg on the true way to life, and it would have been a denial of the knowledge of salvation which God had led him to acquire, by way of ardent inner struggles, if he had led the congregation on any other way than the one God had revealed to him in His Word. He could not deny before the congregation which had been intrusted to his care, what up to this time he had taught with ever increasing clearness in his lectures at the University — for in the lectures on the Psalms, which he began to deliver in 1513, he declares his conviction that faith alone justifies, as can be seen from the complete manuscript, published since 1885, and with still greater clearness from his Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (1515-1516), which is accessible since 1908; nor what he had urged as spiritual adviser of his convent brethren when in deep distress — compare the charming letter to Georg Spenlein, dated April 8, 1516.

Luther's first literary works to appear in print were also occasioned by the work of his calling and of his office in the Wittenberg congregation. He had no other object in view than to edify his congregation and to lead it to Christ when, in 1517, he published his first independent work, the Explanation of the Seven Penitential Psalms. On Oct 31 of the same year he published his 95 Theses against Indulgences. These were indeed intended as controversial theses for theologians, but at the same time it is well known that Luther was moved by his duty toward his congregation to declare his position in this matter and to put in issue the whole question as to the right and wrong of indulgences by means of his theses. His sermon Of Indulgences and Grace, occasioned by Tetzel's attack and delivered in the latter part of March, 1518, as well as his sermon Of Penitence, delivered about the same time, were also intended for his congregation. Before his congregation (Sept., 1516-Feb., 1517) he delivered the Sermons on the Ten Commandments, which were published in 1518 and the Sermons on the Lord's Prayer, which were also published in 1518 by Agricola. Though Luther in the same year published a series of controversial writings, which were occasioned by attacks from outside sources, viz., the *Resolutiones disputationis de Virtute indulgentiarum*, the *Asterisci adversus obeliscos Joh. Eccii*, and the *Ad dialogum Silv. Prieriatis responsio*, still he never was diverted by this necessary rebuttal from his paramount duty, the edification of the congregation. The autumn of the year 1518, when he was confronted with Cajetan, as well as the whole year of 1519, when he held his disputations with Eck, etc., were replete with disquietude and pressing labors; still Luther served his congregation with a whole series of writings during this time, and only regretted that he was not entirely at its disposal. Of such writings we mention: Explanation of the Lord's Prayer for the simple Laity (an elaboration of the sermons of 1517); Brief Explanation of

the Ten Commandments; Instruction concerning certain Articles, which might be ascribed and imputed to him by his adversaries; Brief Instruction how to Confess; Of Meditation on the Sacred Passion of Christ; Of Twofold Righteousness; Of the Matrimonial Estate; Brief Form to understand and to pray the Lord's Prayer; Explanation of the Lord's Prayer "vor sich und hinter sich"; Of Prayer and Processions in Rogation Week; Of Usury; Of the Sacrament of Penitence; Of Preparation for Death; Of the Sacrament of Baptism; Of the Sacrament of the Sacred Body; Of Excommunication. With but few exceptions these writings all appeared in print in the year 1519, and again it was the congregation which Luther sought primarily to serve. If the bounds of his congregation spread ever wider beyond Wittenberg, so that his writings found a surprisingly ready sale, even afar, that was not Luther's fault. Even the *Tessaradecas consolatoria*, written in 1519 and printed in 1520, a book of consolation, which was originally intended for the sick Elector of Saxony, was written by him only upon solicitation from outside sources.

To this circle of writings the treatise *Of Good Works* also belongs. Though the incentive for its composition came from George Spalatin, court-preacher to the Elector, who reminded Luther of a promise he had given, still Luther was willing to undertake it only when he recalled that in a previous sermon to his congregation he occasionally had made a similar promise to deliver a sermon on good works; and when Luther actually commenced the composition he had nothing else in view but the preparation of a sermon for his congregation on this important topic.

But while the work was in progress the material so accumulated that it far outgrew the bounds of a sermon for his congregation. On March 25. he wrote to Spalatin that it would become a whole booklet instead of a sermon; on May 5. he again emphasizes the growth of the material; on May 13. he speaks of its

completion at an early date, and on June 8. he could send Melanchthon a printed copy. It was entitled: Von den guten werckenn: D. M. L. Vuittenberg. On the last page it bore the printer's mark: Getruck zu Wittenberg bey dem iungen Melchior Lotther. Im Tausent funfhundert vnnd zweyntzigsten Jar. It filled not less than 58 leaves, quarto. In spite of its volume, however, the intention of the book for the congregation remained, now however, not only for the narrow circle of the Wittenberg congregation, but for the Christian layman in general. In the dedicatory preface Luther lays the greatest stress upon this, for he writes: "Though I know of a great many, and must hear it daily, who think lightly of my poverty and say that I write only small Sexternlein (tracts of small volume) and German sermons for the untaught laity, I will not permit that to move me. Would to God that during my life I had served but one layman for his betterment with all my powers; it would be sufficient for me, I would thank God and suffer all my books to perish thereafter.... Most willingly I will leave the honor of greater things to others, and not at all will I be ashamed of preaching and writing German to the untaught laity."

Since Luther had dedicated the afore-mentioned Tessaradecas consolatoria to the reigning Prince, he now, probably on Spalatin's recommendation, dedicated the Treatise on Good Works to his brother John, who afterward, in 1525, succeeded Frederick in the Electorate. There was probably good reason for dedicating the book to a member of the reigning house. Princes have reason to take a special interest in the fact that preaching on good works should occur within their realm, for the safety and sane development of their kingdom depend largely upon the cultivation of morality on the part of their subjects. Time and again the papal church had commended herself to princes and statesmen by her emphatic teaching of good works. Luther, on the other

hand, had been accused — like the Apostle Paul before him (Rom. 3 31) — that the zealous performance of good works had abated, that the bonds of discipline had slackened and that, as a necessary consequence, lawlessness and shameless immorality were being promoted by his doctrine of justification by faith alone. Before 1517 the rumor had already spread that Luther intended to do away with good works. Duke George of Saxony had received no good impression from a sermon Luther had delivered at Dresden, because he feared the consequences which Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone might have upon the morals of the masses. Under these circumstances it would not have been surprising if a member of the Electoral house should harbor like scruples, especially since the full comprehension of Luther's preaching on good works depended on an evangelical understanding of faith, as deep as was Luther's own. The Middle Ages had differentiated between *fides informis*, a formless faith, and *fides formata* or *informata*, a formed or ornate faith. The former was held to be a knowledge without any life or effect, the latter to be identical with love for, as they said, love which proves itself and is effective in good works must be added to the formless faith, as its complement and its content, well pleasing to God. In Luther's time every one who was seriously interested in religious questions was reared under the influence of these ideas.

Now, since Luther had opposed the doctrine of justification by love and its good works, he was in danger of being misunderstood by strangers, as though he held the bare knowledge and assent to be sufficient for justification, and such preaching would indeed have led to frivolity and disorderly conduct. But even apart from the question whether or not the brother of the Elector was disturbed by such scruples, Luther must have welcomed the opportunity, when the summons came to him, to dedicate his book *Of Good Works* to a member of the Electoral house. At any rate the book could serve to acquaint him with