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A Course in Lutheran Theology

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A Course in Lutheran Theology

(Continued)

The subject of our first study in *De Servo Arbitrio* was the *sola Scriptura*. The second deals with the *sola gratia*. *De Servo Arbitrio* is a powerful exposition of the fundamental truth that we owe our salvation exclusively to the grace of God, in no wise and in no degree to our own power and activity. "The true scope of *De Servo Arbitrio* is to prove that man is saved not by any ability or efforts of his own but solely by grace. . . . Everything is pressed into service to disprove and explode the assertion of Erasmus that the human will is able and 'does work something in matters pertaining to salvation' and to establish the monergism, or sole activity, of grace in man's conversion." (*Concordia Triglotta, Hist. Intr.*, p. 211.)¹⁴ Luther plainly indicates that as his

14) Cp. Th. Harnack, *Luthers Theologie*, p. 180 ff.: "Eben dies bildet, wie Ausgangspunkt und Ziel seiner Schrift, so die durchgaengige Basis derselben — er bekaempft ruecksichtslos die schriftwidrige und oberflaechliche Ansicht seines grossen Gegners, weil sie Gottes freie Gnade und Christi Verdienst schmaelert." W. Walther, *Lehrbuch der Symbolik*, p. 305: "In seiner Schrift *De Servo Arbitrio* hatte Luther des Erasmus Behauptung, der Mensch habe noch den freien Willen, sich einigermaßen dem Guten zuzuwenden, bekaempft und seine Glaubenserfahrung, dass unser Heil allein von Gott und seiner Erwaehlung abhaenge, verfochten." Do not misread the book! "The *De Servo Arbitrio* was not written to establish a philosophical opinion or defend a theological speculation but to prove that God's grace was the sole power that effected our salvation, because he was firmly convinced that he could only be sure of the fact of his own redemption" (salvation) "if God alone was its source, continuance, and consummation." (J. C. Mattes, in *Luth. Church Quarterly*, Oct., 1937, p. 414.) "Wenn also die Schrift *De Servo Arbitrio* die Absicht verfolgt haette, die Allwirksamkeit Gottes zu erweisen — wie noch heute manche 'Lutherforscher' lehren, so koennte sie ebensogut ungeschrieben bleiben. Wenigstens pflegt sich Luther sonst nicht bei Dingen aufzuhalten, die auch der ratio feststehen. . . . An der Begrueudung des Glaubens, naemlich an der Gewissheit des Heils, ist Luther aber auch in dieser Schrift viel, wenn nicht alles, gelegen. . . . Ueber allem, was von Rechtfertigung, Versoehnung und Erloesung gesagt wurde, steht: *Sola gratia*." (W. Elert, *Morphologie des Luthertums*, I, p. 106 f.)

chief theme: "Our salvation is apart from our own strength and counsel and depends on the working of God alone (which I hope I shall clearly prove hereafter in the course of this discussion)." (P. 72;¹⁵ cp. p. 35.) The sinner's conversion depends on the working of God alone. We do not effect it nor contribute anything towards it.¹⁶

This, then, is the issue between Luther and Erasmus, between the Lutherans and the synergists, "whether our own will does anything in those things which pertain unto eternal salvation or is only passive under the work of grace?" (p. 30). Erasmus answers: "I consider free will in this light, that it is a power in the human will by which a man may apply himself to those things which lead unto eternal salvation or turn away from the same." (P. 122. — *Diatribes*, XVIII, 1612. 1755.)¹⁷ "Judas had it in his power to change his own will." (P. 247.) "The human will is a something placed in a free medium; there is an endeavor which can exert itself either way." (P. 309.) Erasmus insists that "there are two causes of man's conversion, grace being the chief (*principalis*) cause and our will the lesser (*minus principalis*) cause... Both must be said: that God's grace works in us and that our will and endeavor cooperate with God" (*Diatribes*, XVIII, 1649). Luther affirms, "*dass der freie Wille nichts sei*"; that man of his own will, mind, power, contributes nothing towards his conversion; that "it is not in the power of the human will to choose" (p. 74); "that, when God is not present with us to work in us, everything that we do is evil and that we of necessity do those things which are of no avail unto salvation" (p. 72); "that the will cannot will anything but evil" (p. 247); that man, before he is regenerated into the new creation of the kingdom of the Spirit, does nothing and endeavors nothing towards his new creation into that kingdom;... but the Spirit alone effects both in us, regenerating us and preserving us" (p. 318); and all this by grace: "Grace is therefore needed and the assistance of grace is therefore given because 'free will' can of itself do nothing" (p. 320).¹⁸ What saith Scripture?

15) *The Bondage of the Will*, Cole-Atherton translation.

16) The entire work of salvation, conversion, and justification is God's work. We shall let Luther deal with the Semi-Pelagian-synergistic denial of the *sola gratia* in justification later on and confine ourselves for the present to the *sola gratia* in conversion.

17) The references in this form are to the St. Louis edition of Luther's works.

18) *De Servo Arbitrio*, denying the *liberum arbitrium*, does not deny that man can exercise somewhat a free choice in mundane matters. It "allows man a 'free will' not in respect of those things which are above him but in respect only of those things which are below him. . . . We know that man was constituted lord over those things which are beneath himself, over which he has a right and a free will, that they

The body of *De Servo Arbitrio* is made up of three parts, each of which deals with a series of Scripture-passages. The first part examines the passages adduced by Erasmus in the *Diatriba*. The second vindicates, against the strictures of the *Diatriba*, the proof from Scripture heretofore brought by Luther. In the third part, seeing "that the enemy is already dispatched by the one weapon or the other, I shall be as brief as the subject will allow; and from such numerous armies I shall produce only two champion generals with a few of their legions—Paul and John the Evangelist" (p. 324). Take time to study each one of these fifty and more Bible-verses and study them in the order in which Luther presents them. For the present we shall discuss only a portion of them. And we shall group what Luther says in connection with them under four heads.

First, Scripture tells those who imagine that "there is a power in the human will by which a man can apply himself to those things which lead unto eternal salvation "that their mind and will is utterly corrupt, altogether impotent in the spiritual sphere, capable only of evil and viciously active in it. Let those who find powers for good inhering in man study Gen. 6:3, 5: "Man also is

should obey him and do as he wills and thinks" (pp. 79, 378. — XVIII, 1957). It does not deny that it lies in the power of natural man to perform some outward works of the Law. It "grants that 'free will' can by its endeavor move itself in some direction unto good works or unto the righteousness of the civil or moral law" (p. 348. Cp. Apology, Art. 18). It does not deny that the will of the Christian, renewed in conversion, chooses and performs the good. "We are not now considering what we can do in cooperation with God. . . . God does not work in us without us, seeing that He has for this purpose created and preserved us" (spiritually), "that He might operate in us and that we might cooperate with Him: thus, by us He preaches, shows mercy to the poor, and comforts the afflicted." (P. 317 f.) Nor, finally, does the term *servum arbitrium*, "bondage of the will," at all imply that the will of man acts by compulsion, against its own will. "Will, whether divine or human, does what it does, be it good or evil, not by any compulsion, but by mere willingness or desire, as it were, totally free." (P. 41.) "If the will were forced, it would be no longer will." (P. 74.) The natural man indeed cannot will anything but evil, but his "will is led on and carried away by its own willing; no violence is done to its will, because it is not forced against its will" (p. 235). Just ask him! So also "the sons of God do good with a free will" (p. 190), not under compulsion, against their will. Just ask them! Natural man "is a captive, slave, and servant to the will of Satan" (p. 79); at the same time "he does not evil against his will as by violence, but he does it spontaneously and with a desirous willingness" (p. 72). So also the Christians "are led captives by the Spirit of God, at His will, so that we cannot will anything but that which He wills" (p. 74). At the same time their will is free: "When God works in us, the will, being changed and sweetly breathed on by the Spirit of God, desires and acts, not from compulsion but responsively, from pure willingness, inclination and accord. . . . This is the royal liberty." (P. 73.)—In this discussion the question: Has man a free will? means: Has the sinner a part in effecting his conversion, his salvation?

flesh. . . . Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually," and he must conclude with Luther: "Since men are 'flesh,' they can savor of nothing but flesh; so far is it from possibility that 'free will' should do anything but sin."... And "He does not say that man is intent or prone to evil but that evil altogether, and nothing but evil, is thought or imagined by man throughout his whole life." (Pp. 277. 279.) How much 'free will,' how much good, does Rom. 3:9 leave man? "He who describes them all as being 'under sin' leaves them no degree of good whatever." (P. 332.) And how can they strive after the good, get ready to submit to the Spirit of God, who *know nothing* of these things? "God *reveals* the righteousness of faith to them (Rom. 1:17) as being ignorant and sitting in darkness; therefore of themselves they know it not. . . . Nor can they extricate themselves therefrom nor endeavor to extricate themselves; for how can you endeavor if you know neither what you are to endeavor nor in what way nor to what extent you are to endeavor?" (P. 328.) "How should 'free will' discover Him [Christ] when it is itself dark and devoid even of the light of the Law, which might discover to it its disease, which disease in its own light it seeth not, but believeth it to be sound health, Rom. 3:20?" (P. 345.) On Rom. 3:19f: "Such ever has been, and still is, the hardness and insensible obstinacy of our hearts, that we never should of ourselves hear or feel the force of these thunder-claps or thunder-bolts but should, even while they were sounding in our ears, exalt and establish 'free will' with all its powers, in defiance of them." (P. 338.) Moreover, "here [Rom. 8:5 ff] let the advocate for 'free will' answer me: How can that endeavor toward good 'which is death' and 'which is *enmity against God*'?" (p. 364). Finally, this enmity is ever stimulated and absolutely *controlled by Satan*. "Satan is the prince of the world and rules in the wills and minds of those men who are his captives and servants. Shall that roaring lion, that implacable and ever restless enemy of the grace of God and the salvation of man, suffer it to be that man, his slave and a part of his kingdom, should attempt good by any motion in any degree, whereby he might escape from his tyranny, and that he should not rather spur and urge him on to will and do the contrary to grace with all his powers?" (P. 308.) Erasmus and the synergists actually teach that men, who are under the absolute domination of Satan, are able to engage in good and noble endeavors. Satan laughs at such madness.

This impotency and viciousness applies to the whole of man. Rom. 3:10-23 is clear and emphatic on this point. "What is it to be 'gone out of the way' and to 'have become unprofitable' but for men to have no power in one single faculty, and the least power

in their most noble faculties, to turn unto good, but only to turn unto evil?" (P. 335.) Again, if man is not corrupt in every faculty, "John ought not to say (John 3:18) of the *whole man* that he is condemned already but to speak thus: Man according to his 'grosser affections' is condemned already; but according to that which is best and 'most excellent' he is not condemned, because that endeavors after faith." And Luther adds: "Hence, where the Scripture so often saith 'All men are liars,' we must upon the authority of 'free will' say, The Scripture rather lies." (P. 377.)—Erasmus offers to bargain with Luther. He will be satisfied if Luther will let "free will" play any part, the least part, in the matter of salvation. "Erasmus would recommend to me that we should grant *some certain little* to 'free will.'" (P. 321.—*Diatrise*, XVIII, 1660.) Luther will grant nothing, "not any particle or power of 'free will'" (p. 372), "nicht ein Teilchen oder irgendeine Kraft des freien Willens" (XVIII, 1952), "nicht irgendein Fuenklein oder Meitlein vom freien Willen" (J. Jonas's translation, Walch, XVIII, 2460).—"The natural man is not able to do anything towards his conversion, either wholly or half or in any, even the least or most inconsiderable, part." (Form. of Conc., Trigl., p. 885.)

This utter lack of 'free will' is found in all natural men. Scripture puts all classes of men into one class. Every single one of them is spiritually impotent. "They are all under sin," Rom. 3:9, and "he who says 'all' excepts none. . . . "There is none that doeth good,' not even one of them." (P. 332 f.) "If there were any in the world who by the powers of 'free will' endeavored so as to attain unto good, John (in John 1:10) certainly ought in reverence for these persons to have softened down the term, lest by a word of such general application" (world) "he should involve them in all those evils of which he condemns the world." (P. 368.) Luther calls Rom. 1:18 to the attention of Erasmus and asks: "Were there no men out of these two most exalted nations (Jews and Greeks) who 'aspired to what was meritoriously good'? Were there none among men who thus aspired with all the powers of their 'free will'? Yet Paul makes no distinction on this account; he includes them all under wrath and declares them all to be ungodly and unrighteous." (P. 327.) "This also is no powerless thunderbolt where the apostle says: 'All have sinned and are without the glory of God; for there is no difference,' Rom. 3:23. What, I pray you, could be spoken more clearly? Produce one of your 'free will' workmen and say to me, Does this man sin in this his endeavor? If he does not sin, why does Paul not except him? . . . If therefore you except any man, for any kind of devoted desire or work, you make Paul a liar." And Luther is willing to put this to the

test of experience. "Put the question to all the exercisers of 'free will' to a man, and see if you can show me one who can *honestly* and from his heart say of any one of his devoted efforts and endeavors, This pleases God." (P. 350 f.) And still the synergists up to this day are dividing mankind into two classes, one of which is made of better stuff than the other and is able to overcome the resistance of the flesh to grace, able in some way or other to employ their natural powers to make the right use of the grace offered them, able to "apply themselves to those things which lead unto eternal salvation."

But some of the modern synergists here plead, There comes, in some unaccountable way, a season and day when the Holy Spirit finds the natural mind of man somewhat more accessible to grace; or, There are regions in the soul of man, where man finds some ability to exercise self-determination, efforts and endeavors towards the good. No, no, says Luther. He declares: "He that saith 'all' (Rom. 3:23) excepts no one in any place, at any time, in any work or endeavor" (p. 350), and on the authority of John 3:31: "If there were any power in man which at any time, in any place, or by any work did not savor of the earth, the Baptist ought to have excepted this person and not to have said in a general way concerning all those who are out of Christ that they are of the earth and speak of the earth" (p. 379).

A final point made by Luther in this connection should be stressed. Erasmus teaches that "'free will' is a power in the human will by which a man may apply himself to those things which lead unto eternal salvation or turn away from the same." That puts man into a neutral condition. "You who make it out that the human will is a something placed in a *free medium* and left to itself, certainly make it out at the same time that there is an endeavor which can exert itself either way." (P. 309.) But, says Luther, the human will is not left to itself. The will of the unconverted "is the captive of Satan." Satan does not permit his captives to remain neutral. At no time is the flesh, the natural mind and will, neutral. It is at all times, in every condition, on the side of Satan. It never engages in neutrality talk. It is always loyal "to the prince of the world" (p. 308). Apply this to the modern form of synergism, according to which natural man is indeed originally at warfare with God, but somehow or other some are put into a neutral state, occupy a *status medius*, by virtue of which these neutrals "can apply themselves to those things which lead unto eternal salvation or turn away from the same." No, says Luther. No, says Scripture. Before conversion all men are entirely flesh, opposed to God with every fiber of

their being, capable only of resisting grace, at no time, in no condition, neutral.¹⁹)

So what is left of "free will"? Nothing but the name. In 1518 Luther had declared: "*Liberum arbitrium post peccatum res est de solo titulo, et dum facit, quod in se est, peccat mortaliter.*" (13th Heidelberg Proposition. XVIII, 38.) The *Diatribes* is much exercised over this statement. (XVIII, 1630.) The fathers of Trent went into a paroxysm over it: "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, a figment, in fine, introduced into the church by Satan, let him be anathema." (Sess. VI, Can. XX.) And the synergists denounce it as extravagant language. But Luther will not change his language. The passages quoted constrain him to say again and again: "Free will is a mere empty term, whose reality is lost." (Pp. 139. 92. 94.) "These words [Rom. 3:20] bring that miserable thing 'free will' to nothing — nothing at all." (P. 347.) "Why do we so tenaciously hold an empty word, to the peril and mockery of the believing people? . . . This abuse of language does not befit theologians but only stage-players and public informers." (P. 78 f. — *Histriones et quadruplatores*; XVIII, 1722: "*Komoedianten und Betrueger*"; Schumacher's translation: "*Erzschelme und Gaukler.*")

How can theologians who accept the passages quoted as God's truth become or remain synergists? It is a mystery — a mystery of iniquity. "I must confess I am more than astonished that, when Paul so often uses those universally applying words 'all,' 'none,' 'There is none that doeth good; no, not one,' . . . I am more than astonished, I say, how it is that words and sentences, contrary and contradictory to these universally applying words and sentences, have gained so much ground, which say: There is something in man which is good and which endeavors after good." (P. 361 f.)

In the second place, it is grace alone that saves, converts the sinner. "Our salvation is apart from our own strength and counsel and depends on the working of God alone, which I hope I shall clearly prove hereafter in the course of this discussion." (P. 72.) Luther clearly proves (1) that the sinner *needs* God's grace. Towards the conclusion of his treatise he states: "For grace is there-

19) Discussing the matter psychologically. Luther says it would be "a certain logical subtlety" to say that "in the will of man there is a certain *willing*, which cannot indeed will good without grace, but which nevertheless, being without grace, does not immediately will nothing but evil, but is a sort of *mere abstracted willing*, vertible, upwards unto good by grace and downwards unto evil by sin." That is a psychological impossibility. "That desire and endeavor cannot be a mere *willing*; for *desire* must strive and attempt something (as good perhaps) and cannot go forth into nothing nor be absolutely inactive." (P. 137.)

fore needed, and the assistance of grace is therefore given, because 'free will' can of itself do nothing." (P. 320.) He had just quoted John 3:27: "A man can receive nothing except it were given him from heaven." And before that, having quoted Rom. 3:9: "They are all under sin," he had pointed out that "Paul's whole design is to make grace necessary to all men" (p. 336).

Scripture clearly teaches (2) that the sinner needs God's *grace*. Here, Rom. 9:30 f., "is a most clear testimony of Paul, proving that grace is given freely to the most undeserving and unworthy and is not attained unto by any devoted efforts, endeavors, or works, either small or great, of any men, be they the best and most meritorious" (p. 367). "God crowns the undeserving." (P. 268.) What does Rom. 9:13 teach? "It stands manifest that God called Jacob before he was born, because He loved him, but that He was not first loved by Jacob nor moved to love him from any merit in him." (P. 256.) What does Is. 40:2 teach: "She hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins"? Erasmus says: "It does not follow from this passage that man cannot by works morally good prepare himself for the favor of God." (P. 284.) Luther says: "My Isaiah stands victor over 'free will' and clearly shows that grace is given not to the endeavors of 'free will' but to sins and demerits." (P. 284.) And that applies not only in the matter of justification but also in the matter of conversion. Some present-day synergists hold that there are strivings and stirrings in some men which do not indeed merit the grace of conversion but prepare the way for it. Luther asks these men to study Rom. 10:24: "I was found of them that sought me not." That is to say: "It was given them to hear and know Christ, when before they could not even think of Him, much less seek Him or prepare themselves for Him by the power of 'free will.' From this example it is sufficiently evident that grace comes so free that *no thought concerning it or attempt or desire after it precedes.*" (P. 366.)

And (3) Scripture teaches that grace *does everything* in conversion. It teaches it in all those passages which declare that the sinner can do nothing towards converting himself or towards preparing himself for conversion. And it teaches it in all those passages which make the Holy Ghost the sole Author of conversion. "Man, before he is regenerated into the new creation of the kingdom of the Spirit, does nothing and endeavors nothing towards his new creation into that kingdom; . . . but the Spirit alone effects both in us, regenerating us, and preserving us when regenerated, without ourselves, as James saith: 'of His own will begot He us with the Word of Truth,' Jas. 1:18." (P. 318.) Turn again to John 15:5 and learn that "'free will' is a captive of Satan, which cannot be liberated unless the devil first be cast out

by the finger of God" (p. 309). Ask Jacob and every other child of God to what they attribute their deliverance from their former evil state. "Jacob attained unto that unto which Esau attained not solely by the grace 'of Him that calleth,' Rom. 9:11." (P. 253.) But you must read all the passages brought forward by Luther in this connection. When you find your synergistic flesh clamoring for a hearing, you must study "*De Servo Arbitrio*, where Luther presents from every point of view and magnifies in every way the power of the grace of God, the work of the Holy Ghost, who 'changes' the evil, wicked will of man, 'turns' and 'renews' it" (*Lehre u. Wehre*, 28, p. 388). May it be "given us to understand both truths: that we can do nothing of ourselves and next, if we do anything, God works that in us" (p. 186).²⁰

"As many places as there are in the Holy Scriptures" ("and what is more than half of the Holy Scriptures but mere promises of grace, by which mercy, life, peace, and salvation are extended from God unto men," p. 168) which make mention of assistance, so many are there which abolish 'free will' . . . Grace is therefore needed because 'free will' can of itself do nothing." (P. 320.) "Das nennt Luther seine 'gute, starke, feste, gewisse Folge, wenn ich sage: Die Schrift preiset allein Gottes Gnade, darum ist der 'freie Wille' nichts'; darum verleugnen die Schuetzer des freien Willens Christum." (Th. Harnack, *op. cit.*, p. 181. See St. L., XVIII, 1911. 1952.) — And the voice of the Pelagian and synergist is still heard in the Christian land!

In the third place, a further conclusive refutation of Erasmus's arguments for "free will" is provided by these very arguments themselves. Erasmus, too, quotes a lot of Scripture and most of the Scripture which he quotes consists of imperative and conditional statements. And this is his chief argument: Since God commands men to do good, to turn unto Him, it must lie in the power of man to effect his conversion, at least in part. He quotes Is. 21:12: "Return, come," and asks triumphantly: "Of what use is the appeal that they should turn and come to Him if they are absolutely not their own masters?" (*Diatribes*, XVIII, 1621.) He quotes Ecclus. 15:15-18 ("If thou wilt keep My commandments, . . ."); Is. 1:19 ("If ye be willing and obedient, . . .");

20) How grace effects the sinner's conversion is set forth in these words: "Those who, feeling their sins, are distressed and exercised with desperation are raised up by the word of promise." (P. 169 f.) "The riches of the kingdom of God are offered to the world by the Gospel. . . . The Gospel is nothing else than the word by which are offered unto us the Spirit, grace, and the remission of sins obtained for us by Christ Crucified, and all entirely free." (Pp. 187. 199.) Hearing "the Gospel voice, the sweetest consolation to miserable sinners: 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; . . . turn ye' (Ezek. 33:11)," the sinner, "his will being changed and sweetly breathed on by the Spirit of God," turns to Jesus and rejoices in the grace of God (pp. 73. 167).

Is. 52:1 ("Awake, awake"); Mal. 3:7 ("Return unto Me"); "Make you a new heart"; "Believe in Christ," and concludes: "If what is commanded be not in the power of every one, all the numberless exhortations in the Scriptures, and also all the promises, threatenings, expostulations, reproofs, asseverations, benedictions and maledictions, together with all the forms of precepts, must of necessity stand coldly useless." (Pp. 174. 206.) Erasmus is sure of his case. He has found many such passages, "a countless number." He tried to count them and found "that there are more than 600 such passages in Holy Scripture" (XVIII, 1640). But "if we can do nothing, to what purpose are so many laws, so many precepts, so many threatenings, and so many promises?" (p. 345).

When Erasmus "concludes: Man can do those things; otherwise the precepts are given in vain, this reply must be made: Madam Diatribe, you make a bad inference. . . . Does it follow also from 'Love the Lord, thy God, with all thy heart'—therefore thou art able to love with all thine heart?" (pp. 156. 162). Luther denies that the command presupposes and proves the ability to do it. And logic is on the side of Luther. A *praecepto ad posse non valet consequentia*. The same applies to conditional statements. Luther puts it this way: "If Caesar shall conquer the Turks, he shall gain the kingdom of Syria; therefore Caesar can conquer, and does conquer, the Turks." (P. 189.) Erasmus can prove his case with those 600 texts only by "teaching us, by a new kind of grammar, that *ought to be* is the same as *having been*" (p. 167); that "what is spoken imperatively and what is spoken indicatively, is the same thing" (p. 207). And "the *Diatribe* is so drowned, suffocated in, and corrupted with that sense of the carnal interpretation 'that impossibilities are commanded in vain' that it has no power over itself, but as soon as it hears an imperative or conditional word, it immediately tacks to it its indicative conclusions: A certain thing is commanded; therefore we are able to do it, or the command is ridiculous" (p. 272.—XVIII, 1872).²¹⁾

Furthermore, Erasmus's argument would prove too much, and whoever does that has lost his case. Erasmus combats the opinion of the Pelagian claim that conversion in its entirety is the work of man. But if the logic and grammar of Erasmus is correct, the command to believe proves not that man can assist in his conver-

21) Walther, *Law and Gospel*, p. 262: "The mere issuing of such demands" ("Do this, and thou shalt live"; "Awake") "does not prove that man can comply with them. An old and true maxim runs thus: *A debito ad posse non valet consequentia* (No valid conclusion can be drawn from an obligation to the ability to do it). When a creditor demands payment that does not prove that the debtor can pay." Lenski on 2 Cor. 5:20: "The synergistic reasoning is fallacious that, since God tells men to be reconciled, men must have the ability to obey."

sion but that he can effect the whole of it. "If the conclusion of the *Diatribes* stand good, the Pelagians have evidently established their point. . . . In what degree soever, therefore, you speak against the Pelagians, who from this passage" (and any one of the 600) "ascribe the whole to 'free will,' in the same degree, and with much more determination, shall we speak against that certain small remnant desire of your 'free will.' . . . If that conclusion of yours be admitted, it will make for the Pelagians against all the others; and, consequently, it makes against the *Diatribes*; which in this passage is stabbed by its own sword." (P. 149 f.) Let us glance at one more passage as interpreted by Erasmian logic and grammar, the first passage he quotes from the New Testament, Matt. 23:37-39. "It marches forth in front, as it were the Achilles of these flies." Erasmus argues that, if there are no powers of free will in the men of Jerusalem, the reproach "Ye would not" would be out of place. "Might not Jerusalem here have justly said in reply to the Lord, Why dost Thou weary Thyself with useless tears?" Luther replies: "That passage of Matthew either forcibly proves 'free will' altogether or makes with equal force against the *Diatribes* itself and strikes it prostrate with its own weapon." (P. 179 f.)

Finally, as to the argument of Erasmus that, if there were no spiritual power in man, these imperatives would be "ridiculous" and "out of place," Luther shows that these commands, invitations, and exhortations serve a good, necessary, and saving purpose. We have here, first, legal admonitions—"Keep the commandments." These are addressed to men "that it may plainly appear to them how unable they are to do it. . . . Human reason thinks that a man is mocked by a command impossible; whereas I say that the man by this means is admonished and roused to see his own impotency" (pp. 145. 153). We have, next, the evangelical invitations and exhortations. Imperatives are employed "that by them not only the impotency of 'free will' is shown, by which no one of those things can be done; but it is also signified that a time will come when all those things shall be done, but by a power not our own, that is, by the divine power" (p. 185). Erasmus knows nothing of the nature and power of these evangelical invitations. "Our friend *Diatribes* makes no distinction whatever between the voice of the Law and the voice of the Gospel." (P. 162.) The Gospel commands make no demand on us whatever, but offer the gifts of salvation, console and lift up the despairing sinner and thereby create the faith called for. "The word 'turn' in the evangelical sense is the voice of the divine consolation and promise by which nothing is demanded of us but in which the grace of God is offered unto us. . . . And that of

Christ (Matt. 11:28) 'Come unto Me, all ye that labor,' etc., is the Gospel voice and the sweetest consolation to miserable sinners... By this, as the word of offered grace, the bruised and afflicted are called unto consolation. . . . He is raising up and comforting the sinner lying under this affliction and desperation." (P. 162 ff.) And receiving this comfort means to believe. Offering the comfort is creating faith. When God bids a man to believe on the Lord Jesus, He is not making sport of the impotent sinner, but now "the time has come when all those things shall be done, but by a power not our own, that is by the divine power" inherent in the Gospel call.²²⁾ Finally we have the admonitions addressed to the converted, "by which they are animated, comforted, and raised up to go forward, to persevere, and to conquer" (p. 192), by which "Paul exhorts *Christians* to the fruits of faith" (p. 201).—No; these admonitions and commands—of whatever class—are not futile words. But they would be futile, of no use whatever, and altogether ridiculous if men were expected to follow them by their own natural power.

This argument of Erasmus, that the imperative and conditional statements in the Bible prove the ability of man, the power of 'free will,'—illogical and antiscritptural as it is,—exercises a strong fascination on men. Theologians of all times and of every description, Catholic and Protestant, have come under its sway.²³⁾ Irenaeus operated with it. "If it were not in our power to do or not to do these things, what reason had the apostles and much more the Lord Himself to give us counsel to do some things and to abstain from others?" (*Against Heresies*, IV, chap. 37, 4.) It is an axiom in Catholic theology: "God commands not impossibilities." (*Canons and Decrees of Trent*, Sess. VI, chap. XI.) It is, says Kromayer, the "*argumentum primum et palmarium Pontificiorum*" that, if man could not cooperate towards his conversion, there would be no sense in God's calling upon him to repent. (See Hoenecke, *Ev.-Luth. Dogmatik*, III, p. 286.) And the synergists within the Lutheran Church unhesitatingly adopt

22) "Walther points out that the words 'Repent ye and be converted' or 'Believe on the Lord Jesus,' addressed to men who are dead in sins, are like the words of Christ spoken to dead Lazarus: 'Lazarus, come forth,' that is, that *through these words* conversion, faith, life, is produced. 'Deswegen kann ein Mensch auf diese Worte sich bekehren, weil ihn Gott mit diesen Worten bekehrt.'" (*Lehre u. Wehre*, 36, p. 315f.) Cp. Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik*, II, 565 f., on *admonitiones legales* and *admonitiones evangelicae*.

23) The philosophers are no better. Kant himself is a victim. "Die bisherigen Ausfuehrungen Luthers zeigen, dass er fuer Kants (des 'Philosophen des Protestantismus') 'Du kannst, denn du sollst' sicher kein Verstaendnis gehabt haette." (Zickendraht, *Der Streit zwischen Erasmus und Luther*, p. 90.)

the wicked theology and faulty logic of Erasmus. Latermann declares in the spirit and with the assurance of Erasmus: "*Si conversio hominis a parte Dei tantum pendet, omnes adhortationes ad conversionem fore frustranes.*" (Baier, III, p. 223.) In our days, to mention a few typical examples, Luthardt has said: "Die Schrift bezeichnet die Bekehrung teils als ein Werk der Gnade, teils als eine Leistung des Menschen. . . . Busse und Glaube wird vom Menschen gefordert als seine Leistung: μετανοεΐν καὶ πιστεΐν — auf allen Stufen der Heilsgeschichte. Der Forderung der Busse soll und kann der Berufene alsbald nachkommen." (Luthardt-Jelke, *Komp. d. Dog.*, p. 384.) It does not enter the mind of Luthardt that some people might not see the force of the argument that, since God calls upon man to believe, man must be able to achieve his conversion, at least in part. Dr. W. Laible follows the same line of thought. He quotes Eph. 4:23: "Be renewed in the spirit of your mind," and says: "Mit diesem Gebot sagt Gott zum ersten, dass der Mensch sich erneuern kann. Er wuerde es nicht sagen, wenn es nicht moeglich waere." (*Allg. Ev.-Luth. Kircheng.*, Sept. 30, 1932.) To quote one American representative of this school of loose thinking, Dr. L. Keyser taught in *Election and Conversion*, (1914), p. 44: "Christ began to preach to unregenerate men by saying, 'Repent ye and believe the Gospel.' Why command them to do what they were utterly unable to do? . . . Why bid a man believe when he couldn't?" It is a deplorable situation. Dr. Stoeckhardt describes it thus: "The truth that faith and conversion is demanded and required does not permit the deduction 'that the performance lies in the will of man, which puts the offered power to the right use.' In the Lutheran Church this belongs to the rudimenta doctrinae. Modern theology, however, has completely lost sight of it." (*Lehre u. Wehre*, 32, p. 219. See also 43, 130 ff.) The course in Lutheran theology given in *De Servo Arbitrio* is much needed today. Luther tells these modern Lutherans: "Heap together out of the large concordances all the imperative words into one chaos, . . . and I will immediately declare that by them is always shown what men ought to do, not what they can do. . . . Thus 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." (P. 155. — XVIII, 1781.)

Nor do the other arguments and "Scripture-proofs" of Erasmus help the case of "free will." The desperation which inspired them proves that the case is hopeless. For instance, how does he treat John 15:5: "Without Me ye can do nothing"? "This passage,"

says the *Diatribē* (XVIII, 1646), "Luther considers his Achillean sword and invincible weapon." Luther: "I will just look on and see by what force the full-mouthed and heroic *Diatribē* will conquer my Achilles." (P. 305.) And how does Erasmus try to render the force of this blow harmless? It is a simple matter: "Without Me ye can do nothing,' that is, *perfectly*." (P. 306.) Luther of course answers that "nothing" means "nothing": "I stand by the natural and grammatical signification of the term, laughing both at your armies and at your triumphs." And he makes the additional point that, if "nothing" only means "nothing perfect," it does mean something good, albeit imperfect, and then "we may preach that the ungodly, who are without Christ, can, while Satan reigns in them and wars against Christ, produce some of the fruits of life, that is, that the enemies of Christ may do something for the glory of Christ" (p. 306).

Another sample: "The passage Rom. 9:11f: 'Jacob have I loved. . . . Not of works, but of Him that calleth,' the *Diatribē* evades by saying 'that it does not properly pertain to the *salvation* of man.'" (P. 251. *Diatribē*, XVIII, 1636.) Luther answers, first, that, whether these words pertain to salvation or not, the question is here whether *merit* comes into consideration, and "Paul proves that Jacob attained unto that unto which Esau attained not solely by the grace of 'Him that calleth.'" Secondly, "it is not only the external rule of servitude which is there spoken of but all that pertains to the Spirit of God; that is, the blessing, the Word, the Spirit, the promise, of Christ, and the everlasting kingdom. And this the Scripture more fully confirms afterwards, where it describes Jacob as being blessed and receiving the promises and the Kingdom. But it is wearisome to contend with these depraved attempts to pervert and evade the Scripture." (P. 254.)

Erasmus even tries this: "Nothing" in John 15:5 cannot mean absolutely "nothing," because that would mean "that 'free will' cannot even sin without Christ, whereas Luther, nevertheless, says 'that "free will" can do nothing but sin'" (p. 314. — *Diatribē*, XVIII, 1646). No comment.

One more Erasmian argument: "It is not to be believed that God would overlook an error in His Church for so many ages" (p. 96), meaning that the doctrine *de libero arbitrio* cannot be an error, since it has been taught by so many Fathers for so long a time. Luther answers, among other things, that "'these men of renowned talent' 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).²⁴

That is the best Erasmus can do for synergism. It leaves synergism in bad shape. But do not blame Erasmus too much. The case of "free will" is so bad that no advocate can save it.

In the fourth place, Luther, drawing the hideous picture of "free will," adds a few more strokes, which bring out in still stronger relief the utter incapacity of the natural will of man for good and its unlimited capacity for evil. It is found, according to Rom. 3:9, not only in the worst of men but also, in the same degree, in *the best of men*. Among those who are "under sin" "those must also be numbered who are the best and most laudable, who aspire after that which is meritorious and good with all the powers of 'free will'" (p. 334). Again, "'free will' is then the worst when it is the best; and *the more it endeavors, the worse it becomes*, and the worse it is. The words [Rom. 1:21] are plain; the division is certain; nothing can be said against it" (p. 332). Worse still, the closer God draws to the sinner, the more virulent and malignant the enmity of "free will" grows. Luther had pointed out that men "cannot *endeavor* to extricate themselves; for how can you endeavor if you know not what you are to endeavor after?" (p. 328). But what results when God endeavors to show them what is needful? What results when God reveals *the Law* unto them? "Being blinded and hardened by the flesh, they only become the worse the more they are judged." (P. 277.) And what results when the Gospel is preached to them? "It is confirmed even by this very scripture [Rom. 9:17 f.] . . . that an evil will could will nothing but evil and that, as the good which it hated was presented to it, it could not but wax worse and worse." (P. 229.) "Look at the Jews, instructed by so many wonders and so many successive prophets. What did they think of this way of righteousness? They not only did not receive it, but so hated it that no nation under heaven has more atrociously persecuted Christ unto this day (1 Cor. 1:23; Rom. 1:18)." (P. 329.) "Is this [Rom. 9:30 f.] not plainly saying that the endeavor of 'free will' is all in vain, even when it strives to do the best, and that 'free will' of itself can only fall back and grow worse and worse?" (P. 366.)²⁵

24) Pieper: "Despite the fact that synergism is the product of rationalism the synergistic arguments against the *sola gratia* are nothing but paralogisms, glaring offenses against logic, as we found when we reviewed the various objections to monergism. . . . What effect will a course in synergistic theology have on the youthful students? Since these objections operate with paralogisms, such a course is a systematic training in illogicalness." (*Christl. Dogm.*, II, 594. 597.) *Per contra*, if you need a course in logic, study *De Servo Arbitrio*.

25) Cp. *Proceedings, Noerdl. Dist.*, 1868, p. 13.

And, finally, if the flesh in the Christian cannot endeavor after good but strives only after evil, how dare the synergist say that there may be spiritual stirrings in the unconverted? "I omit to bring forward that truly Achillean scripture of mine, which the *Diatribes* proudly passes by untouched,—I mean that which Paul teaches Rom. 7 and Gal. 5, that there is in the saints and in the godly so powerful a warfare between the spirit and the flesh that they cannot do what they would. From this warfare I argue thus: If the nature of man be so evil even in those who are born again of the Spirit that it does not only not endeavor after good but is even averse to, and militates against, good, how should it endeavor after good in those who are not born again of the Spirit and who are still in the 'old man' and serve under Satan?" (P. 383. — XVIII, 1961.)

Pelagianism and synergism stand condemned at the bar of Scripture. "If our subject of discussion is to be decided by the judgment of Scripture, the victory in every respect is mine; for there is not one jot or tittle of the Scripture remaining which does not condemn the doctrine of 'free will' altogether." (P. 382.) There is not a single passage in Scripture behind which synergism may hide. And there are thousands of passages which forbid Erasmus to open his mouth in the Christian Church. In fact, all Scripture does that. It is not a Lutheran hyperbole to say: "The whole Scripture, in every letter and iota, stands on my side." (P. 324.) All Scripture is either Law or Gospel. And the Law, charging man with utter corruption, proclaims that "free will" can do nothing, and the Gospel publishes the sweet message that grace does everything.

How is it possible that in the face of this clear teaching of Scripture the Pelagian-synergistic heresy has found so many advocates among the theologians? Luther is amazed at this state of affairs. "I must confess I am more than astonished that, when Paul so often uses those universally applying words 'all,' 'there is none that doeth good; no, not one'. . ., so that, if any one wished to speak otherwise so as to be more intelligible, he could not speak in words more clear and more plain—I am more than astonished, I say, how it is that words and sentences contrary and contradictory to these universally applying words and sentences have gained so much ground, which say there is something in man which is good and which endeavors after good, as though that man, whoever he be, who endeavors after good, were not comprehended in this one word 'all' or 'none' or 'not.'" (P. 361. — XVIII, 1944.) And as Luther goes on to study the baneful nature and effect of this heresy, his amazement, his sorrow, and his hot indignation grow apace.

(To be continued)