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James I. Packer

*Oxford University, Oxford*

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# Luther Against Erasmus

JAMES I. PACKER

## I

On Sept. 6, 1524, Desiderius Erasmus, the foremost literary man of his day, sat in his study writing a letter to a distinguished friend and patron, Henry VIII, King of England. In the course of his letter came the words: "The die is cast. The little book on free-will has seen the light of day."<sup>1</sup> He was referring to his *Diatrise seu collatio de libero arbitrio* ("Discussion or Conference Concerning Free Will"), which had been published at Basel five days earlier. He wrote more truly than he knew. The die was now cast indeed. A Rubicon had been crossed, and one of the great storms of history was about to break.

Why had Erasmus written — at a single sitting, we are told — this "little book on free-will"? Because he had become convinced that the only way of keeping the friends on whose generosity and protection his career depended was publicly to dissociate himself from that stormy petrel, Martin Luther, whose revolutionary views and fiery manner of expressing them in print were setting all Christendom by the

<sup>1</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, "Erasmus Roterdamus Regi Angliae Henrico Octavo S.D.," *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterdami*, ed. P. S. Allen, V. (Oxonii: In Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1924), 541, No. 1493.

*James I. Packer, an Anglican clergyman of the evangelical persuasion, is at Latimer House, Oxford University, Oxford, England. The paper was delivered to the pastoral conference of the English Evangelical Lutheran Church, Oct. 30, 1964.*

ears. Thereby hangs a tale, which we must briefly tell.

Born at Rotterdam in 1466, the illegitimate son of a priest and a doctor's daughter, Erasmus had become Europe's leading classical scholar before Luther's public career began. The position he had gained was that of what we would now call a literary lion. There was an open door for him into all the cultured circles which the Renaissance had brought into being, and he could command a welcome as an honored guest in any university. Aspirants after scholarly distinction scraped his acquaintance and took their cue from him. His words and attitudes had wide influence, and his support was an asset to any cause.

Though primarily a philologist, classicist, and satirist, rather than a theologian, Erasmus was not wholly secular in his interests. In 1516 he brought out his pioneer critical edition of the Greek New Testament, and since 1502, when he wrote *Enchiridion militis Christiani* ("The Christian Soldier's Handbook"), he had not sought to conceal his concern that abuses in the church should be removed. His ideal of reformation, however, was neither as thoroughgoing nor as evangelical as that which Luther later maintained. In face of obscurantism, superstition, corruption, and moral laxity, Erasmus pleaded for a return to the "Christian philosophy" (*philosophia Christiana*) of the New Testament. But by this he meant New Testament ethics rather than New Testament doctrine. For Erasmus did not regard questions of theo-



logical truth as having ultimate importance for the Christian man. His attitude was that as long as one tries to be good and says one's prayers, keeping humble and admitting one's faults and weaknesses, being loyal as a churchman and law-abiding as a citizen, one need not bother one's head about matters of doctrine. Theological debates could safely be left to the theologians; they did not concern the ordinary Christian one way or the other. What Erasmus sought, then, was a reformation, not of doctrine, but simply of manners. And he believed that the classical studies which he loved had an important part to play in bringing about such a reformation. His ideal was to unite "good letters" (the classics) with "sacred letters" (the Bible), for the furthering of a moral culture and a cultured morality. Hence, on principle as well as from inclination, he was always a man of peace, for he knew that humanistic studies could not prosper in conditions of social or ecclesiastical instability. Anything disruptive or revolutionary was anathema to Erasmus, and his instinct was to keep clear of such things if he possibly could.

In 1517 Dr. Martin Luther, aged 34, professor of Biblical studies at Wittenberg University, was suddenly catapulted into prominence by broadcasting throughout Germany in broadsheet form his Ninety-five Theses against the current theology of indulgences. When Luther followed this up with a shower of inflammatory pamphlets assailing accepted ideas on a whole series of topics relating to the doctrine and life of grace, Erasmus' feelings were mixed. He did not see the point of Luther's protests, nor did he like their ferocious polemical style; yet he sym-

pathized with many of Luther's grievances against current evils, and was not prepared to join the chorus of those who cried out against him. For some years, therefore, when asked for his views on Luther, Erasmus contented himself with observing that Luther's motives were transparently honest and his intentions undoubtedly good, which was more than could be said of some of the latter's opponents. So in 1520 we find him, when quizzed by Luther's patron and protector, Frederick the Wise, making his famous remark: "Luther has committed a great sin; he has hit the monks in their belly and the Pope in his crown!" ("What a wonderful little man," Frederick grumbled afterwards; "you never know where you are with him.") Erasmus would not pronounce against Luther, but at the same time he had no intention of getting involved in the storm Luther was raising.

But the situation soon reached a point where Erasmus felt he could no longer stand aloof. In 1520 the Pope excommunicated Luther for heresy. In the same year Luther denounced the papal claim to supremacy, burned the Pope's bull of excommunication, attacked the established sacramental and hierarchical system (*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*), and called on the estates of the Empire to summon a council and reform the German church at once (*Address to the German Nobility*). Erasmus' unwillingness to condemn Luther, coupled with his own known wish for reform, had already brought him under suspicion of being a crypto-Lutheran. For a time he had been content merely to joke about the accusation that, as he once put it, he had laid the egg which Luther hatched, and he must have thought it very



funny to be suspected, as in 1521 he was, of being the real author both of Luther's *The Babylonian Captivity* and of Henry VIII's *Assertion of the Seven Sacraments*, written in reply to it! But things were getting beyond a joke. Erasmus had powerful enemies, and with Luther in utter disgrace, it was becoming increasingly important for the master of "good letters" that nobody should be able to take him for a Lutheran in disguise. In 1520 he had been offered a bishopric if he would write against Luther, and he had refused; but in 1523 he decided, reluctantly as we may believe, that he would have to take this step after all. Rupp calls his decision to oppose Luther in print Erasmus' "greatest act of appeasement."<sup>2</sup>

Having made his decision, Erasmus faced the problem of finding a suitable topic on which to write. In 1520 Luther had published a counterblast to his excommunication entitled *Assertion of All of the Articles of Dr. Martin Luther Condemned by the Bull of Leo X*. The 36th of these reaffirmed articles described free will as a mere fiction. This paradoxical thesis seemed to Erasmus to provide an ideal theme for his purpose. The defense of free will accordingly became the subject of his *Diatribes*.

## II

Inspection shows that Erasmus' book is intended to make three points: one about Luther, one about Erasmus, and one about the topic announced in its title.

(1) Regarding Luther, Erasmus seeks to make his readers feel that a certain

<sup>2</sup> [Ernest] Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God: Luther Studies* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), p. 268.

unbalance and, as we should say, crankiness marks him. The prefatory section of the book (the substance of which, writes Erasmus, "appears more important than the disputation paper"<sup>3</sup>) is a long reflection on the fact that on an issue that is obscure and in practice unimportant, at a point where Holy Scripture is unclear and no good purpose can be served by controversy, Luther has taken up an extreme and eccentric position, in which he has the weight of ecclesiastical opinion against him and is now arguing it in a way that cannot but seem arrogant, opinionated, and pastorally irresponsible. Erasmus insinuates that Luther is, to say the least, conceited and lacking in a sense of proportion.

(2) Regarding himself, Erasmus is at pains to appear, by contrast to Luther, reasonable, tolerant, peace-loving, and humble. He dwells on his distaste for "assertions" and polemics. He assures us that on many aspects of the free-will question he keeps an open mind and is ready to learn from those better instructed. His book, he explains, is merely a discussion of the problem, not a determination of it; all he is doing is tentatively to submit his present views for the judgment of others. He invites his readers to applaud his moderation, just as he invites them to censure Luther's apparent extremism and arrogance.

(3) Regarding free will, Erasmus is concerned to say, mildly but firmly, that it is undoubtedly real in the sense that,

<sup>3</sup> Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther, *Erasmus-Luther: Discourse on Free Will*, trans. and ed. Ernst F. Winter (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing Co., c. 1961), p. 12. (This book contains a full English translation of the *Diatribes*.)



as most churchmen have always believed, fallen man still retains power to "apply himself to or turn from that which leads unto eternal salvation."<sup>4</sup> Erasmus thinks of God as, first, the lawgiver, laying down the terms on which salvation may be had, and, second, the helper, strengthening those who choose to follow after salvation so that they actually fulfill the prescribed conditions and attain that which they desire. He illustrates his view of free will and grace by the analogy of a father and a baby boy who cannot quite walk. The father sets before the child an apple some way beyond its reach. The child stretches for the apple but cannot touch it, nor, unaided, can he walk towards it. However, the father lifts him to his feet and holds him up. Thus supported, he is now able to toddle over to where the apple is. "Thus the child comes, led by the father, to the apple, which the father places willingly into his hand, like a reward for his walking. The child could not have raised itself without the father's help; would not have seen the apple without the father's showing; would not have stepped forward without the father's helping his weak little steps; would not have reached the apple without the father's placing it into his hand. What can the child claim for himself? Yet he did do something. . . . Let us assume it is the same with God. . . ." <sup>5</sup> Erasmus here shows himself to be firmly anchored in the "semi-Pelagian" legalism of the Middle Ages, according to which one's will to do good works merits divine help for the doing of them. On this view, the decisive factor in salvation is man's

meritorious choices. Erasmus assumes without question, first, that the Gospel has the nature of law — "do this, and live" — and, second, that all men can will the will of God, even though they lack power to perform it. It is this scheme that is in his mind when he writes: "I like the sentiments of those who attribute a little to the freedom of the will, the most, however, to grace."<sup>6</sup> Erasmus thinks of the bringing of man to glory as a joint enterprise in which, though God does the lion's share, the issue depends ultimately on our own acts of will.

Strangely enough, Erasmus had no idea that there was any deep cleavage between Luther and himself over this scheme. In 1523 he had written to Zwingli: "I think I have taught almost everything that Luther teaches, only I have not done it so fiercely and have abstained from certain riddles and paradoxes."<sup>7</sup> He did not see that Luther's teaching about divine grace abolishes "semi-Pelagian" legalism altogether. Luther's blunt statement at the end of his reply, "God has not yet willed nor granted that you should be equal to the subject of our present debate,"<sup>8</sup> was no more than the truth.

Yet for all that, Erasmus lives triumphantly on. Thousands on the fringes of

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 92 f.

<sup>7</sup> [Desiderius] Erasmus, "Erasmus to Zwingli," *Luther's Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters*, trans. and ed. Preserved Smith and Charles M. Jacob, II (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1918), 198; cited from E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, c. 1950), p. 687.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. and ed. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Westwood, N. J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1957), pp. 319 f.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 86 f.



our churches, and many who are much nearer the center than that, still think Erasmus' thoughts and speak with Erasmus' accents. Such people manifest, first, an attitude of doctrinal indifferentism. "Oh," they say, "what matters is not what a man believes but what he is and does. Leave theology to the theologians, and let us plain men get on with the business of living. It's the way you live that counts." With this they manifest a spirit of soteriological optimism. "Do your best," they say, "and God will certainly smile on you and help you and accept you. He is good and kind and will never reject anyone who lives a decent, honest life. God is merciful, so salvation presents no problem, and there is no need to worry about it. Why some people get troubled about their salvation we cannot understand—unless it just means that they are morbid or psychologically odd." But doctrinal indifferentism linked with soteriological optimism—unconcern about "the redemption that is in Christ Jesus," plus confidence in the goodness of natural man—is the essence of the standpoint of Erasmus. The truth seems to be that there is more of the Erasman outlook in our English churches at the present time than there is of any other sort of thinking. The issue over which Luther and Erasmus clashed thus remains a live one, and the battle which Luther fought against the Erasman version of the religion of the natural man still needs fighting today.

### III

How did Luther react to Erasmus' essay? In the words of Margaret Mann Phillips, he "met the graceful little book with a

bomb."<sup>9</sup> In December 1525, he published a full-scale reply, four times the length of Erasmus' "little book," under the unpromising title *De servo arbitrio* ("Of the Slave Will"). This reply was described by B. B. Warfield as "in a true sense, the manifesto of the Reformation."<sup>10</sup> Professor Gordon Rupp has quoted with approval a contemporary description of it as "the finest and most powerful *Soli Deo Gloria* to be sung in the whole period of the Reformation."<sup>11</sup> Luther himself afterwards declared that of all his published works it alone, along with his little catechism for children, deserved to survive, for it alone was "right" (*justum*).<sup>12</sup> It is undoubtedly the greatest piece of sustained theological writing that he ever did, and it stands for all time as the clearest, indeed, the classical elucidation of what the Reformation conflict was all about.

A word must be said at the outset concerning the tone and temper of Luther's frequent personal references to Erasmus. To Erasmus himself they seemed needlessly bitter and gratuitously offensive, and many since have agreed with him. But it must be remembered that the main point of the *Diatribes* had been a personal one—that Luther had shown himself inconsiderate and irresponsible in making the de-

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Mann Phillips, *Erasmus and the Northern Renaissance* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1950), p. 197.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, "The Theology of the Reformation," *Studies in Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 471.

<sup>11</sup> Rupp, p. 283.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther, "Luther an Wolfgang Capito in Strassburg," *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Br. 8 (Weimar: Herman Böhlau Nachfolger, 1938), 99 (Cited as WA). *De Servo Arbitrio* is in WA 18, 600—787.



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nial of free will an issue, and that by contrast Erasmus' strictures upon him for taking this line were the acme of Christian sobriety and good sense. For a full answer, therefore, Luther was bound to show why the denial of free will was of such capital importance as to require the emphasis he gave it, and this meant that he had to controvert not merely Erasmus' arguments but also Erasmus' assumption that the question itself was unimportant. Luther believed that every Christian knows from personal experience that this issue is crucial: how, then, could the great and learned Erasmus not know it? Luther felt fully entitled in the circumstances to raise the question—which is all that his personal references are really doing—whether Erasmus himself is not a stranger to grace, for, says Luther grimly, he certainly thinks and writes like one. Or, rather (since Luther's treatise was cast in the form of an open letter to Erasmus), "you think and write like one!" This was certainly straight speaking, but it was not prompted by either vainglory or contempt. Instead, Luther's attitude to Erasmus was one of undisguised pastoral concern. "Who knows," he wrote, "but that God may even condescend to visit you, most excellent Erasmus, by me, His poor weak vessel, and I may come to you by this book in a happy hour and gain a beloved brother. From my heart I beseech the Father of mercies through Christ our Lord that it may be so."<sup>13</sup> There is no reason to suspect Luther of insincerity here.

Luther's regular way in controversy, like that of most 16th-century writers, was to

<sup>13</sup> Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, pp. 64 f.

meet his opponents on their own ground, to accept their statement of the issues in dispute and to make his rejoinders in the form of critical comments on what they had said, paragraph by paragraph. Such a method is thorough but tortuous, and the reader of *De servo arbitrio* often finds it hard to see the wood for the trees, in Philip S. Watson's judgment. Luther's "real intentions are not a little obscured because he adheres so closely to Erasmus' statement of the issue."<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, instead of following Luther's own order of exposition, we shall now arrange his main contentions in the way which will bring out most clearly their basic thrust.

Two points serve to define Luther's approach to the debate, as contrasted with that of Erasmus.

(1) *The Crucial Nature of the Free-will Question*

Luther thanks Erasmus for giving him his first opportunity to treat fully the matter which had been his own main concern all along.

You alone . . . have attacked the real thing, that is, the essential issue. You have not worried me with those extraneous issues about the Papacy, purgatory, indulgences, and such like—trifles, rather than issues—in respect of which almost all to date have sought my blood . . . you, and you alone, have seen the hinge on which all turns, and aimed for the vital spot [literally, "taken me by the throat"]. For that I heartily thank you; for it is more gratifying to me to deal with this issue.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Philip S. Watson, *Let God be God! An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, c. 1947), p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, p. 319.



The question whether or not man has free will, in Erasmus' sense of the term, was to Luther the hinge of the whole Reformation debate. Why did he regard it so? Because, to him, what he and his opponents were really arguing about was whether the Christian message tells man how, with God's help, he may save himself, or whether Christianity declares that it is God in Christ who saves, and God alone. Luther's fundamental purpose as theologian and churchman was to explicate and establish the second way against the medieval habit of taking the first for granted. All his reforming activity sprang from this concern. And the reason he saw the free-will question as "the hinge on which all turns" was that the assertion of free will, in Erasmus' sense, is basic to the first position, whereas the denial of it undercuts at a stroke every form of the gospel of self-salvation and shuts us up to the second view, making us spiritual realists by forcing us to recognize that unless God freely works our whole salvation, we cannot be saved at all.

Luther's exposition of his thesis that we are saved by grace alone has two parts. The first and better-known part is his insistence that we are justified not on the ground of any merit of our own (for we have none) but through God's own gift of righteousness, freely bestowed on us in virtue of the obedience and sacrifice of Christ and received through faith alone. The second part, often underemphasized today, is his equally vigorous insistence that our very faith depends not on any natural ability to trust God (again, we have none) but on God's calling; that is, His supernatural work by the Spirit of creating in us a response to the word of

the Gospel. God in grace gives not only righteousness but also faith to receive it. First to last, salvation is of the Lord. The importance of the doctrine of the enslaved will is that it clears the road for this account of salvation by grace, by establishing the inability of sinners to supply either works or faith from their own natural resources.

Erasmus had dismissed the free-will debate as "idle" and "superfluous" from the standpoint of piety. It will be in the interest of Christian practice, he had said, if a ban is placed on it. Luther castigates him for this. If, says Luther, the "common-sense" assumption of human ability goes unchallenged, nobody will ever attain to the practice of true piety at all.

For if I am ignorant of the nature, extent, and limits of what I can and must do with reference to God, I shall be equally ignorant and uncertain of the nature, extent, and limits of what God can and will do in me—though God, in fact, works all in all. . . . Now, if I am ignorant of God's works and power, I am ignorant of God Himself, and if I do not know God, I cannot worship, praise, give thanks, or serve Him, for I do not know how much I should attribute to myself and how much to Him. We need, therefore, to have in mind a clear-cut distinction between God's power and ours, and God's work and ours, if we would live a godly life.<sup>16</sup>

The man who never learns to reject the false assumption that he has free will, and who in consequence is never weaned away from the self-confident, self-reliant religion to which this assumption gives rise, will never know Christ, or worship God in truth. "If we know nothing of these

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.



things," declares Luther roundly, "we shall know nothing whatsoever of Christianity."<sup>17</sup>

(II) *The Necessity of Dogmatism in a Christian*

Erasmus had expressed distaste for the positive, definite, categorical way in which Luther held his views and had abjured any such attitude on his own part. "So great is my dislike of assertions that I prefer the views of the Sceptics wherever the inviolable authority of Scripture and the decision of the Church permit. . . ."<sup>18</sup> Luther finds this shocking.

To take no pleasure in assertions is not the mark of a Christian heart; indeed, one must delight in assertions to be a Christian at all. . . . Away, now, with Sceptics . . . let us have men who will assert. . . . Take away assertions, and you take away Christianity. . . . What Christian can endure the idea that we should deprecate assertions? That would be denying all religion and piety in one breath.<sup>19</sup>

Why is Luther so insistent here? Because of what he believes about Holy Scripture and the Holy Spirit. Holy Scripture, he maintains, is not the obscure book that late medieval theology made it out to be, but a book that is in itself perfectly clear, provided only that one acknowledges the Christ of Scripture as the key to Scripture and reads everything in the light of His work. It is true that the natural man is unable to perceive the Biblical message to be divine truth, but this is not because the message is unclear; it is because his

mind is darkened and blinded through sin. (Luther maintains the blindness of the *mind* as well as the bondage of the *will*.) The Holy Spirit, however, is given to cure this blindness and to write on our hearts, as truth from God, the Biblical proclamation of Christ.

The truth is that nobody who has not the Spirit of God sees a jot of what is in the Scriptures. All men have their hearts darkened, so that, even when they can discuss and quote all that is in Scripture, they do not understand or really know any of it. They do not believe in God, nor do they believe that they are God's creatures, nor anything else. . . . The Spirit is needed for the understanding of all Scripture and every part of Scripture.<sup>20</sup>

"Believe" and "understand" here are words which point to a God-given, experimental, "existential" conviction of divine truth—the kind of conviction which, to Luther's mind, Erasmus patently lacked. So he writes: "Leave us free to make assertions, and to find in assertions our satisfaction and delight; and you may applaud your Sceptics and Academics—till Christ calls you too! The Holy Spirit is no Sceptic, and the things He has written in our hearts are not doubts or opinions, but assertions—surer and more certain than sense and life itself."<sup>21</sup>

This being so, Luther insists, Christianity is necessarily confessional. To confess Christ and the truth about Him is the heart of the Christian calling and the basic activity of every man into whose life the Spirit of God has come. "The Holy Spirit is given to Christians from heaven in order that He may glorify Christ and in them

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Erasmus and Luther, *Erasmus-Luther: Discourse on Free Will*, p. 6. Cf. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, pp. 66, 68.

<sup>19</sup> Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, pp. 66 f.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 73 f.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 70.



confess Him even unto death."<sup>22</sup> Christianity is thus by its very nature an assertive, dogmatic faith. Luther knows, of course, that the world and the church are often bedeviled by a dogmatism which springs from nothing higher than pig-headedness, obscurantism, and sheer superstition, but he disclaims all intention of defending dogmatism of that sort. His point is not that it is never desirable to have an open mind, but simply that on the central issues of the Gospel—the person, place, and work of Jesus Christ, the *sola gratia*, and the way of salvation—an open mind, so far from being a true expression of Christian humility and self-distrust, is sub-Christian and indeed anti-Christian, for it argues ignorance, both theological and experimental, of the work of the Holy Spirit. The question Luther would press on anyone who, like Erasmus, extolled an undogmatic temper in Christian theology would be this: Do you believe in the Holy Ghost?

#### IV

From what has been said so far, we have seen that the thesis of *De servo arbitrio* is one which Luther regards as essential to the Gospel and one about which he expects every Spirit-taught man to be clearly and strongly convinced. What, now, is this thesis? In a sentence, it is that fallen man is by nature the helpless slave of sin and Satan, so that when he is saved, his salvation is the work of God alone. Luther once described Paul's aim in Romans as being to magnify sin, in order that he might magnify grace. This was precisely Luther's own aim when he wrote against Erasmus. The full expli-

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

tion of his thesis requires us to consider three topics.

#### (I) *Man's Will*

In discussing the human will, both Erasmus and Luther were encumbered by the theological and philosophical vocabulary which they inherited. The traditional term "will" (*arbitrium*, "power of decision") could be used in both psychological and metaphysical contexts, and these two spheres of discourse were not clearly differentiated in Luther's day. Also, the very use of the word tended to encourage the conception of a man's will as something distinct from him and in a sense external to him, in the way that his hand, foot, or finger, or his faculties of sight and hearing are. This, of course, is a mistake; "will" does not denote a particular part of man, but the word has to be understood as a logical abstraction denoting man himself, viewed as a conative, active, and morally responsible being. The will is the self, regarded from a particular point of view. Thus the question of whether the will is free is, and always was, really the question of whether we, as men, are free in the decisions we make. Erasmus' mind is patently confused about this; Luther, however, shows himself clearly aware of the bondage of the will, and throughout his treatise we find him skillfully manipulating the traditional vocabulary of free will in order to make it express the Biblical truth that the natural man in all his decisions shows himself to be enslaved to the powers of evil, sin, and Satan until grace sets him free to serve God.

Free will, says Luther, is something that exists, not simply when an agent has power to make a personal choice as distinct from being compelled to act willy-nilly, but



when the agent has power in himself to choose all the various alternatives which the situation presents to him. If, however, he has not (as we say) "got it in him" to choose one or more of them, then to that extent free will is lacking to him. Thus we may truly say that man has free will in relation to "things below him"—that is, the created order, which man was made to rule—because he really has "got it in him" to choose at each point any of the whole gamut of physical possibilities. "Man should realise that in regard to his money and possessions he has a right to use them, to do or to leave undone, according to his own 'free-will.'" <sup>23</sup> According to Luther, then, we all have genuine free will in regard to whether or not we have marmalade, honey, or jam for breakfast, whom we marry, what career we take up, whether we spend our money on a car or not, and, if so, what car we buy, and all decisions of that order. Also, says Luther, we all have genuine free will in relation to civil righteousness and the outward keeping of the Moral Law. Luther has no wish to deny that we have "got it in us" to keep the rule of the road, or to pay our income tax, or to tell the truth. But Erasmus had defined free will as power to "apply to, or turn from, that which leads to eternal salvation." That means, as Luther expands the definition, "a power of the human will which can of itself will and not will the word and work of God, by which it is to be led to those things that exceed its grasp and comprehension. If it can will and not will . . . it can in measure keep the law and believe the gospel." <sup>24</sup> And it is here, Luther insists,

in relation to "things above him"—God, and the Word of God—that fallen man lacks free will, and the free will that he fancies he has is a nonentity. For the truth about him is that deliberately, spontaneously, heartily, voluntarily, he always chooses the way of noncompliance and nonconformity when the full demands of the Law confront him. Thus he shows himself to be what Scripture declares him to be—the slave of sin.

Erasmus had invoked God's repeated summons to us in the Scriptures to choose the path of obedience and life as proof that we all have power to make such a choice; if we lacked this power, said Erasmus, the summons would be completely pointless. Not at all, replies Luther; the summons is issued in order to make us discover in experience that we lack power to respond to it, and so to make us realize our inability to save ourselves. Satan would hide this inability from us by deceiving us about ourselves; but God sends His law to "undeceive" us, and so to prepare us to receive His grace.

The Scripture sets before us a man who is not only bound, wretched, captive, sick and dead, but who, through the operation of Satan his lord, adds to his other miseries that of blindness, so that he believes himself to be free, happy, possessed of liberty and ability, whole and alive. Satan knows that if men knew their own misery he could keep no man in his kingdom; God could not fail at once to pity and succour wretchedness that knew itself and cried to Him, for God is proclaimed with mighty praise throughout the Scripture as being near to the broken-hearted. . . . Hence, the work of Satan is to hold men so that they do not recognize their wretchedness, but presume they can do everything that is stated. But the work of Moses the lawgiver is the opposite of this

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107; see AC XVIII; Ap XVIII 70.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.



—namely, through the law to lay open to man his own wretchedness, so that, by thus breaking him down, and confounding him in his self-knowledge, he may make him ready for grace, and send him to Christ to be saved.<sup>25</sup>

The law of God, with its daunting standards and its inexorable sanctions, works in our consciences, on the one hand, a sense of our need of righteousness and, on the other hand, an awareness of our lack of it and our consequent exposure to God's wrath and condemnation. The doctrine of the will's slavery to sin deepens this latter awareness and extends it into a realization that not only do we lack righteousness now, but we have no ability, try as we will, to achieve righteousness in the future. The prisoners have no strength to break their bonds, for the bonds are in truth part of themselves. A man sins because he is a sinner by nature, and is not free from righteousness. This is what slavery to sin means. The knowledge that there is no such thing in man as free will in Erasmus' sense—power, that is, to please God, to gain merit, and so to secure divine help for salvation—thus completes the work of the Law and drives men into the self-despair of conscious impotence which is the necessary preparation for grace. Writes Luther:

God has surely promised His grace to the humbled: that is, to those who mourn over and despair of themselves. But a man cannot be thoroughly humbled till he realises that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, counsels, efforts, will and works, and depends absolutely on the will, counsel, pleasure and work of Another—God alone. As long as he is persuaded that he can make even the smallest

contribution to his salvation, he remains self-confident and does not utterly despair of himself, and so is not humbled before God; but plans out for himself (or at least hopes and longs for) a position, an occasion, a work, which shall bring him final salvation. But he who is out of doubt that his destiny depends entirely on the will of God despairs entirely of himself, chooses nothing for himself, but waits for God to work in him; and such a man is very near to grace for his salvation.<sup>26</sup>

## (II) *God's Rule*

Part of Erasmus' trouble, says Luther, is that his thoughts of God are "too human." He thinks of God as merely a spectator of man's actions, just as we are spectators of each other's actions. But in fact God is far more than this. Not only is He an observer of men's actions; He is in a real sense the doer of them. God works in all. The commonsense idea that in human action God is more or less passive, so that man stands over against God as an independent agent, is an illusion. Erasmus' conception of free will as a power in the exercise of which God plays no part is unbiblical, untheological, and untrue. The truth is that God is always active everywhere, energizing each created thing to act according to its nature. This is true of Satan no less than of men, and of unregenerate men no less than of the regenerate. Luther states the matter thus:

Now, Satan and man, being fallen and abandoned by God, cannot will good (that is, things that please God, or that God wills), but are ever turned in the direction of their own desires, so that they cannot but seek their own. . . . Since God moves and works all in all, He moves and works of necessity even in Satan and the

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.



ungodly. But He works according to what they are, and what He finds them to be: which means, since they are evil and perverted themselves, that when they are impelled to action by the movement of Divine omnipotence they do only that which is perverted and evil. It is like a man riding a horse with only three, or two, good feet; his riding corresponds with what the horse is, which means that the horse goes badly. . . .

Here you see that when God works in and by evil men, evil deeds result; yet God, though He does evil by means of evil men, cannot act evilly Himself, for He is good, and cannot do evil; but He uses evil instruments. . . . The fault which accounts for evil being done when God moves to action lies in these instruments, which God does not allow to be idle. In the same way a carpenter would cut badly with a saw-toothed axe. Hence it is that the ungodly man cannot but err and sin always, because under the impulse of Divine power he is not allowed to be idle, but wills, desires and acts according to his nature.<sup>27</sup>

It is in the light of this that we should understand Luther's image, borrowed from Augustine, whereby he expresses the thought that every man is actively dominated either by God or by the devil. "Man's will," Luther writes, "is like a beast standing between two riders. If God rides, it wills and goes where God wills. . . . If Satan rides, it wills and goes where Satan wills. Nor may it choose to which rider it will run . . . but the riders themselves fight to decide who shall have and hold it."<sup>28</sup> There is no implication here of an ultimate dualism; on the contrary, Luther is emphatic that the God with whom Satan

fights as an enemy Himself works in Satan according to Satan's nature. Satan is God's tool as well as His foe, and when it is His pleasure to translate a man from Satan's kingdom to that of His Son, Satan cannot prevent His doing so. In this connection Luther makes much of Christ's picture of the strong man's goods being despoiled by the stronger man. No element of contingency or uncertainty attaches to the outcome of God's conflict with Satan; God reigns, and at every point His will is done. Luther expresses this thought elsewhere by affirming that God is the one Being whose will is, in a completely unqualified sense, free, inasmuch as His purposes cannot in principle be thwarted.

The deeds of Satan and of all men who oppose God, His truth, His Christ, and His people (Luther instances Pharaoh, Shimei, and Judas as examples) are done spontaneously, voluntarily, and without constraint (*coactio*). Nonetheless, they are in a sense necessitated. The necessity is not absolute, as Luther is careful to point out in WA 43, 457—463. The Lutheran symbolical books (FC SD II 44) appeal explicitly to this passage. This is so, first, because of the nature and character of the agent and, second, because of the purposive decision of God. Behind the self-determination of character, the fact that one does what one does because one is what one is (in this case, a slave to sin), lies the pre-determining resolve of the Creator, who works all things according to the counsel of His will. God resolves either to change the sinner's nature and character, so that he trusts Christ for righteousness, loves God's law, and serves God gladly, or else not to change him, but simply to allow him to run his course according to his

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 103 f.



present natural impulses, so that he brings upon himself just judgment.

### (III) *God's Grace*

What has been said so far has already indicated the richness of Luther's concept of grace. By grace he means, quite simply and comprehensively, the loving action of a sovereign Creator saving guilty sinners who cannot lift a finger to save themselves. Grace appears not only in God's free gift of righteousness, a gift bestowed in virtue of the merit and atoning death of Christ, but also in God's regenerative work, whereby the Holy Spirit brings us to faith, renews our hearts, and so makes new men of us. Rebirth sets us free from sin's dominion so that henceforth we serve God, not only outwardly, but from our hearts, which we could never do before. "When God works in us, the will is changed under the sweet influence of the Spirit of God. . . . [I]t cannot be mastered or prevailed upon even by the gates of hell; but it goes on willing, desiring and loving good, just as once it willed, desired and loved evil."<sup>29</sup> Grace both justifies and sanctifies. Nor is this all. God's acts of grace towards men in time flow from His election of them to salvation from all eternity, and this election of grace is God's guarantee not merely of present acceptance but of final glory also. God's purpose of grace will stand, and those whom He has chosen and called and justified will be preserved until the day when they are glorified, according to His promise. Such, according to Luther, is the grace of God.

Erasmus' scheme, by contrast, made final salvation altogether uncertain of attainment, because it was made contingent on

our success in performing a series of acts of free will independently of God. What a comfort, says Luther, to know that this scheme is a falsehood, that free will in Erasmus' sense does not exist, and that God has taken the question of our salvation into His own omnipotent hands! Luther writes:

I frankly confess that, for myself, even if it could be, I should not want free-will to be given me, nor anything to be left in my own hands to enable me to endeavour after salvation; not merely because in face of so many dangers, and adversities, and assaults of devils, I could not stand my ground and hold fast my "free-will" . . . but because, even were there no dangers, adversities, or devils, I should still be forced to labour with no guarantee of success. . . . But now that God has taken my salvation out of the control of my own will, and put it under the control of His, and promised to save me, not according to my working or running, but according to His own grace and mercy, I have the comfortable certainty that He is faithful and will not lie to me, and that He is also great and powerful, so that no devils or opposition can break Him or pluck me from Him. "No one," He says, "shall pluck them out of my hand, because my Father which gave them me is greater than all" (John 10:28-29). . . .

Furthermore, I have the comfortable certainty that I please God, not by reason of the merit of my works, but by reason of His merciful favour promised to me; so that, if I work too little, or badly, He does not impute it to me, but with fatherly compassion pardons me and makes me better. This is the glorying of all the saints in their God.<sup>30</sup>

It is obvious that Luther's evangelical

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313 f.



doctrine of grace, based as it is on a flat rejection of the common-sense Pelagian, or "semi-Pelagian," view of man as an independent agent and of God as a mere spectator of man's doings, raises for the speculative mind the acutest problems of theodicy, for it makes God's will the deciding factor in salvation and damnation alike. Luther himself felt these problems acutely.

Doubtless it gives the greatest possible offence to common sense or natural reason, that God, who is proclaimed as being full of mercy and goodness, and so on, should of His own mere will abandon, harden and damn men. . . . It seems an iniquitous, cruel, intolerable thought to think of God; and it is this that has been a stumbling block to so many great men down the ages. And who would not stumble at it? I have stumbled at it myself more than once, down to the deepest pit of despair, so that I wished I had never been made a man. (That was before I knew how health-giving that despair was, and how close to grace.)<sup>31</sup>

How are we to cope with such "intolerable" thoughts when they assail us? They turn God into a tyrannical monster and throw our souls into panic and expose them to the severest temptation (*Anfechtung*); how can we stop them? Luther has two pieces of advice for us. The first is to leave alone all speculation and inquiry into God's hidden purposes and confine our attention to what He has revealed and affirmed in His Word. Luther makes this point by developing the distinction between "God revealed" (*Deus revelatus*) and "God hidden" (*Deus absconditus*).

Wherever God hides Himself, and wills to be unknown to us, there we have no

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.

concern. . . . God in His own nature and majesty is to be left alone. . . . We have to do with Him as clothed and displayed in His Word. . . . God does many things which He does not show us in His Word, and He wills many things which He does not in His Word show us that He wills. . . . We must keep in view His Word and leave alone His inscrutable will; for it is by His Word, and not by His inscrutable will, that we must be guided.<sup>32</sup>

What this means in practice is that we must listen to, and deal with, God as He speaks to us in Christ and not attempt to approach or contemplate Him apart from Christ. "We may not debate the secret will of Divine Majesty. . . . But let man occupy himself with God Incarnate, that is, with Jesus crucified. . . ." <sup>33</sup> In Christ, says Luther, God comes seeking the salvation of all and offering life and righteousness to all. It is for us who hear the Word of God in Christ to be humble and teachable before it, to receive and believe it as God's message to us, and to trust Christ on the basis of it, however unable we may be to square it with what we think we know of God's hidden purposes. And then we are to let God's gracious promises fill our minds and gladden our hearts and keep at bay dark thoughts arising from forbidden guesswork about the will of "God hidden." To know that God's promises in Christ stand sure should be enough for us.

Luther's second piece of advice to us, following on the first, is to remember that theodicy is ultimately a matter of eschatology—that is, that we cannot fully understand God's purposes, in the nature of the case, till we see them in the light of

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 170 f.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 175 f.



glory, when they have all been worked out to the full. When tempted to deny God's justice on the ground that He hardens and damns some men according to His own will, we should meet the temptation by reminding ourselves that here we live by faith, but one day faith will pass into sight; and when that happens, we shall know the reasons for all God's doings which baffled us here below and shall certainly discover that any appearance which may have been given of injustice, or of amoral arbitrariness, or of division and incoherence in the will of God, was entirely illusory. Luther writes:

By the light of grace, it is inexplicable how God can damn him who by his own strength can do nothing but sin and become guilty. Both the light of nature and the light of grace here insist that the fault lies not in the wretchedness of man, but in the injustice of God. . . . But the light of glory insists otherwise, and will one day reveal God . . . as a God whose justice is most righteous and evident—provided only that in the meanwhile we believe it, as we are instructed and encouraged to do.<sup>34</sup>

God knows what he is doing, and we may be sure, even though we cannot at present see, that the Judge of all the earth is doing, and will do, right.

## V

The book ends with an appeal to Erasmus to acknowledge that he was wrong and to receive Luther's elucidation of the Biblical doctrine of grace as divine truth. This, Luther implies, would be Erasmus'

salvation. But Erasmus did not respond as Luther hoped. With his tremendous resources of theological power and polemical rhetoric, Luther had belabored Erasmus harder, perhaps, than he realized. Erasmus was bitterly offended and wrote a 2-volume reply to Luther, *Hyperaspistes* (which we might render as "Protector," or "Defender"), in which he assaults the Wittenberg theologian as a destroyer of all civil, religious, and cultural order. He did not appear to have seen the theological and religious point of Luther's thesis about sin and grace, and Luther did not trouble to answer him again. There was no reconciliation; Erasmus continued in acid contempt for Luther, and Luther "wrote off" Erasmus as an enemy of God because he was an enemy of grace.

The personal side of the exchange, then, was not happy. Yet the exchange itself was supremely worthwhile. It achieved something of the highest importance. It established once and for all that the Reformation conflict was not primarily about obscurantist superstitions and ecclesiastical abuses, matters over which humanists like Erasmus and theologians like Luther might under certain circumstances have made common cause; but that it was essentially concerned with the substance of the Gospel and the significance of grace, matters over which Luther opposed the humanists, with their moralistic, Platonistic rechauffés of Pelagianism, no less directly than he opposed the papacy, with its grandiose claims to disburse merit and grace. To have this made clear, once and for all, was real gain.

Oxford, England

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 317.