

11-1-1931

De Servo Arbitrio

Th Engelder

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Engelder, Th (1931) "De Servo Arbitrio," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 2 , Article 88.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol2/iss1/88>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

De Servo Arbitrio.¹⁾

A review of this book in the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY does not call for a discussion of its contents. *De Servo Arbitrio* has been sufficiently reviewed along those lines for the past four hundred years. Since its publication in 1525 it has stood in the forefront of theological discussion. Luther himself reviewed it in 1537 and wrote to Wolfgang Fabricius Capito: "I am much averse to having a collection of my books published and do not care to lend a hand to it; rather would I, impelled by a Saturnian craving, have them all destroyed. For I do not recognize any of them as fully expressing my thoughts, with the possible exception of the *Bondage of the Will* and the Catechism." (St. L. Ed., XVIII, 66.) "Luther himself considered it his best production," says Atherton, Preface, p. 7. The Formula of Concord also reviewed it favorably. "Even so Dr. Luther wrote of this matter also in his book *De Servo Arbitrio, i. e., of the Captive Will of Man*, in opposition to Erasmus and elucidated and supported this position well and thoroughly; . . . to which we also hereby appeal and refer others." (*Triglotta*, p. 897.) The Fathers of Trent had also studied it thoroughly, and what they thought of the statement on page 139: "'Free will' is a mere empty term, whose reality is lost," and similar statements occurring in the other writings of Luther they have set down in Canon V, Sess. VI: "If any one saith that since Adam's sin the free will of man is lost and extinguished or that it is a thing with only a name, yea, a name without reality, in fine, introduced into the Church by Satan, let him be anathema." The condemnation of this book by Rome is its strongest commendation. When the Roman Catholic writer H. Grisar states: "Not true humility, but a suicidal detraction of the nature of man is the guiding principle of this miserable treatise," and when, as is but natural, A. Ritschl agrees and characterizes the book as "a wretched botchery," "*ein unglueckliches Machwerk*" (*Rechtfertigung und Versoehnung*, I, 221), that is indeed high praise.

The present review would only take cognizance of the fact that Luther's masterpiece has been repeatedly translated into English and that a revised translation has been published by a Reformed concern. We thank God that these men are lending their hands to the wider dissemination of the Scriptural doctrine of the *sola gratia*. For, as

1) *The Bondage of the Will*. By Martin Luther the Celebrated Reformer. Being his Reply to Erasmus. Translated by Henry Cole, M.A., with slight alterations from Edward Thomas Vaughan, M.A. Corrected by Henry Atherton. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., *The Reformed Press*, 234 Pearl St., N. W., Grand Rapids, Mich. Great Britain: Sovereign Grace Union, Henry Atherton, Gen. Secretary. 420 pages, 5½ × 8½. Price, \$3.50. — Order from Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Mo.

Atherton declares in the Preface: "This book is most needful at the present day. The teachings of many so-called Protestants are more in accordance with the dogmas of the papists or the ideas of Erasmus than with the principles of the Reformers." At the present day, when Semi-Pelagianism in the form of Arminianism and even gross Pelagianism is spreading among the sects, and in its milder form, synergism, is being propagated by prominent men in the Lutheran Church, the Church needs the proclamation of these truths: "A man cannot be thoroughly humbled until he comes to know that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, counsel, endeavors, will, and works and absolutely depending on the will, counsel, pleasure, and work of another, that is, of God only. For if, as long as he has any persuasion that he can do even the least thing himself towards his own salvation, he retain a confidence in himself and do not utterly despair in himself, so long he is not humbled before God, but he proposes to himself some place, some time, or some work whereby he may at length attain unto salvation." (P. 69. St. L. XVIII, 1715.) Again: "Thus, therefore, it comes to pass that you theologians are so senseless and so many degrees below even schoolboys that, when you have caught hold of one imperative verb, you infer an indicative sense, as though what was commanded were immediately and even necessarily done or possible to be done, etc." (P. 155. St. L., 1781.) And again: "These assertors of 'free will' are worse than the Pelagians themselves, and that on two counts. First, the Pelagians plainly, candidly, and ingenuously assert the 'merit of worthiness,' thus calling a boat a boat and a fig a fig and teaching what they really think, whereas our 'free-will' friends, while they think and teach the same thing, yet mock us with lying words and false appearances, as though they dissented from the Pelagians, when the fact is quite the contrary, so that, with respect to their hypocrisy, they seem to be the Pelagians' strongest opposers, but with respect to the reality of the matter and their heart tenet they are twice-dipped Pelagians. And next, under this hypocrisy they estimate and purchase the grace of God at a much lower rate than the Pelagians themselves. For these assert that it is not a certain little something in us by which we attain unto grace, but whole, full, perfect, great, and many devoted efforts and works, whereas our friends declare that it is a certain little something, almost a nothing, by which we deserve grace." (P. 354. St. L., 1938.)

We thank God, too, that these men are lending their hands to the wider dissemination of the Scriptural doctrine of the *gratia universalis*. The Sovereign Grace Union of Great Britain, under whose auspices this translation is published, stands for particular redemption (p. 6) and the other characteristic errors of Calvinism. These men will do well to ponder such statements as these: "It is the Gospel voice and the sweetest consolation to miserable sinners

where Ezekiel saith: 'I desire not the death of a sinner, but rather that he should be converted and live'; and it is in all respects like unto that of Ps. 30, 5: 'For His wrath is but for a moment; in His willingness is life.' And that of Ps. 36, 7: 'How sweet is Thy loving-kindness, O God!' Also: 'For I am merciful.' And that of Christ (Matt. 11, 28): 'Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.'" (P. 167. St. L., 1791.) Again: "He desires that all men should be saved, seeing that He comes unto all by the Word of Salvation, and it is the fault of the will which does not receive Him, as He saith (Matt. 23, 37): 'How often would I have gathered thy children together, and thou wouldest not!'" (P. 173. St. L., 1796.) And again: "The God Incarnate, then, here speaks thus: '*I would, and thou wouldest not.*' The God Incarnate, I say, was sent for this purpose, that He might desire, speak, do, suffer, and offer unto all all things that are necessary unto salvation." (P. 181. St. L., 1802.)

Furthermore, while Calvinism solves the mystery of the *Cur alii prae aliis?* by its denial of universal grace, Luther, teaching both the *sola gratia* and the *gratia universalis*, lets the mystery stand. "Why it is that some are touched by the Law and some are not touched, why some receive the offered grace and some despise it, that is another question which is not here treated on by Ezekiel, because he is speaking of the *preached and offered mercy of God*, not of that *secret and to-be-feared will of God.*" (P. 171. St. L., 1794.) Again: "He desires that all men should be saved, seeing that He comes unto all men by the Word of Salvation, and it is the fault of the will which does not receive Him. . . . But why that Majesty does not take away or change this fault of the will *in all*, seeing that it is not in the power of man to do it, or why He lays that to the charge of the will which the man cannot avoid, it becomes us not to inquire; and though you should inquire much, yet you will never find out, as Paul saith (Rom. 9, 20): 'Who art thou that repliest against God?'" (P. 173. St. L., 1796.) Again: "But I here observe as I have observed before that we are not to dispute concerning that SECRET WILL of the divine majesty, and that that human temerity which, with incessant perverseness, is ever leaving those things that are necessary and attacking and trying this point, is to be called off and driven back that it employ not itself in prying into those secrets of Majesty which it is impossible to attain unto." (P. 181. St. L., 1801.) And once again: Men accuse God of injustice, "who crowns the wicked man freely without any merit and yet crowns not, but damns another who is perhaps less or at least not more wicked. But the light of glory speaks otherwise." (P. 389. St. L., 1966.) Luther is continually pointing out that, since all men are equally corrupt and guilty and since the grace of God is universal and impartial, the question why some are saved and

others not must remain unanswered under the revelation given in the Bible, in "the light of grace," but will be answered in "the light of glory." Synergism solves the mystery by means of the violent expedient of eliminating the *sola gratia*. Calvinism applies the equally violent expedient of eliminating the *gratia universalis*. Thus Calvinism has no occasion to discuss a mystery here. And that should give the Calvinist pause. He should perceive that his theology is not the theology of St. Paul, the theology which leads up to Rom. 11, 33, and estops men from solving and seeking to solve this mystery.

Finally, Calvinists should note that, while both Calvin and Luther speak of the revealed and the hidden God, there is a fundamental difference in their treatment of the matter and in the conclusions reached. Luther does not accept Calvin's theology nor Calvin Luther's. Calvinism has God nullify His revealed will, according to which He would have all men to be saved, through His secret will, according to which He would not have all men to be saved. For all practical purposes the gracious will of God, looking to the salvation of all men, is non-existent. Calvin declares that Ezek. 18, 23 ("Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?") does not extend to the whole human race. (*Inst.*, III, chap. 24, § 15: "If we are to extend this to the whole human race," etc. "How comes it, then, that, if God would have all to be saved, He does not open a door of repentance for the wretched, who would more readily have received grace?") Calvinism makes God contradict Himself. "As though God said: Outwardly, through the Word, I indeed call to My kingdom all of you to whom I give My Word; however, in My heart I do not mean this with respect to all, but only with respect to a few; for it is My will that the greatest part of those whom I call through the Word shall not be enlightened nor converted, but be and remain damned, although through the Word, in the call, I declare Myself to them otherwise. *Hoc enim esset Deo contradictorias voluntates affingere*, that is, for this would be to assign contradictory wills to God." (*Trigl.*, p. 1075.) And according to Calvinism this secret will of God is *not* a secret will. Calvinism is fully informed on it. But Luther does not presume to unfold to us the secret will of God. It has been shown in the preceding paragraph that Luther looks to the light of glory in heaven to give him an insight into the unsearchable judgments and inscrutable ways of God in dealing differently with different men of the same nature. (See pages 387—389.) Luther recognizes that there is a *seeming* contradiction here; but that will vanish in the light of glory. Above all, Luther insists that God's revealed will, His will to save all men, must stand under all circumstances. Though God deals differently with different men (the reasons for that not being revealed, but remaining hidden, secret), we are to concern ourselves *only* with the revealed will of God. We must absolutely preach God as He has

Engelder: De Servo Arbitrio

revealed Himself, as the gracious, the universally gracious, God. "God, therefore, is to be left to remain in His own nature and majesty; for in this respect we have nothing to do with Him, nor does He wish us to have, in this respect, anything to do with Him; but we have to do with Him as far as He is clothed in, and delivered to us by, His Word; for in that He presents Himself to us, and that is His beauty and His glory. . . . For God *preached* desires this: that, our sin and death being taken away, we might be saved; 'He sent his Word and healed them,' Ps. 107, 20. . . . But in the present case we are to consider His Word only and to leave that will inscrutable, seeing that it is by His Word, and not by that will inscrutable, that we are to be guided; for who can direct himself according to a will inscrutable and incomprehensible?" (P. 172 f. St. L., 1795 f.) Again: "But I here observe as I have observed before that we are not to dispute concerning that *secret will* of the divine majesty, and that that human temerity which with incessant perverseness is ever leaving those things that are necessary and attacking and trying this point, is to be called off and driven back that it employ not itself in prying into those secrets of Majesty which it is impossible to attain unto, seeing that they dwell in that light which is inaccessible, as Paul witnesseth (1 Tim. 6, 16). But let the man acquaint himself with the God Incarnate, or, as Paul saith, with Jesus crucified. . . . The God Incarnate, I say, was sent for this purpose, that He might desire, speak, do, suffer, and offer unto all all things that are necessary unto salvation." (P. 180 f. St. L., 1801 f.) In his commentary on Genesis, Luther enjoins all men from reading a Calvinistic sense into his *De Servo Arbitrio*. "Thus God reveals His will to us through Christ and the Gospel. . . . I have been at pains to inculcate this here and have gladly taken the opportunity to do so. For after my death many will dig up my books and quote them, endeavoring to prove by them all manner of errors and their own figments. I have indeed stated, among other things, that all things take place by necessity; but I also immediately added that we must look to that God who revealed Himself, as we sing in the Forty-sixth Psalm: 'Jesus Christ it is, Of Sabaoth Lord, And there's none other God.' But they will turn aside from all these passages and take up only those that speak of the hidden God. Therefore I bid you, who read this, to remember that I have taught thus: You are not to pry into the predestination of the hidden God, but to rest content with that predestination which is revealed through the call and through the Gospel; for there you may obtain the assurance of faith and of salvation and can say: I believe in the Son of God, who said: 'He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life,' John 3, 36. Therefore there is no condemnation or wrath upon him, but God the Father is pleased with him. And just this I have taught in all my books, and I still teach it with a loud voice. I will

not accept responsibility for anything else." (St. L., II, 184 f.) Calvinists should ponder these statements and learn that a theology which denies John 3, 16 is not the theology of Christ, not the theology of St. Paul, who "determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2, 2).²

The translation itself, made by Henry Cole in 1823, from Melancthon's edition of the book and now revised by H. Atherton, is a fine piece of work. A partial examination of the matter convinces us that it is a pretty faithful translation. It might pass, upon the whole, for a translation of the German translation of our St. Louis edition, Vol. XVIII. Or we might say that our German edition might pass for a translation of the English work. That is to say, both translations are fairly exact. To be sure, the translation is not absolutely correct. Was ever a book translated by human beings that was absolutely correct? We have noticed a few mistranslations. For instance: "Why do we not here in like manner say at once—What, is our judgment nothing when compared with the divine judgments?" (P. 386.) "*Weshalb sagen wir nicht gleicherweise auch hier: Unser Urteil ist nichts, wenn es mit Gottes Urteil verglichen wird?*" (St. L., 1964.) "*Quare non similiter et hic dicimus: Iudicium nostrum nihil est, si divino iudicio comparetur?*" (Erl. Ed., v. a VII, p. 364. Thus

2) G. Aulén (*Das christliche Gottesbild in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, 1930) states on page 227: "The tendency of the present day is to make *Deus absconditus* the index" (of *De Servo Arbitrio* and of Luther's theology), and then declares: "Here, as everywhere, where Luther speaks of the *Deus absconditus* he states emphatically that it is not our business to search the unsearchable and unapproachable divine majesty. It is for us to abide by the *Deus revelatus*. . . . *Deus absconditus* sets limits to man, and specifically to the man of faith, beyond which he must not go. There are things which we cannot 'know' and should not desire to know. Why does God deal in just this manner and not differently? Faith does not answer these questions. . . . It is presumptuous and constitutes the *crimen maiestatis* to attempt to justify the ways of God before the forum of human reason and the human sense of justice. . . . That does not mean, however, that faith must remain uncertain as to the nature of the divine will. *Deus absconditus* does not make this matter uncertain. It does not imply that the *Deus revelatus*, the revelation in Christ, no longer informs faith on God's 'nature' and disposition. Luther does not take away what has just been given; he does not make of the revelation in Christ an empty pretense." (P. 228 ff.) Dr. M. Reu agrees with Aulén's presentation of Luther's exposition of the omnipotence of God in *De Servo Arbitrio* and of the *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus* and adds: "*Luther ist ueber diesen Ausfuehrungen und Unterscheidungen die Einheit des Gottesbildes nie verlorengegangen, und doch hielt er sich fern von allem rationalisierenden Abschleifen der scheinbaren Gegensatze, die sein Gottesbild an sich trug.*" (*Kirchliche Zeitschrift*, March, 1931, p. 181.)

Engelder: De Servo Arbitrio

also Editio Princeps. Does Melancthon's edition perhaps give a different reading?) — “. . . and that the Jews might not imagine that this did not apply to them by anticipation, and asserts that it applied to them most particularly.” (P. 333.) “*Und damit die Juden nicht glauben moechten, das gehe sie nicht an, so KOMMT PAULUS DEM ZUVOR, indem er behauptet, das gehe sie am meisten an.*” (St. L., 1921.) “*Et ne Iudaei putarent, ad sese non pertinere, PRAEVENIT Paulus, asserens ad eos maxime pertinere.*” (Erl. Ed., p. 328; and Ed. Pr.) — “Let him that dares, defend ‘free will’ against these damnable doctrines.” “*Wider diese Verdammungsurteile.*” “*Adversus has damnationes.*” (L. C.) — “. . . and the Book of Esther, though they [the Hebrews] have this last in their canon, and according to my judgment it is much more worthy of being there than any one of those that are considered not to be in the canon.” (P. 132.) “. . . und Esther. Obgleich sie dieses im Kanon haben, so waere es nach meinem Urtheil doch mehr wert als alle, nicht fuer kanonisch gehalten zu werden.” (St. L., 1763.) “. . . Esther; quamvis hunc habeant in canone, dignior omnibus me iudice, qui extra canonem haberetur.” (Erl. Ed., p. 195. Ed. Pr. — Luther is referring to the apocryphal book “The Rest of the Chapters of the Book of Esther.” See *Lehre und Wehre*, 71, 166.) — The passage in Erl. Ed., p. 324, and Ed. Pr.: “*Ostende mihi in universo genere mortalium unum, . . . cui unquam in mentem venerit, hanc esse viam ad iustitiam et ad salutem, scilicet credere in eum, qui sit simul Deus et homo, pro peccatis hominum mortuus et suscitatus et collocatus ad dexteram Patris, AUT SOMNIARIT hanc iram Dei, quam Paulus his revelari de coelo dicit,*” which is thus rendered on page 328: “Show me one of the whole race of mankind . . . into whose mind it ever came that the way unto righteousness and salvation was to believe in Him who is both God and man, who died for the sins of men and rose again and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father, that He might still that wrath of God the Father which Paul here says is revealed from heaven,” is thus rendered in the St. L. Edition, 1917: “*Zeige mir in dem ganzen Menschengeschlecht einen, . . . dem es jemals in den Sinn gekommen waere, dass dies der Weg zur Gerechtigkeit und zur Seligkeit sei, naemlich zu glauben an den, der zugleich Gott und Mensch ist, gestorben fuer die Suenden der Menschen und wieder auferweckt und gesetzt zur Rechten des Vaters, ODER DER SICH HAETTE TRAEUMEN LASSEN von dem Zorn Gottes, von dem Paulus hier sagt, dass er vom Himmel offenbart werde.*” — The passage: “. . . *Philippi Melancthonis de Locis Theologicis invecum libellum, meo iudicio non solum immortalitate, sed canone quoque ecclesiastico dignum . . .*” (Erl. Ed., p. 117) reads in the English translation: “. . . the incontrovertible Book of Philip Melancthon *Concerning Theological Questions*, a book, in my judgment, worthy not only of being immortalized, but of being included in the ecclesiastical canon”

(p. 14), and in the German: ". . . *das unueberwindliche Buechlein des Philipp Melanchthon, Loci Communes, welches nach meinem Urtheil wert ist, nicht allein, dass es ewig bleibe, sondern auch, dass es IN DER KIRCHE ALS RICHTSCHNUR GELTE.*" The German rendering is less liable to misconception. — "*ILLUDIT autem sese Diatribe ignorantia sua, dum nihil distinguit inter Deum praedicatum et absconditum.*" (P. 222.) "But the *Diatribe* is deceived by its own ignorance, in not making a distinction between God preached and God hidden." (P. 172.) "*Die Diatribe macht sich aber selbst ZUM GESPOETTE durch ihre Unwissenheit, indem sie keinen Unterschied macht zwischen dem gepredigten und dem verborgenem Gott.*" (P. 1795.) It is hard to decide which is the better translation. — "*Et id sequenter probat per experientiam, quod INGRATI DEO tot vitiis subiecti fuerint.*" (P. 327.) "This he proves to them afterwards from experience, showing them that, being hated of God, they were given up to so many vices." (P. 332.) "*Und das beweist er folgend durch die Erfahrung, dass sie als UNDANKBARE GEGEN GOTT so vielen Lastern unterworfen waren.*" (P. 1920.) The English translation might be preferable; the preceding sentence speaks of the wrath of God revealed from heaven. — If one of the brethren who can find the time for it would note the passages of the German and the English translations which differ and publish such a compilation, together with the Latin original, say in the *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, that would prove a welcome help to those who will be studying *The Bondage of the Will*.

And surely many will be studying it. Those Lutheran pastors who are more familiar with the English language than with the German (and with the Latin) will want this edition of *De Servo Arbitrio*.
 TH. ENGELDER.

Has Our Church a Quarrel with Science?

(Essay delivered before the convention of the Western District of the Missouri Synod, June, 1931.)

He who makes clear distinctions teaches well. So says the old Latin proverb. Or: He whose definitions are clear at the outset, will most likely succeed in presenting his subject in a convincing manner. Let us therefore begin with some definitions, in keeping with the wording of our topic.

Has our Church a quarrel with science? is our question. The term *our Church* here does not refer to the Christian Church in general nor to the Protestant denominations as they have been organized during the past four hundred odd years. We are speaking of the *Lutheran Church*, specifically of that body which is represented in the present convention. It is the church organization which un-