

He selected one of them, which he thought would be understandable to more sections of the country than any other, and took it as the basic form of speech for his translation. Then he selected from various dialects features that would be best suited to the clear presentation of the Word of God. Luther's translation became the foundation of modern German. It is interesting to read the writings of one of Luther's great antagonists, the monk Tetzl, and to compare his style with the style of Luther's writings. Anyone who can read German today can understand most of what Luther wrote. But one who knows German only as it is used in the 20th Century would find Tetzl's writings very hard to understand. The German language, like all living languages, has changed greatly in the last four centuries, but Luther already had moved a long distance in the direction in which the language itself was to move. Luther's translation had a tremendous influence upon the German language and upon German thought, and also upon the thought of all Protestant nations. When the King James Version of the Bible was published it was stated on the title page that in making the translation the ideas of the translators had been carefully compared with the German at every point. Thus recognition was given to the long years of labor that Luther devoted to this great task. To the very end of his life Luther was constantly working at the task of finding the best possible way of expressing the precise thought of the Greek New Testament and the Hebrew Old Testament in understandable German. He issued edition after edition of the Bible.

Not long before the end of Luther's life someone told him of a plan to issue a complete edition of all his works. Luther opposed the idea. He said that his writings were only the expression of human ideas. "Do not reprint them," he said. "Reprint the Bible. That is where you find the truth of God. Let my writings perish. Let the Word of God be published and distributed as widely as possible."

It is customary among those who do not accept the historic Christian idea of the inerrancy and infallibility of the Word of God to try to make it appear that Luther felt that he could discard certain portions of the Bible. The particular point of attack is the Book of James. Luther is often quoted as having made two statements derogatory to this book. One of these is that he called it "an epistle of straw." The other is that he said that he would throw the Book of James into the Tiber.

On two quotations from a man we should not discard the clear emphasis of his life as shown by the attitude that he expressed so frequently regarding his absolute confidence in the Word of God. However, we do not have to content ourselves with merely saying this. We must look further into the nature of what Luther said about the Book of James. First let us notice the source of these quotations. In the latter part of his life Luther entertained many guests at his large home in Wittenberg. There would nearly always be quite a number of people at the table. After the meal was over Luther would often talk freely on many different subjects. He was a great character and his remarks on

almost any subject were interesting. A man who visited there for quite a time was so impressed with Luther's casual remarks that he made a practice, after he would go to his room, of writing down all that he could remember of what Luther had said. Eventually these statements were put together into a book called Luther's Table Talk. The two statements that have been quoted about the Book of James come from this source. We have no certainty that what the man remembered afterwards was precisely what Luther had said. There is no doubt, however, that he occasionally spoke about the Book of James in a way to show that he felt it to be in some way less important than certain other books of the New Testament.

Then, too, it must be remembered that Luther was of peasant extraction. He knew the language of the common people. His sermons were very popular because they put great truths in such simple language that everyone could understand. Sometimes he would use very strong language. To know exactly what he meant, one should compare his remarks with other statements of his on the same subjects. In every edition of the New Testament that he published Luther always included the Book of James. This makes it perfectly clear that he never questioned that James was a part of the Word of God. He never suggested that it was in any way less true, less dependable, or less inerrant than any other book of the Bible. His criticism was that it did not stress truths that he felt particularly vital at his time. The epistles of Paul stress the great truths of salvation. These are tremendously important as the very foundation of the Christian life. Much of the Epistle of James is devoted to emphasizing the importance of certain aspects of the Christian walk and the necessity of carefully avoiding various types of subtle temptation. There is no evidence that Luther ever questioned that this is a true and inerrant portion of the Word of God. He did consider it less important, or at least less primary, than certain other parts of the New Testament. If one were to take this epistle by itself, and to ignore those portions of the New Testament where the foundation truths of salvation are developed more at length he might reach false conclusions. For this reason Luther may once have called it "an epistle of straw." He may once have said that he would throw it into the Tiber, meaning by this remark that those who were holding to a mere religion of ceremonies and who were seeking to win salvation by works were wrongly building on this epistle, taken by itself and not interpreted in relation to other equally true writings. The attempt to use these two brief statements to offset the solid emphases of Luther's life is quite mistaken. Over and over again Luther stressed the fundamental authority and primacy of God's Word. One does not find in Luther or Calvin any denial of the inerrancy of the Bible. It is only by taking sentences out of context and interpreting them in a way different from what their authors actually meant that such a claim can be advanced.

We have looked at two great emphases of Luther's life. We have seen his great realization of the terrible nature of sin as something that must be dealt with