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A Course in Lutheran Theology

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A Course in Lutheran Theology

Those who feel the need of acquiring a deeper understanding of the saving truths of the Bible will do well to take up the study of Luther's *De Servo Arbitrio*. That will provide an excellent course in Lutheran theology. Study and reread the weighty matters presented in this course, and you will become a proficient and efficient Christian theologian.

There are those, indeed, who will tell you that the study of this book is profitless and harmful. A. Ritschl, the liberal theologian, labels the book "a wretched botchery." H. Grisar, the Catholic writer, declares: "Not true humility but a suicidal detraction of the nature of man inspired the miserable treatise." (See Aulén, *Das christliche Gottesbild*, p. 219, and *Lehre u. Wehre*, 56, p. 72.) Nor do the Lutheran synergists think much of our book. In his book *Martin Luther, a Destiny*, published 1927, L. Febvre, professor at Strassburg, describes Melancthon's reaction to *De Servo Arbitrio* thus: "In 1525 also occurred the decisive, inescapable, irremedial rupture with Erasmus, the violent shock of the two irreconcilable viewpoints. But Melancthon cared for Erasmus, admired him, and could not join in Luther's delirious outbursts against him. . . . No. Luther was wrong in preaching predestination and writing that inopportune, violent, and dangerous tract on the subject against Erasmus. He was wrong to repudiate free will; it made the vulgar, who did not understand him, averse to all effort, to all personal and moral initiative. Melancthon indicates this in 1525 in his Latin articles written during his trip. . . . He develops the thought in great detail in the *Loci Communes* of 1535. He restores to the human will and human cooperation their dignity as a means of salvation. As the theologians say, he becomes (or rebecomes)

a synergist." (P. 296 ff.)¹⁾ It is not a matter for surprise that Melancthon and Ritschl and Grisar do not like this course in Christian theology. A teacher who so emphatically stresses the *sola gratia*, so uncompromisingly maintains that the sinner owes his salvation in no wise to his merit and activity but solely and in all respects to the grace and activity of God cannot expect to enroll such students in his course as insist that the sinner has much or at least something to do with his salvation.

There are others who think highly of this book. Walther speaks of it as "a powerful treatise." E. T. Vaughn, who translated it in 1823 into English, declares: "I count this a truly estimable, magnificent, and illustrious treatise." Theod. Harnack thought much of it: "Diese gewaltige, wohlueberlegte und vortrefflich geschriebene Schrift zaehlt zu *den grossen Taten des Reformators*." (*Luthers Theologie*, p. 178.) Luther himself thought much of it: "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, see 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*." (XXI b, 2176;²⁾ XVIII, 66 [Introduction]; Weimar ed., 18, 596.) And the Formula of Concord endorses the book and charges all men to study it: "In these words Dr. Luther ascribes to our free will no power whatever to qualify itself for righteousness or strive after it. . . . 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—*ut diligenter legantur, omnes hortamur*." (Trigl., p. 897.)

1) Cp. *Conc. Theol. Month.*, VI, p. 258; *Concordia Triglotta*, Hist. Introd., p. 209; W. Walther, *Lehrbuch der Symbolik*, p. 302; Otto Schumacher, *Martin Luther, Vom Unfreien Willen*, p. 11. C. F. W. Walther, *Lehre u. Wehre*, 29, p. 173: "Als ihm [Erasmus] aber Luther hierauf im Jahre 1525 seine gewaltige Schrift *De Servo Arbitrio* entgegengesetzt hatte, da trieb dieselbe gleich einem Sturmwind alle Vernunftmenschen wie Staub von der Tenne der Kirche der Reformation. Da gingen, wie einst zu Christi Zeit, viele hinter sich oder lebten doch von nun an in ihrer Gemeinschaft mit Luther bis zu dessen Tode unter einem gewissen Drucke." Adolf Koeberle, *The Quest for Holiness*, p. 140: "Melancthon and the Philippists were already afraid that as a result of Luther's harsh deterministic statements concerning the bondage of the will ('the condemnation of those who have not deserved it'), the practical-ethical side of faith as an inner decision might be lost. So his followers formulated, with the greatest caution, the teaching *de tribus causis efficientibus, concurrentibus in conversione hominis non renati*."—These "harsh deterministic statements" of Luther will be examined in the final article of this series.

2) References given in this form indicate the St. Louis edition of Luther's works.—See Vol. XVIII, 1670 ff. for the German translation of *De Servo Arbitrio*: "Dass der freie Wille nichts sei."

Let us diligently study these things — the great truth that salvation is of the Lord, not of man, and the other weighty matters that Luther discusses in connection with his central theme. There are many such weighty matters. This book is, as the editor of the St. Louis edition of Luther's works points out, "an outstanding model and compendium of true Bible-theology" (XVIII, Introd., p. 66). We need to study it. We are indeed somewhat acquainted with these doctrines. But studying them as Luther here presents them and dealing with the burning words which the importance of these subjects put into his heart and mouth, we shall receive an increased measure of Luther's spirit. — Let us put down our notes under three main heads. The first is the sole authority of Scripture.

De Servo Arbitrio could not have been written if Luther had not come under the full sway of the Holy Scripture, the sacred Word of God. If Luther had been in submission to human authority, the authority of reason and the authority of "the Church" and the fathers, he would have collaborated on Erasmus's *De Libero Arbitrio* or subscribed to it. It is not in the power of reason, not in the power of man, to so completely strip human nature of its spiritual powers that man will confess: I can do nothing; the gracious Lord must do all. But Luther was able to write *De Servo Arbitrio* because he had become a bond-servant, a glad bond-servant, of Holy Scripture. Let Erasmus marshal his great host of human authorities on the side of free will, Luther declares: "These things have no effect upon us" (p. 82 of the Cole-Atherton translation: *The Bondage of the Will*. Eerdman's Publ. Co.³⁾); the Christian will rather say this — I will steadily adhere to the Sacred Writings everywhere and in all parts of them and assert them" (p. 22). Luther will not make a single theological statement that is not made by Scripture. He will engage in no controversy unless the opponent agrees to submit all questions to this judge. And Erasmus agrees. "You promise 'that you will go according to the canonical Scriptures, and that, because Luther is swayed by the authority of no other writer whatever.'" (P. 81. See *Diatribes*, *De Libero Arbitrio*, XVIII, 1607.)

In spite of the agreement Erasmus kept harping on the authority of the Fathers and of "the Church." He appealed to "the great number of the most learned men, approved by the consent of so many ages, among whom were some of the most extensively acquainted with the sacred writings and also some of the most holy martyrs, many renowned for miracles, together with the more recent theologians and so many colleges, councils, bishops, and Popes" (p. 82. *Diatribes*, XVIII, 1607), "the whole choir of the

3) Where only the page is designated, the reference is to the Cole-Atherton translation.

saints"; "from the days of the apostles to the present day there has not been a single writer who so completely annulled the power of free will save only Manichaeus and John Wyclif" (*Diatribes*, XVIII, 1608). The *Diatribes* closes with the appeal to the reader, "whether it is right to reject the teaching of so many Church Fathers" (XVIII, 1667).

Luther makes answer: "These things have no effect upon us." "It is a settled determination with me not to argue upon the authority of any teacher whatever but upon that of Scripture alone." (P. 210.) "Is it not enough that you submit your opinion to the Scriptures? Do you submit it to the decrees of the Church also? What can the Church decree that is not decreed in the Scriptures? If it can, where, then, remains the liberty and power of judging those who make the decrees, as Paul, 1 Cor. 14, teaches: 'Let others judge'? . . . You would take away from us the power of judging the decrees of men and give it unto men without judgment. Where does the Scripture of God command us to do this?" (P. 22. — XVIII, 1678.) "Christ is better than the authority of the Fathers." (P. 64.) And wherever the Fathers disregarded Christ, Paul, the Holy Scriptures, Luther disregarded them. "Go now, then, and boast of the authorities of the ancients and depend on what they say; all of whom, you see, to a man disregarded Paul, that most plain and most clear teacher, and, as it were, purposely shunned this morning-star, yea, this sun rather, because, being wrapped up in their own carnal reason, they thought it absurd that no place should be left to merit." (P. 357.) It was not an easy matter for Luther thus to renounce allegiance to these time-honored authorities. "These had such weight with me for upwards of ten years that I think no other mortal was ever so much under their sway." (P. 82.) But now he had come under the blessed sway of Scripture. Scripture meant everything to him, the Fathers, where they disregarded Scripture, nothing. When Erasmus quotes Jerome on Is. 40:2 against him (and against Isaiah), his blood is stirred, and he cries out: "I hear you, Jerome says so; therefore it is true! — I am disputing about Isaiah, who here speaks in the clearest words, and Jerome is cast in my teeth. . . . Where now is that promise of ours by which we agreed at the outset 'that we would go according to the Scriptures and not according to the commentaries of men?'" (P. 280.) And on Is. 40:6, 7: "Here again the trifling vanities of Jerome are cast in my teeth instead of Isaiah." (P. 286.) He heard the Lord speaking to him in the words of Scripture, and his Christian conscience would not permit him to subordinate Christ's word to the words of men. "I call God for a record upon my soul that I should have continued so" (swayed by human authorities) "had not an urging conscience and an evidence of things forced me into a

different path." (P. 82 f.)⁴ And there was this other consideration: "In the mean time, Friend Erasmus, what will the soul do that shall be bound and murdered by that iniquitous statute? Is that nothing to you?" (P. 63.) Erasmus had propounded the monstrous proposition "that, if anything were settled upon in the councils that was wrong, it ought not to be openly confessed, lest a handle should be thereby afforded for contemning the authority of the Fathers." This is an extreme case: in the interest of maintaining the authority of the Fathers, Erasmus refuses to warn men against certain iniquitous statutes established by the councils. These men are guilty of murdering souls, of murdering those souls which obey the wicked statutes. But Luther's charge applies in every case. Every one who maintains the principle of the authority of the Fathers is guilty of leading men into soul-destroying errors, because many of the Fathers have taught such errors. For instance: "They thought it absurd that no place should be left to merit." And more, even if the Fathers had not taught a single error, if the councils had not enacted a single iniquitous statute, the principle that the teachings of the Fathers and of the Church are binding upon the conscience is wicked and soul-destroying in itself. It puts men in the place of God. And it destroys the foundation of faith. Saving faith rests solely on God's own Word.

Luther did not disparage the Fathers. He studied their writings as diligently as Erasmus did. He thought highly of them. He profited greatly by them. It does not accord with the Lutheran spirit to throw the writings of the Fathers of the Christian Church and of the Lutheran Church on the junk-pile. We have been taught to study them reverently and lovingly. Walther has impressed upon us that "it is arrogance, which God would punish, if, in getting doctrine out of Scripture, a person refuses to be aided by others or will not study the writings of the great teachers but endeavors to find everything in Scripture himself. See note to § 3 of his *Pastorale*" (F. Pieper, *Conversion and Election*, p. 96). Luther studied the writings of the Fathers with a reverent and loving mind, and we are now reading and examining a writing of Luther with the same mind. That is the Lutheran spirit. Luther did not disparage the Fathers. He did disparage and disregard them, how-

4) Prof. Febvre quotes from a letter Luther wrote to Strassburg (Erl. ed., 53, 274. — St. L. ed., XV, 2050): "I was strongly drawn to the idea" (Carlstadt's idea of the Lord's Supper). "I struggled; I saw clearly that I could thus strike the strongest blow to the Papacy. But what of it? I was bound; I could not throw off the restraint. The Word is too strong; nothing can tear it from my soul." And then he remarks: "Luther deceived himself. It was his sentiment, his religious instinct, that 'bound' him." (Op. cit., p. 268.) That is a mean slur — and a rather senseless one. Certainly Luther's "religious instinct," or as Luther expresses it, "his conscience," bound him, because the Word bound his conscience.

ever, when "they disregarded Paul." "All that I say concerning those saints of yours, or rather *ours*" (Did Luther disparage the Fathers?), "is this: Those should be selected who have spoken the best, that is, who have spoken in defense of grace and against 'free will,' and those left who, through the infirmity of the flesh, have borne witness of the flesh rather than of the spirit. And also, that those who are inconsistent with themselves should be selected and caught at in those parts of their writings where they speak from the spirit, and left where they savor of the flesh. This is what becomes a Christian reader." (P. 101. — XVIII, 1740.) In a letter written 1516 Luther had stated: "When it comes to Scriptural interpretation, I prefer Augustine to Jerome exactly as much as he, Erasmus, prefers Jerome to Augustine." (Enders, *Briefwechsel*, p. 63 f.)⁵ The Christian has the right and the duty to subject any statement of any theologian to the judgment of Scripture. Lutheran theology does not make "the infirmities of the Fathers" (p. 94) the source of doctrine. The Lutheran slogan is: Not the Fathers but Scripture. Luther says elsewhere: "Let us first and principally read the Holy Scriptures, and afterwards we may read also the Fathers; *yet with discretion*, for the Fathers have not always taught and thought right of the things of God. He that will leave the Bible and deal only with the comment and books of the Fathers, his study will be endless and profitless." (XXII, p. 30.) Profitless and harmful and soul-destroying!

Lutheran theology does not recognize the authority of the Fathers—nor the authority of reason. *De Servo Arbitrio* is the declaration of war against rationalism in theology.⁶ Reason has at all times sought to dominate theology. The Fathers who spoke for free will had been listening to reason. "Being wrapped up in their own carnal reason, they thought it absurd that no place should be left for merit." (P. 357.) And Erasmus was continually appealing to reason. He continually forgot what he had professed in the opening paragraphs of the *Diatribes*: "I submit my reason at all times and at once to the inviolable authority of Scripture and the decrees of the councils, whether I comprehend it or not." (XVIII, 1601.) He never did so. "At one time you fly to the interpretations of the Fathers; at another to absurdities of reason." (P. 291.)

5) Naturally Erasmus and Febvre and others will object that, in applying the criterion: They have spoken the best who have spoken in defense of grace and against free will, Luther is led by his subjective bias. We shall refer to that later on.

6) "It has been said that, instead of entitling their papers *On Free Will* and *On Predestination*, the two antagonists might have named them *On Natural Religion* and *On Supernatural Religion*." (Febvre, *op. cit.*, p. 271.) This much is true: "The doctrinal controversy of 1525 marked more clearly the sharp line between rationalists and Bible theologians." (*Four Hundred Years*, p. 60.)

"You see therefore, again, how rashly you run against the Word of God, as though you preferred far before it your own counsel and cogitations." (P. 61.) For instance: "It appears absurd" (says the *Diatribes*) "that God, who is not only just but also good, should be said to have hardened the heart of a man in order that by his iniquity He might show forth His own power." (P. 219.) Reason is continually protesting against the teaching of Scripture. "Why does God not, then, change, in His motion, those evil wills which He moves? . . . Why did He permit Adam to fall?" (P. 230.) And men are lost, eternally, by reason of the fall which God permitted! Reason rebels at this seeming injustice. "It is insolvable how God can damn him who by his own powers can do nothing but sin and become guilty." (P. 389.) And it is particularly in the matter of the *cur alii, alii non* that carnal reason goes into paroxysms of indignation and resentment.⁷⁾ It protests violently "that the fault is not in the miserable man but in the unjust God; nor can they judge otherwise of that God who crowns this wicked man freely without any merit and yet crowns not, but damns, another who is perhaps less, or at least not more, wicked" (p. 389. — XVIII, 1966). Luther refuses to solve these insolvable matters; they "belong to those secrets of Majesty where 'His judgments are past finding out'" (p. 230). Erasmus, rather than be charged by his reason with teaching "absurdities," chooses to deny the *sola gratia*. And this is the answer he gets from Luther: "It appears absurd (says the *Diatribes*) . . . It appears, then, that one of the principal causes why the words of Moses and of Paul are not received is their absurdity. But against what article of faith does that absurdity militate? . . . According to the same argument of absurdity you will deny all the articles of faith, because it is of all things the most absurd, and, as Paul says, foolishness to the Gentiles and a stumbling-block to the Jews, that God should be man, the son of a virgin, crucified, and sitting at the right hand of His Father; it is, I say, absurd to believe such things. Therefore let us invent some tropes with the Arians and say that Christ is not truly God. . . . These things, reason will still say, are not becoming a God, good and merciful. . . . But she will comprehend that, when this shall be said of God: He hardens no one, He damns no one; but He has mercy upon all, He saves all, and He has so utterly destroyed hell that no future punishment need be dreaded. It is thus that reason blusters and contends in attempting to clear God." (P. 219 f. — XVIII, 1831 f.) It is not safe to take reason for our guide. And it is not right. It leads men to rebel against the majesty of God, to demand that God relinquish His throne. "The other absurd objection the *Diatribes* gathers from

7) This matter will be treated more fully in the final article of this series.

Madam Reason. . . . Here they require that God should act according to human laws and do what seems right unto men or cease to be God." (P. 265.) "This is what we come to when we attempt by human reason to limit and make excuses for God, not revering the secrets of His Majesty, but curiously prying into them, being lost in the glory of them; instead of making one excuse for God, we pour forth a thousand blasphemies." (P. 217. — XVIII, 1830.) Yes, they lose God who judge of Him according to reason. "If this righteousness were such that it was considered to be righteousness according to human judgment, it would be no longer divine, nor would it in any thing differ from human righteousness." (P. 386. — XVIII, 1963.) And on this same page: "What is man compared with God?" And you dare set your judgment against the declaration of Scripture! Luther will not recognize any man as a Lutheran who contends for the right of reason to interpret Scripture. Where Luther's spirit prevails, the rationalizing of Erasmus and of Melancthon and their followers must depart. As Walther remarks: *De Servo Arbitrio* drives all rationalizers from the floor of the Church of the Reformation; those that remain must feel out of place.

There is no room in the Lutheran Church for those who set up, in place of the authority of Scripture, the authority of the Fathers or of reason or of "the Spirit"⁸⁾ or any other human authority, the Christian self-consciousness or the Christian experience or whatever other alias it assumes. Those theologians within the Lutheran Church who do not operate exclusively with the *sola Scriptura* have lost the spirit of Luther. And there are many such. There was a time when men said, referring to Luther's controversy with Erasmus, that "owing to Luther the world was ready to rely solely on the clear word of Scripture." (See Weimar ed., 18, 581.) And what is the situation today? Prominent theologians within the Lutheran Church are denouncing the appeal to the *sola Scriptura* as — Biblicism. Yes, Luther himself was a — Biblicist! Editor Laible of the *Allg. Ev.-Luth. Kirchenzeitung* knows the situation in Europe and protests: "Ah, this 'it is written,' this, too, is now antiquated — 'Biblicism!'" (1931, p. 5.) Here are a few typical pronouncements. The Swedish leader G. Aulén has no use for "the old Biblicism, which restricts the divine revelation to the Bible." "Biblicism, the application of the theory of verbal inspiration, laid its heavy hand on the theology of orthodoxy." "*Die schicksalsschwerste Gabe des Biblizismus*"; "the disastrous consequences of this theory." "Luther was partly

8) "I had the last year, and have still, a sharp warfare with those fanatics who subject the Scriptures to the interpretation of their own boasted spirit." (P. 102. — XVIII, 1741.)

influenced by Biblicism. He sees that Scripture speaks of obduration: God hardens Pharaoh, etc., and he feels that such statements must be accepted"; "Luther's slavish dependence on the proof-texts." (*Das christliche Gottesbild*, 221, 251, 255, 346, 386.) P. Althaus, a leader of the Lutheran Church in Germany, denounces Biblicism, which "identifies the Word of God and Scripture" and looks upon "the Bible as the supernatural, infallible text-book (*Lehrbuch*)"; for "Scripture is not an absolutely infallible *Lehrbuch von Wahrheiten*." "Our doctrine of justification is not simply a repetition of the New Testament doctrine, and our eschatology is not simply a repetition of the Biblical doctrine but has its own form." (*Die Letzten Dinge*, 4th ed., 61, 67, 74, 250.) The same voice is heard here in America. The *Lutheran* of September 24, 1936, for instance, after discussing the "Biblicism of later dogmatists," sets up this principle: "When we speak of the authority of the Scriptures, we do not mean that they are independently authoritative. They have no authority either apart from Christ, who is the primary authority,⁹⁾ or apart from the Church, in which Christ's power is operative." They say it is no longer admissible to prove a theological statement with proof-texts. This method of the Biblicists has gone by the board. Dr. E. E. Flack declares: "No fundamental doctrine rests on a single, isolated passage. Nor may several passages strung together in proof-text fashion fix faith." (*Lutheran*, Oct. 11, 1936.) *De Servo Arbitrio* applies the proof-text method. The body of the book is nothing else than the exposition of some 57 passages of Scripture. Beginning with Gen. 6:3, Luther strings together some 57 simple proof-texts, besides adducing incidentally a number of others, laboriously studies their true sense according to grammar and context, and publishes this study in Bible-passages as a theological treatise! Luther's one argument is: "It is written." That was the fashion in 1525. Today the liberal J. S. Whale declares: "The

9) The sinister purpose back of this modern distinction between the authority of Scripture and the authority of Christ is to wean men away from the sole authority of Scripture. For the same purpose these men denounce the appeal to the bare word of Scripture as legalistic; taking the doctrine directly and exclusively from the Bible would be degrading the Bible to a legal code. With Luther, however, the authority of the Bible and the authority of Christ coincide. Christ reveals His will to us nowhere but in the Bible, and the teaching of the Bible is clothed with the authority of Christ. And Luther did not study and use the Bible in a legalistic spirit. His theology was Christocentric. He sought for, and found, Christ in the Bible. "Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find remaining in them?" (P. 26.) He loved, and clung to, the words of the Bible because Christ was there.—Which is the primary authority, Christ or the Bible? Such a question is foreign to the spirit of Luther.—And what about the statement: "The Scriptures have no authority apart from the Church"? Authority of the Church, of men? That is legalism, pure and simple.

Bible is abused when it is used merely as an armory of proof-texts for defending some theological scheme" (*The Christian Answer to the Problem of Evil*, p. 77), and the Lutheran Flack asks Luther: Have you nothing else to offer us than proof-texts? They want something better than just the simple words of the Bible.

The trouble is, they no longer believe in the inspiration of Scripture. So they necessarily criticize Luther for employing the proof-text method. The historical introduction to *De Servo Arbitrio* in the Weimar edition (18, p. 596) praises the book: "Auch von unserm Standpunkt aus gesehen, bleibt diese Schrift eine Grosstat des Reformators"; but on page 595 it pronounces this criticism: "Was die Schrift *De Servo Arbitrio* selbst betrifft, so muss gesagt werden: 'Luther haelt sich in ihr nicht rein auf dem Boden der religioesen Erfahrung.'" (Koestlin-Kawerau, *M. Luther*, I, 662.) Wo er beweist, arbeitet er mit einer fuer uns nicht mehr ueberzeugenden . . . theologischen Methode. Ihren Ausgangspunkt hat dieselbe fuer den vorliegenden Gegenstand in den *Theologumenen des Paulus* in Roem. 9:ff." Naturally one cannot adduce statements of Paul as proof if these statements are not God's words but merely some good man's *theologumena*—his human opinions.¹⁰ A better authority than the uninspired Scriptures is needed. The fashionable authority just now is the "Christian experience." See, for instance, what the Weimar editor just said about Luther and his "religious experience."¹¹ There are today only a few theologians who are willing to be classed as *Biblicists*. The majority has renounced the supreme and sole authority of Scripture.

The generation of 1938 needs the spirit of 1525. Men must realize that any teaching which destroys or weakens the authority of the

10) Give up verbal inspiration, and you lose Scripture as the one absolute authority. That is a fine statement by Laible: "Ah, this 'it is written,' this, too, is now antiquated—'Biblicism'! . . . Denying the authority of Scripture, you lose the light of God, the one help in the night that is upon us, the only guide the Church has."

11) Men are so thoroughly convinced that "experience" is the final authority in theology that they are able to read this idea even into Luther's *De Servo Arbitrio*. In his book *Der Streit zwischen Luther und Erasmus K. Zickendraht*, Lic. Theol., says on page 73: "Erasmus hatte die Frage, wer Schiedsrichter sein sollte, nominell doch zugunsten der kirchlichen Autoritaeten entschieden. Demgegenueber wird in Luthers Ausfuehrungen, welche an jenen nur dasjenige als Autoritaet anerkennen, was mit seiner religioes-sittlichen Erfahrung stimmt, zunaechst einfach stillschweigend diese zum Schiedsrichter gemacht." And this is the proof offered for this monstrous assertion: "Nach der Richtschnur dieser inneren Erfahrung, nach dem *iudicium conscientiae*, beurteilt er nun zunaechst auch die Geltung aller von Erasmus vorgebrachten Autoritaeten." (P. 74.) He is referring to the statement quoted above: ". . . had not an urging conscience and an evidence of things forced me into a different path." Luther was swayed by his conscience, surely. But what bound his conscience? His conscience and experience or Scripture?

Bible is an antichristian iniquity. We need to be filled with the holy indignation and fierce wrath which inspired the burning words of Luther: "If this be the attitude of Rome, then blessed be the land of Greece, blessed be the land of Bohemia, blessed be all those who have separated themselves and gone out from this Babylon. . . . As matters now stand, faith has been extinguished in her midst, the Gospel proscribed, Christ is banished, and the morals are worse than barbarian. Still there remained one hope: the inviolable authority of Holy Scripture remained, men had at least the right view of the Bible, though not the right understanding of its sense. But now Satan is capturing this, too, the stronghold of Zion and the tower of David, unconquered up till now." (XVIII, 425 f.; written 1520.) And the modern Protestant theologians are the faithful allies of the Pope!

The article of the authority of Scripture stands and falls with the article of the clearness of Scripture. If the teachings of Scripture were dark and uncertain, they could not serve as the source and norm of doctrine. "If Scripture be obscure or ambiguous, what need was there for its being sent down from heaven?" (p. 108.) Erasmus operates with "that pestilent saying of the Sophists 'The Scriptures are obscure and ambiguous'"; Luther, on the contrary, takes this position: "This ought, above all things, to be received and most firmly settled among the Christians, that the Holy Scriptures are a spiritual light, by far more clear than the sun itself, especially in those things which pertain unto salvation or which the Christians must necessarily know." (P. 104. — XVIII, 1742.) "This indeed I confess that there are many *places* in the Scriptures obscure and abstruse; not from the majesty of the things, but from our ignorance of certain terms and grammatical particulars; but which do not prevent a knowledge of all the *things* in the Scriptures" (the saving doctrine). (P. 25.) Luther is sure of his position. "What is more frequently said in praise of Scripture than that it is a most certain and most clear light? Ps. 119, 105." "And what is the design of the apostles in proving their preaching by the Scriptures? Is it that they may obscure their own darkness by still greater darkness? . . . The apostles as well as Christ Himself appealed to the Scriptures as the most clear testimonies of the truth of their discourses. With what face, then, do we make them obscure?" "In a word, if Scripture be obscure or ambiguous, what need was there for its being sent down from heaven? Are we not obscure and ambiguous enough in ourselves without an increase of it by obscurity, ambiguity, and darkness being sent down from heaven? And if this be the case, what will become of that of the apostle: 'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction'? 2 Tim.

3:16." (P. 106 ff. — XVIII, 1744 ff.) And, again, "if Scripture as they declare, be obscure, who shall certify us that their declaration is to be depended on? Shall it be certified by another new declaration? But who shall make that declaration? — And so we may go on *ad infinitum*." (P. 108.) No, God has given us "the all-clear Scriptures" (p. 27), "the all-clear light of the Scriptures" (p. 290), and it is a pestilent, "an impudent and blasphemous saying: 'The Scriptures are obscure.'" (P. 109.) It is a blasphemous saying; could not the Holy Spirit express Himself clearly? It is a pestilent doctrine; it destroys the authority of Scripture.

Men today still argue after the manner of Erasmus: "If, then, the Scripture be quite clear, why have men of renowned talent, through so many ages, been blind upon this point?" (P. 114. *Diatribes*, XVIII, 1609.) This text and that text, they say, cannot be clear because there are contradictory interpretations of it. All denominations appeal to Scripture. "They each claim it as belonging to them." (P. 102; cp. p. 402.) How, then, can you say that Scripture speaks in a clear, unmistakable manner? Luther makes answer: "All heresies and errors in the Scriptures have not arisen from the simplicity of the words, as is the general report throughout the world, but from men not attending to the simplicity of the words and hatching tropes and conclusions out of their own brain." (P. 206.) Let us take courage from Luther and, when dealing with such a case, declare: "If many things still remain abstruse to many, this does not arise from obscurity in the Scriptures but from their own blindness or want of understanding." (P. 27.) Yes, at times we will have to meet the assertion of the errorist that this and that passage is "uncertain and obscure" in the manner of Luther: "No wonder; for all that the *Diatribes* aims at is to make the Scriptures of God in every place obscure to the intent that it might not be compelled to use them." (P. 306.) And as to the matter in hand, dealing with the great host of the synergists, who refuse to accept the clear teaching of Scripture, Luther delivers this telling blow: "Why have men of renowned talent been blind upon this point? I answer: They have been thus blind to the praise and glory of 'free will,' in order that that highly-boasted-of 'power by which a man is able to apply himself unto those things that pertain unto eternal salvation' might be eminently displayed, that very exalted power, which neither sees those things which it sees nor hears those things which it hears and much less understands and seeks after them." (P. 114 f.) — The heretics contrive so to manipulate and twist the clearest text that they and their dupes can no longer see its plain meaning. "And no wonder; for even the sun itself would not shine if it should be assailed by such arts as these." (P. 231.)

Finally there is that glorious assurance of Luther. He was certain of his doctrine. There he stands like a rock, immovable. For his theology is grounded on, and grown out of, and grown together with, Scripture, the unmovable rock. Lutheran theology is the theology of certainty. The Lutheran theologian has firm convictions. The Erasmian has no firm convictions. He cannot be certain of his doctrine because he does not take his doctrine from Scripture. "He looks upon the Christian doctrines as nothing better than the opinions of philosophers and men." (P. 23.) "He would make it appear that there has been nothing certain in the Christian religion." (From a letter of Luther to Amsdorf, p. 394. — XVIII, 1993.) He does "not delight in assertions" and censures in Luther "an obstinacy of assertion." (P. 18. *Diatribes*, XVIII, 1601.) And certain teachings of Scripture must not be spoken out loud. "Although they are true in themselves, yet it would not be prudent to prostitute them to the ears of every one." (P. 48. *Diatribes*, XVIII, 1605.) What is the Lutheran attitude? "Not to delight in assertions is not the character of the Christian mind; nay, he must delight in assertions, or he is not a Christian. . . . By *assertion* I mean a constant adhering, affirming, confessing, defending, and invincible persevering. Moreover, I speak concerning the asserting of those things which are delivered to us from above in the Holy Scriptures. . . . Nothing is more known or more general among Christians than assertions. Take away assertions, and you take away Christianity. Nay; the Holy Spirit is given unto them from heaven that He may glorify Christ and confess Him even unto death." (XVIII, 1676: "damit er [Christus] bis zum Tode bekannt werde"). "Allow us to be assertors and to study and delight in assertions; and do you favor your skeptics and academics until Christ shall have called you also. The Holy Spirit is not a skeptic, nor are what He has written on our hearts doubts or opinions, but assertions more certain and more firm than life itself and all human experience." (Pp. 18-24.)

Luther is certain of his doctrine; for Scripture teaches these things as the absolute truth and teaches them clearly and definitely. The Erasmian theologian, who is guided by reason and human experience, is never sure of his position, is unwilling to assert things positively, and refuses to confess them unto death. But Luther is dealing with Scripture, and through Scripture the Holy Spirit wrote on his heart firm convictions and certain assertions. Here there is no shilly-shallying, no trimming and evading, no halting and vacillating, no fear and hesitancy to speak out. Here there are clear-cut, straightforward propositions, and they are put forward as the absolute truth. "Let that Christian be anathema who is not certain in, and does not follow, that which is enjoined

him." (P. 23.) "That obstinate assertor Luther urges his cause by the Scriptures"! (P. 315.)

The Christian theologian has no choice here. Scripture leaves him but one course: "Truth and doctrine are to be preached always, openly, and firmly and are never to be dissembled or concealed." (P. 61.) And more, Scripture does not merely command it, but drives him on with kindly compelling force to give voice to its blessed teaching. The Christian theologian cannot but speak of these things with conviction — and with a loud voice. "As to my always conducting discussions with ardor, I acknowledge my fault, if it be a fault; nay, I greatly glory in this testimony which the world bears of me in the cause of God; and may God Himself confirm the same testimony on the Last Day! Then who more happy than Luther — to be honored with the universal testimony of his age that he did not maintain the Cause of Truth lazily nor deceitfully but with a real, if not too great, ardor" ("oder vielmehr allzu heftig," XVIII, 1913: "vel potius nimio"). "Then shall I be blessedly clear from that word of Jeremiah: 'Cursed be he that doeth the work of the Lord deceitfully ('negligently'), Jer. 48:10." (P. 322.) — Luther could not suppress a single truth nor speak of any truth of Scripture coldly and indifferently. God's Word was in his heart as a burning fire; he could not stay, Jer. 20:9.

Furthermore, the troubled conscience needs certainty. It cannot rest in probabilities. "What is more miserable than uncertainty?" (P. 22.) And it needs assurance on all points of doctrine. What, keep silence on certain truths and have "souls bound and murdered" by adhering to the error? "Is that nothing to you?" (P. 63.) You may "care nothing whatever about the certainty of Scripture. But as for me who labor to establish consciences nothing can be more inconvenient, nothing more injurious, nothing more pestilential," than your "convenient interpretation." (P. 307 f. — XVIII, 1901.)

But to speak out so boldly, to proclaim all Scripture-truths without any suppression, subtraction, adjustment, and smoothing down, will cause many to turn against the Bible and will bring on all kinds of tumult and endanger the peace of the Church. So said Erasmus. Melancthon felt the same way. And countless numbers today have the same fear. But Luther refused to keep silence on any point of doctrine. Least of all would he make any compromise in the doctrine of the bondage of the will. "Some, you say, are of that nature, that, although they are true in themselves, yet it would not be prudent to prostitute them to the ears of every one. . . . As I have said before, those things which are either found in the Sacred Writings or may be proved by them are not only plain but wholesome and therefore may be, nay, ought to be,

spread abroad, learned and known." (P. 48.) "And as to 'a fear that many who are depravedly inclined will abuse this liberty,' these are not to be considered of so much consequence as that, for the sake of restraining their abuse, the Word of God should be taken out of the way." (P. 59.) "Truth and doctrine are to be preached always, openly, firmly, and are never to be dissembled or concealed; for there is no offense in them; they are the staff of uprightness." (P. 61.) "You would have us, for the sake of the Popes, the heads, and the peace of the community, to put off, upon an occasion, and depart from, the all-certain Word of God." You fear the tumults that will otherwise arise. Do you not know that tumults must arise where the truth, the full truth is preached? "Such is most constantly the case with the Word of God that because of it the world is thrown into tumult, Matt. 10:34; Luke 12:49; 2 Cor. 6:5. Ps. 2: The nations are in tumult, the people roaring, the kings rising up, and the princes conspiring against the Lord." (P. 55.)¹² Luther would rather die than keep silence in this matter — and be eternally damned: "I am, in this discussion, seeking an object solemn and essential; nay, such and so great that it ought to be maintained and defended through death itself. . . . Since it cannot be otherwise, I choose rather to be battered in temporal tumult, happy in the grace of God, for God's Word's sake, which is to be maintained with a mind incorrupt and invincible, than to be ground to powder in eternal tumult, under the wrath of God and torments intolerable." (P. 54. — XVIII, 1703.) No, you cannot stop the mouth of a Luther. He was no opportunist, indifferentist, skeptic, dissembler.

And you cannot stop his mouth by calling him an "obstinate assertor." The Erasmians lift up their hands in horror when they hear the Lutheran declare that he is sure about his position, that he is right and all others wrong. They stigmatize such an attitude as due to stubborn pride and conceit. They cannot bear to have Luther say that his opponents, the assertors of free will, are all wrong and that he, the assertor of *sola gratia*, is absolutely right. "Those men, as far as they asserted 'free will,' were most ignorant of the Sacred Writings." (P. 120.) "Those should rather be selected who have spoken in defense of grace." (P. 101.) How can you say, Luther, that you alone are right? Well, Luther will put it still more strongly. He closes his treatise with this statement: "In this book of mine I have asserted, and still do assert, and I wish none to become judges but all to yield assent." (P. 393.)

12) "Es ist fuer Luther sogar ein Anzeichen der Wahrheit einer Lehre, wenn sie 'rumort' oder 'Tumult' macht; sonst waere sie nicht Wahrheit. Beruehmte Stelle in *De Servo Arbitrio*." (Prof. Preuss of Erlangen. *Allg. Ev.-Luth. Kz.*, Oct. 29, 1937, p. 989.)

Let one of us say today that we shall permit no man to revise our teaching and that we demand its unconditional acceptance, and we shall be overwhelmed with fierce denunciations of such intolerable conceit and bigotry. These denunciations would indeed be in place if Luther's assertions were the result of his own observation, investigation, and experience. Judgments based on human intelligence are subject to revision. We realize that where our judgments are backed by nothing more than our intelligence and study, we may be wrong fifty per cent. of the time, perhaps seventy-five per cent. of the time. Our opponent may be right and we wrong. But where our judgment is backed by the clear word of Scripture, where our judgments are simply the judgments of Scripture, there we are right one hundred per cent. of the time, and the opponent is wrong. The opponent indeed may uphold his judgment with the same stubbornness as Luther. But it is not the same stubbornness. One proceeds from the refusal to submit the judgment of conceited reason to the clear teaching of Scripture, the other from the firm conviction of the truth of Scripture, written into the heart by the Holy Ghost. And we are certainly not going to let the fact that men misinterpret Scripture and stubbornly cling to their error shake our reliance on the sure word of Scripture. The Holy Ghost can and does create this assurance in spite of the fact that many, perhaps the majority, reject in a given case the clear testimony of Scripture. We thank God for this assurance.¹³⁾ And out of this assurance Luther declared: "If therefore our subject of discussion is to be decided by the judgment of the Scripture, the victory is mine." (P. 382.) "All the gates of hell cannot bring them [the words of Scripture] to nothing." (P. 310.)

Modern theology is dominated by the spirit of doubt and uncertainty, which "believes that nothing ought to be believed with the confidence of settled faith. This incertitude is praised as the becoming posture of a cultured mind and applauded as the attitude of one who has attained a lofty superiority to all prejudice. . . . However excusable men may be for entertaining definite and certain beliefs about anything else, they cannot be allowed to hold more than provisional and transitory views concerning matters of religious faith." (W. A. Candler, *The Christ and Creed*, p. 29.) That applies also to our modern "conservative" theologians. Here

13) "Here there dare be no uncertainty. The soul demands a sure Archimedean point where it may stand, where faith can find a sure footing, where literary questions cannot disturb the facts, where an inner conviction, a *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum* brings absolute certainty to the soul. Such a sure foundation is to be found only in the Word of God." (Dr. J. C. Mattes, in the *Lutheran Church Quarterly*, Oct., 1937, p. 425.)

we have the great host of the unionists. The soul of unionism is indifference to doctrine. And here we have the great host of those who no longer believe in the inspiration of Scripture. There is not, and there cannot be, anything positive about their teaching. They do not deal in assertions but in "problems," as Dr. W. Laible said: "Ach, dieses 'Es steht geschrieben,' auch das ist veraltet—'Biblismus'! . . . Indem man aber die Schrift nicht mehr massgebend sein laesst, hat man die Leuchte Gottes verloren, die einzige Hilfe in der Nacht, in der wir stehen, die einzige Wegweisung auf dem Wege der Kirche. Ist es ein Wunder, wenn die 'Probleme' ungeloesst in der Luft wirbeln?" Everything has become problematical, uncertain, because inspiration itself is treated as a "problem." They are telling us: The Bible teaches inspiration, but it does not tell you definitely what inspiration is.— We need to get back to Luther, who taught us to say: "It is written!" It is absolutely true.— The editor of the *Living Church* had protested against promiscuous communion as a *hindrance* to union, and somebody wrote him a letter: "Do we understand that you are dogmatic in your conception of 'Holy Communion'? Do we understand that in the event of a world 'round table' on the subject of church unity you would refuse to budge on your views of Holy Communion to the point of preventing church unity? If you are dogmatic in this matter, just *how* dogmatic?" The editor answered with one brief word: "As DOGMATIC as the Holy Catholic Church." (Dec. 11, 1937.) If Erasmus had asked the "obstinate assessor" Luther: "Just *how* dogmatic are you?" Luther would have answered: "As DOGMATIC as Holy Scripture." We offer no apology for the dogmatic assertions of Luther. We offer no apology for the dogmatism of the Bible.

TH. ENGELDER

(To be continued)

Professional Growth in the Study of the Confessions

1

It is well that, when the "Pastor's Professional Growth" series was planned by the editors of the *Theological Monthly*, there was included in it also an article on the minister's professional growth in the study and knowledge of the confessions, both of our Lutheran Church and of other denominations. We state this because since time immemorial there has prevailed in some circles the false and hurtful notion that symbolics makes an extremely tedious study and that, since it is merely a sort of repetition of dogmatics, it ultimately matters very little whether one knows his *Concordia* or not. Comparative symbolics, of course, has usually been re-