

*The Bondage of the Will*

Martin Luther. Translated by Henry Cole. Summit Books; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977

**About the Author**

Martin Luther (1483-1546) wrote this book in 1525, four years after his excommunication from the Roman Catholic Church. This was the culmination of a process that began when, in 1517, Luther expressed his protest against the selling of indulgences by Tetzel by posting 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church. Luther became convinced that ultimate authority was to be found in the Scriptures alone and certainly not in what the Pope or other esteemed persons might say. This conviction forms a central aspect of *The Bondage of the Will*.

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**Introduction**

*Martin Luther, to the venerable D. Erasmus of Rotterdam, wishing Grace and Peace in Christ.*

Luther begins by explaining why he has delayed in responding to Erasmus' *Diatribes on Free Will* (1523), namely, that Luther found his "barbarian" instincts dulled by Erasmus' politeness and further couldn't see that Erasmus had added anything to what had already been said and competently refuted in Philip Melancthon's *Concerning Theological Questions*. Luther also felt he himself had already said sufficient so that to seek to 'heal' those who, having read his own arguments, were still moved by "these light and trivial arguments of Erasmus" was akin to 'ploughing the seashore' or 'sowing seed in the sand' or 'attempting to fill a cask, full of holes, with water'. He remarks, that "to those who read without the Spirit, it is no wonder if they be driven to and fro, like a reed with every wind. To such, God would not have said enough, even if all his creatures should be converted into tongues" (15).

However, Luther explains that others had urged him to write a response to Erasmus' work because of the esteem with which Erasmus himself was held, so that Christian truth was "endangered in the hearts of many" (16). Indeed, Erasmus' failure, for all his talent, to handle the subject of free will aright further solidified Luther's conviction "that 'Free-will' is a downright lie; and that, like the woman in the gospel, the more it is taken in hand by physicians, the worse it is made" (17).

*Erasmus' Preface Reviewed*

Sect. I.

Erasmus had censured Luther for "obstinacy of assertion" and described himself as "far from delighting in assertions", to which Luther responds, "For not to delight in assertions, is not the character of the Christian mind; nay, he must delight in assertions, or he is not a Christian" (18). That is Christians are committed to "a constant adhering, affirming, confessing, defending, and invincibly persevering". "Take away assertions, and you take away Christianity" (19).

Luther now challenges Erasmus' position on making assertions:

For, if you think the matter of "Free-will" is not necessary to be known, nor at all concerned with Christ, you speak honestly, but think wickedly: but, if you think it is necessary, you speak wickedly, and think rightly (20-21).

### *Erasmus' Scepticism*

#### Sect. II

Luther challenges Erasmus to be content with submitting his opinion to the Scriptures and not to speak also of submitting it to the decrees of the church: "What can the church decree, that is not decreed in the Scriptures?" (22). If the church can, and Erasmus supports this, then he is denying the freedom and power of Christians to judge those who make decrees, something that lacks any Scriptural backing. Luther argues that Erasmus, in his efforts to be a peace-maker is acting as though it doesn't really matter what anyone, anywhere believes. In reality, Luther charges, Erasmus, in his opposition to assertions, aligns himself with the Sceptics and Academics. Against this Luther states:

The Holy Spirit is not a Sceptic, nor are what He has written on our hearts doubts or opinions, but assertions more certain, and more firm, than life itself and all human experience (24).

#### Sect. III

Luther proceeds to reprove Erasmus for misusing Romans 11:33 and Isaiah 40:13 to undermine the clarity of biblical revelation. As such Erasmus serves as the mouthpiece of impious Sophists who speak of Scripture as though nothing in it is clear:

And it is with such scare-crows that Satan has frightened away men from reading the Sacred Writings, and has rendered the Holy Scripture contemptible, that he might cause his poisons of philosophy to prevail in the church (25).

Luther does not deny that there are *places* in the Scriptures that are obscure and abstruse. It is our ignorance of certain terms and grammatical particulars that occasions this. But this does not mean we are ignorant of all *things* in the Scriptures and, indeed, the most important *thing* of all, Christ made man, God as Trinity and Unity, Christ suffered for us and reigning for all eternity are so clear as to be known and proclaimed even in the streets: "Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find remaining in them?" (26).

It exaggerate the obscurity of a few words in Scripture is absurd and impious:

For who would say that the public fountain is not in the light, because those who are in some dark narrow lane do not see it, when all those who are in the open market place can see it plainly? (26).

#### Sect. IV

Luther challenges Erasmus and the Sophists to produce any mystery still abstruse in the Scriptures. Luther insinuates that they are imputing the darkness and obscurity of their own hearts to the all-clear Scriptures of God.

Luther points out that Erasmus' arguments against the clarity of Scripture involve misusing Scripture, e.g. the text does not say the judgments of Scripture but of God are incomprehensible and the question is not "Who has known the mind of Scripture?" but "Who has known the mind of God?" (Isa 40:13). Further, Erasmus' examples of doctrines lacking clarity are irrelevant: the distinction of Persons, the union of Divine and human natures, and the unpardonable sin. For without any obscurity or ambiguity Scripture simply confesses these doctrines. Luther summarises:

But to be brief. The *clearness* of the Scripture is twofold; even as the *obscurity* is twofold also. The one is *external*, placed in the ministry of the word; the other *internal*, placed in the understanding of the heart (29).

Since all have a darkened heart “the Spirit is required to understand the whole of the Scripture and every part of it” (29).

#### Sect. V

Luther moves from these considerations to regarding as intolerable Erasmus’ attempt to treat the doctrine of Free Will as one which is unnecessary for Christian piety. Here Luther regards Erasmus as the voice of Lucian and Epicurus. In particular Erasmus had deemed it not necessary to know:

- “whether or not God foreknows any thing by contingency.”
- “whether our own will does any thing in those things which pertain unto eternal salvation, or is only passive under the work of grace.”
- “whether or not we do, what we do of good or evil, from necessity, or rather from being passive.”

Luther contends “if they be not necessary, and certainly known, there can remain neither God, nor Christ, nor Gospel, nor Faith, nor any thing else, even of Judaism, much less of Christianity!” (31).

#### Sect. VI

Luther now cites from Erasmus’ “Form” of Christianity:

That we should strive with all our powers, have recourse to the remedy of repentance, and in all ways try to gain the mercy of God; without which, neither human will, nor endeavour, is effectual (31).

Luther reproves Erasmus for such an icy-cold statement which excludes Christ and the Spirit. In speaking of the will as striving Erasmus asserts “that the will does something in those things which pertain unto eternal salvation”, while also, by saying it is ineffective without the mercy of God, that it is passive. Yet, he leaves it unclear as to how far God’s mercy extends and how far the human will extends, what the human will is to do and what God’s mercy is to do.

#### *The Necessity of Knowing God and his Power*

##### Sect. VII-VIII

Luther draws out the implications of Erasmus’ indefinite theology. It would be strange for a person to compose a poem or speech without first considering and deciding what he was capable and not capable of doing or what was involved in doing justice to the subject concerned, lest he make an absolute hash of it. Similarly, it would be strange if the farmer who seeks an abundant harvest did not first consider the condition of the soil, but “should rush on at once, thinking nothing but the work, and plough the seashore, and cast in the seed wherever the soil was turned up, whether sand or mud” (33). Again, it would be peculiar if those seeking victory in war did not first consider what it was feasible to achieve, whether the treasury could fund this effort, whether there was an adequate fighting force and whether any opportunity existed to effect the desired end.

Yet, Luther argues, it is precisely such carelessness which Erasmus encourages, enjoining “Christians themselves to become rash workers, and charge them not to be curious about what they can do and what they cannot do, in obtaining eternal salvation” (35). Consequently, Luther concludes:

Therefore, it is not irreligious, curious, or superfluous, but essentially wholesome and necessary, for a Christian to know, whether or not the will does any thing in those things which pertain unto Salvation (35).

Luther reasons that if he doesn't know the difference between "our working and the power of God, I know not God Himself" (36). This in turn undermines his worship of God since he would not know what to attribute to God and what to himself. Indeed, if God is to get all the glory then it must be asserted that "the mercy of God alone does all things, and that our own will does nothing, but is rather acted upon" (36-37).

### *The Sovereignty of God*

#### Sect. IX

Erasmus had claimed it was irreligious, curious and vain to know whether God foreknows any thing by contingency or whether people do all things by necessity.

Against this Luther insists Christians must know that:

God foreknows nothing by contingency, but that He foresees, purposes, and does all things according to His immutable, eternal, and infallible will. By this thunderbolt, 'Free-will' is thrown prostrate, and utterly dashed to pieces (38).

Luther shows that Erasmus has immersed himself in inconsistency:

You openly declare that the immutable will of God is to be known, but you forbid the knowledge of His immutable *prescience*. Do you believe that He foreknows against His will, or that He wills in ignorance? (39)

Consequently, all things people do, even if apparently done mutably and contingently, and, indeed, actually done contingently by us, are yet, in reality, done necessarily and immutably, with respect to the effective and unpreventable will of God. The human will exercised in building a house ceases upon completion of the work. If God was like us then it would indeed be the case that everything people do is by contingency and mutability. But for God when the *work ceases*, the *will remains*, since a contingent and mutable will is not to be found in God.

#### Sect. X

Luther finds the established term *necessity* an unfortunate one because of the unhelpful connotations it bears. In particular this term suggests "an idea of compulsion, and that which is altogether contrary to *will*" (41), which is not at all the biblical idea. Luther observes that: "Will, whether divine or human, does what it does, be it good or evil, not by compulsion, but by mere willingness or desire, as it were, totally free" (41). However, our own will, being corrupt, cannot of itself do good. Hence what must be brought together is the immutable will of God and the impotency of our depraved will - the *necessity of immutability*.

#### Sect. XI-XIII

Luther proposes that just as people have a notion of divinity they also have a sense of predestination and of the prescience of God, as illustrated by the way Virgil treats events and even the immortal gods as subject to Fate. Failure to know God's foreknowledge and immutable will, as clearly taught in Scripture, undermines trust in his ability to fulfil his promises and, therefore, destroys Christian faith and brings the whole Gospel crashing down to the ground.

## Sect. XIII

In discouraging the attempt to understand God's prescience Erasmus was effectively encouraging people to "seek after an ignorance of God..., disregard faith, leave the promises of God, and account the consolations of the Spirit, and the assurances of conscience, nothing at all" (45).

## Sect. XIV

Erasmus, in arguing that the doctrine of Free Will should be left as a mystery, had contended that there are some truths which it is not prudent "to prostitute them to the ears of every one" (48).

## Sect. XV-XVI

To illustrate he argues that while it may be true that God is in a beetle's hole or in a sink that is improper to discuss such a matter in public. Luther responds by illustrating how the Son of God entered the uncleanness of a human belly and, indeed, experienced the ultimate uncleanness of death - far more horrible and loathsome than being in a hole or sink.

## Sect. XVII

Luther rebukes Erasmus for commending the "intermediate tyranny of Popes", which results in the common people's consciences being fettered by false laws, "that they might be tormented with sins where God wills there should be no sins at all" (52). Against this people's consciences should be bound by the law of God alone. The laws of the Popes don't succeed in restraining the mind, but exasperate people to hate both God and others. Such tyrants are "barbarous soul-murderers, who fill the world with hypocrites" (53).

## Sect. XVIII-XIX

Luther also reproves Erasmus for trivializing the doctrine of Free Will as though it was not worth fighting about in the interests of preserving the general peace of the community. Against this Luther states:

I am... seeking an object solemn and essential; nay, such, and so great, that it ought to be maintained and defended through death itself; and that, although the whole world should not only be thrown into tumult and set in arms thereby, but even if it should be hurled into chaos and reduced to nothing (54).

Luther's willingness to risk his own life in defending this truth testifies to the depth of his conviction in its crucial importance. He goes on to point out how it is often the case that the word of God does throw the world into tumult (Mt 10:34; Lk 12:49; 2 Cor 4:5). In Acts the word of Paul and the other apostles threw both Gentiles and Jews into commotion (see esp. 17:6). Tumult is the inevitable result of the conflict between the true God and the god of this world (2 Cor 4:4). Consequently, Erasmus' attempt to silence such tumults is an attempt to hinder the Word of God.

## Sect. XX

Erasmus' promotion of the laws of the Popes fails to recognize how Satan uses them to entangle and bind consciences: "the Word of God, and the traditions of men, are opposed to each other with implacable discord" (59).

## Sect. XXI

Luther reproves Erasmus again for his misuse of 1 Corinthians 6:12 - "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient." For Paul is not speaking of teaching doctrine:

Truth and doctrine, are to be preached always, openly, and firmly, and are never to be dissembled or concealed; for there is no offence in them; they are the staff of uprightness. - And who gave you [sc. Erasmus] the power, or committed to you the right, of confining the Christian doctrine to persons, places, times, and causes, when Christ wills it to be proclaimed, and to reign freely, throughout the world? For Paul saith, "the Word of God is not bound," (2 Tim ii.9), but Erasmus bounds the word. Nor did God give us the word that it should be had with respect of places, persons, or times: for Christ saith, "Go ye out into the whole world,": He does not say, as Erasmus does, - go to this place and not to that. Again, "Preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mark xvi.15): He does not say - preach it to some and not to others. In a word, you enjoin, in the administration of the word of God, a respect of persons, a respect of places, a respect of customs, and a respect of times: whereas, the one and especial glory of the word consists in this, - that, as Paul saith, there is, with it, no respect of persons; and that God is no respecter of persons. You see therefore, again, how rashly you run against the Word of God, as though you preferred far before it, your own counsel and cogitations (61).

## Sect. XXII

Luther throws back at Erasmus his advice that anything wrongly decided in the councils should not be openly confessed lest it lead to undermining the authority of the fathers: "This, indeed, is just what the Pope wished you to say!" (63). Luther reasserts: "... human statutes cannot be observed together with the Word of God: because, the former bind consciences, the latter looses them. They are directly opposed to each other, as water to fire" (63).

## Sect. XXIII-XXIV

When Erasmus argues that it is dangerous to preach that whatever is done by people is not done by free will but by necessity Luther responds, "What! Shall your Creator, come to learn of you His creature, what is useful, and what not useful to be preached?" (65). Luther points out the openness of Scripture on this subject (Rom 9:18, 22; Mt 22:14; Jn 13:18). He maintains there are two reasons why it is necessary to preach this:

1. The humbling of our pride and the knowledge of the grace of God, through the knowledge that salvation is completely beyond our powers.
2. Christian faith itself, since faith is in *things not seen*:  
This is the highest degree of faith - to believe that He is merciful, who saves so few and damns so many; to believe Him just, who according to His own will, makes us necessarily damnable... If, therefore, I could by any means comprehend how that same God can be merciful and just, who carries the appearance of so much wrath and iniquity, there would be no need of faith (70-71).

## Sect. XXV

Luther takes up the paradox mentioned by Erasmus: "whatever is done by us, is not done by Free-will, but from mere necessity" (72). Luther reasons:

... does it not evidently follow, that when God is not present with us to work in us, every thing that we do is evil, and that we of necessity do those things which are of no avail unto salvation? For if it is not we ourselves, but God only, that works salvation in us, it must follow, whether or no, that we do nothing unto salvation *before* the working of God in us.

But, by *necessity*, I do not mean *compulsion*; but (as they term it) the *necessity of immutability*, not of *compulsion*: that is, a man void of the Spirit of God, does not evil against his will as by violence, or as if he were taken by the neck and forced to it, in the same way as a thief or cut-throat is dragged to punishment against his will; but he does it spontaneously, and with a desirous willingness.

...This is what we mean by the necessity of immutability: - that the will cannot change itself, nor give itself another bent; but rather the more it is resisted, the more it is irritated to crave; as is manifest from its indignation (72-73).

By contrast, when God works in us, the Spirit causes the will to desire and act, "not from *compulsion*, but *responsively*, from pure willingness" (73). He concludes that the will is like a beast which wills and goes where its rider wills, whether God or Satan. Further, the will has no power of its own to choose its rider.

#### Sect. XXVI-XXVII

Erasmus had described the power of free will to be "that certain small degree of power, which, without the grace of God, is utterly ineffective" (75). Luther argues that, unknowingly, Erasmus is denying the very thing he is trying to affirm, since his statement implies that apart from God's grace the will is not free, but the slave of sin.

Luther insists that free will only applies to God himself. With reference to people Luther would prefer to ditch the term altogether, but will allow a limited usage of free will:

not in respect of those which are above him, but in respect only of those things which are below him: that is, he may be allowed to know, that he has, as to his goods and possessions the right of using, acting, and omitting, according to his "Free-will;" although, at the same time, that same "Free-will" is overruled by the Free-will of God alone, just as He pleases; but that, God-ward, or in things which pertain unto salvation or damnation, he has no "Free-will," but is a captive, slave, and servant, either to the will of God, or to the will of Satan (79).

#### *Exordium*

#### Sect XXVIII

Erasmus had promised to argue from the Scriptures since Luther refused to be swayed by the authority of any other writer. However, Erasmus confessed that "so great a number of the most learned men, approved by the consent of so many ages" (81) carried a great deal of weight for him.

Luther understands why Erasmus would be swayed by such authorities since they had also had much weight with Luther for many years to the extent that Luther expostulates, "I think no other mortal was ever so much under their sway" (82). Indeed, he would have continued in this way "had not an urging conscience and an evidence of things, forced [him] into a different path" (83).

#### Sect. XXIX-XXX

Luther has no patience with Erasmus' argument that the Church Fathers taught free will, stating: "If...the fathers have at any time preached 'Free-will,' they have certainly spoken from the flesh (seeing they were men), not from the Spirit of God" (85). Luther insists that even if they did at times speak about free will it is apparent that such fathers as Augustine and Bernard

whenever they approach God, either to pray or to do, approach Him, utterly forgetful of their own 'Free-will' and despairing of themselves, crying unto Him, for pure grace only, feeling at the same time that they deserve every thing that is the contrary (88).

Luther demands that Erasmus explain "what work, what word, what thought" the power of free will "can move, attempt, or perform, in order to apply itself unto grace" (89). If free will is a power it must do some kind of work, yet Erasmus fails to define "what that power is, what it can do, in what it is passive, and what takes place", being more dumb in this respect "than Seriphian frogs and fishes" (89).

Erasmus had hypocritically demanded that Luther's doctrine be proved by sanctity, the Spirit and miracles, something he himself was incapable of doing. Luther does not even ask Erasmus to produce any example of a work, a word or a thought confirming his doctrine, but simply to explain the doctrine itself, "what you would have to be understood by it, and what the form of it is" (91). All Erasmus' appeal to his doctrine being backed by great teachers is all sound since he can produce no sound reason for his doctrine, but simply sound the syllables, "There is a power of free will".

Sect. XXXI

Luther reproaches Erasmus for his hypocrisy. On the one hand, protesting against Luther, he advises "that questions of this kind be omitted; and that, Christ crucified be rather taught, and those things which suffice unto Christian piety" (93). On the other hand, in contravention of such counsel Erasmus writes Diatribes, exalts the decrees of the Pope, honours the authority of men and tries to draw people aside into strange things that are contrary to the Scriptures.

Luther cajoles those who latch on to things said by the fathers, in "the infirmity of the flesh", yet, in favour of free will, only to oppose statements made by the same fathers against free will, so as to cause the better to give way to the worse.

Luther quotes Jerome's impious, sacrilegious and blasphemous statement: "Virginity peoples heaven, and marriage, the earth." Luther comments,

As though the earth, and not heaven, was intended for the patriarchs, the apostles, and Christian husbands. Or, as though heaven was designed for gentile vestal virgins, who are without Christ (95).

The statements that the Sophists collect from the fathers in favour of free will are of the same ilk and build an authority that is based more on numbers than on judgment.

Sect. XXXII

Erasmus argued that it was not credible "that God would overlook an error in His Church for so many ages, and not reveal to any one of His saints that, which we contend for as being the grand essential of the Christian doctrine" (96).

Luther denies that this error has been overlooked by God in his church or in any one of his saints (Rom 8:14; Mt 28:20; 1 Tim 3:15). Luther challenges Erasmus to prove to a certainty that those he calls the church are the Church. The people of Israel in the Old Testament illustrate how "during so many kings and so long a time, not one king is mentioned who never was in error" (97). Romans 11:4, citing God's reservation of 7000 faithful Israelites among the masses who had given themselves to idolatry, shows

we must not deny that "under all these great men", the fathers and those occupying high office, God "was reserving to Himself a Church among the commonality" (97).

Luther asks,

And who knows who are the people of God, when throughout the whole world, from its origin, the state of the church was always such, that those were called the people and saints of God who were not so; while others among them, who were as refuse, and were not called the people and saints of God, were the People and Saints of God? as is manifest in the histories of Cain and Abel, of Ishmael and Isaac, of Esau and Jacob (98).

During the time of the Arian heresy there were scarcely five catholic bishops preserved throughout the whole world and they were driven from their places while the Arians reigned "everywhere bearing the public name and office of the church" (98). Yet, even "under these heretics, Christ preserved His Church: but so, that it was the least thought or considered to be the Church" (98).

Luther challenges Erasmus to show him one bishop who discharges his office under the kingdom of the Pope and to show him one council, the business of which was to address matters concerning godliness and "not rather, concerning gowns, dignities, revenues, and other baubles, which they could not say, without being mad, pertained to the Holy Spirit!" (98). Yet they are called the church when all who live as they do "must be reprobates and any thing but the church. And yet, even under them Christ preserved His Church, though it was not called the Church" (98). Luther also notes how, for some ages, the Inquisition has burnt and killed many true saints, holy men such as John Huss.

Erasmus should rather be wondering "that there ever were, from the beginning of the world, more distinguished talents, greater erudition, more ardent pursuit among the world in general than among Christians or the people of God" [99] (Lk 16:8). Yet why is it that none of them, even those who contended for the truth with all their efforts, attained to the truth. Will Erasmus say that this too is not credible, "that God would utterly leave so many great men, throughout such a series of ages, and permit them to labour in vain?" . Indeed, if free will had any substance then "it must have appeared and wrought something in those men, at least in some instance. But it availed nothing, nay it always wrought in the contrary direction" - clear proof that free will "is nothing at all, since no proof of it can be produced even from the beginning of the world to the end!" (99).

Sect. XXXIII

Luther emphasizes that the real Church of God is not to be confused with the term "church of God" nor the real saints of God to be confused with the term "saints of God". Rather, the Spirit of God treats them like pearls and precious jewels, which he doesn't cast before swine, but keeps hidden, so that the wicked will not see the glory of God (1 Cor 2:8).

Luther clarifies that he is not saying these things to deny that those Erasmus calls "saints" and "church of God" are not the real thing, but because it cannot be proved that they are, the matter necessarily in a state of uncertainty. Indeed, Luther calls the saints and church and looks upon them as such - "according to the law of Charity, but not according to the law of Faith" (100). Charity thinks the best of every one, but

is liable to err. Faith, by contrast, "calls no one a saint but him who is declared to be so by the judgment of God, for faith is not liable to be deceived" (101). Indeed, although, we ought all to be looked upon as saints by each other by the law of charity, yet no one ought to be decreed a saint by the law of faith, so as to make it an article of faith that such or such an one is a Saint. For in this way, that adversary of God, the Pope, canonized his minions whom he knows not to be saints, setting himself in the place of God" (2 Thess 2:4) [101].

Luther insists that since these saints have differed among themselves those should be chosen "who have spoken in defence of Grace, and against 'Free-will': and those left, who, through the infirmity of the flesh, have borne witness of the flesh rather than of the Spirit" (101).

#### Sect. XXXIV

Luther takes issue with Erasmus' claim that his discussion with Luther is not so much concerning Scripture, since this is not itself sufficiently clear, but concerning the sense of Scripture. Luther points out this expostulation is just Erasmus' rationalization for cleaving to the doctrine of free will, till the truth be made glaringly manifest.

Luther protests at the Pope in whose circles it is commonly said "that the Scriptures are obscure and ambiguous; and that the Spirit, as the Interpreter, should be sought from the apostolical see of Rome." He contends that "nothing could be said that was more destructive; for by means of this saying, a set of impious men have exalted themselves above the Scriptures themselves." Indeed, he sees this saying as "a poison poured forth into the world by a wonderful malice of the devil himself, the prince of all demons" (103).

Luther contends that "the spirits are to be tried and proved by a twofold judgment":

1. *Internal* - "the internal clearness of the Holy Scripture": "by which, through the Holy Spirit, or a peculiar gift of God, any one may illustrate, and to a certainty, judge of, and determine on, the doctrines and sentiments of all men, for himself and his own personal salvation" [103] (1 Cor 2:15). This belongs to faith and each and every Christian must exercise such judgment.
2. *External* - "the external clearness of the Holy Scripture": "by which, we judge, to the greatest certainty, of the spirits and doctrines of all men; not for ourselves only, but for others also, and for their salvation" (104). This belongs to the public ministry of the Word and the external office, especially those who teach and preach the Word. This form of judgment is exercised when such persons strengthen the weak in faith and refute adversaries.

Luther insists "that the Holy Scriptures are a spiritual light by far more clear than the sun itself, especially in those things which pertain unto salvation or necessity" (104).

#### Sect. XXXV-XXXVII

Luther insists on the clarity of Scripture against "the pestilent saying of the Sophists", namely, that "the Scriptures are obscure and ambiguous" (104).

Luther proceeds to argue for the clarity of Scripture commenting on texts such as Deuteronomy 17:8; Psalm 19:8; 119:130; Isaiah 8:20; Malachi 2:7; Psalm 119:105; Rom 1:2; 3:21; 2 Peter 1:19; John 8:12; 5:35, 39; Acts 17:11; 2 Timothy 3:16; Titus 1:9; and

Luke 21:15. He concludes that "they who deny the all-clearness and all-plainness of the Scriptures, leave us nothing else but darkness" (109). He also contends that if the doctrine concerning 'Free-will' be obscure and ambiguous, it does not belong unto Christians and the Scriptures, and is, therefore to be left alone entirely, and classed among those 'old wives' fables' (1 Tim iv.7) which Paul condemns in contentious Christians (110).

For if the doctrine of free will does belong to Christians and the Scriptures "it ought to be clear, open, and manifest", as per all the other most evident articles of faith.

Although free will promoting adversaries may not be able to resist the clear teaching of Scripture this does not mean they will cease from their opinion. Christ silenced the Sadducees (Mt 22:23-32, citing Ex 3:6) and Stephen's opponents "could not resist the spirit and the wisdom with which he spake" (Acts 6:10), but this only served to infuriate them and suborn false witnesses against him (Acts 6:11-13).

In Luther's own times John Huss preached against the Pope from Matthew 16:18 on the text, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against my church". Huss asked, "Is there any obscurity or ambiguity? But the gates of hell do prevail against the Pope and his, for they are notorious throughout the world of their open impiety and iniquities. Is there any obscurity here either? ERGO: THE POPE AND HIS, ARE NOT THE CHURCH CONCERNING WHICH CHRIST SPEAKS" (112-113).

Huss' point was irresistible, yet, "they did *resist*, and *persist* until they had burnt him: so far were they from yielding to Him, in heart" [113] (cf. Lk 21:15 - "though they resist, they shall not be able to resist").

#### Sect. XXXVIII

Given the way Satan so binds the human heart, Luther does not find it at all surprising that "through so many ages, men renowned for talent remained blind" with respect to the myth of free will (115). When people don't comprehend God's words it is not, as Erasmus would have it, because of weakness of mind, but because of "the wickedness of Satan enthroned and reigning in our weakness, and resisting the Word of God" (117).

#### Sect. XXXIX

Erasmus' title *Diatribes*, meaning "the Collation", was chosen instead of *Apophysis*, "the Denial", because he wrote with a purpose to *collect all things* and to *assert nothing*. Yet the authorities Erasmus depends on, "rashly and as fools" do define and assert free will, treating it as if it were "a certain and all-sure testimony of Scripture" (118). Erasmus needs to decide whether he will give greater credit to so many so-called great ones who believed the Scriptures are quite clear or to his own private judgment, which denies the Scriptures are quite clear.

#### Sect. XL

Since Erasmus, as he repeatedly expresses in his *Diatribes*, is committed to his belief that the Scriptures are not quite clear, he must concede that he is lacking in seriousness when he appeals to authorities whom he describes as "men of the greatest understanding in the Scripture, and martyrs of Christ", a stratagem with which to "blind the eyes of the inexperienced commonalty" (120). But Luther avers that *neither* of Erasmus' assertions are true and, indeed, that both are *false*:

1. The Scriptures are quite clear.
2. To the extent that Erasmus' authorities asserted free will they "were most ignorant of the Sacred Writings" (120).

Since there is not one word or fact in Scripture to support the teaching of free will Erasmus' teaching is akin to the fables of Lucian. However, Lucian only amused people with ludicrous stories from wit and policy, stories that deceived or injured no one. But Erasmus' teaching are "friends", which "in a matter of importance which concerns eternal salvation, madly trifle to the perdition of souls innumerable" (120).

Luther introduces the Discussion which he will break into three parts (121):

1. A confutation of the arguments adduced in support of free will.
2. A defence of his arguments that are confuted.
3. A contention for the grace of God against free will.

## Discussion

### First Part

#### Sect. XLI

Erasmus had defined free will as follows:

Moreover I consider Free-will in this light: that 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 (122).

Luther argues that the Sophists would call this a faulty definition since it fails to fully embrace the thing defined. For Luther maintains that free will cannot be applied to any one except God. He contends that the term "means, that which can, and does do God-ward, whatever it pleases, restrainable by no law and no command" (122). Since men and angels live under the all-overruling command of God, to say nothing of sin and death, "they cannot consist one moment by their own power" and therefore can hardly be called *free*.

Consequently, the definition provided by Erasmus actually militates against the term free will. Luther maintains that this definition actually describes what might be termed vertible<sup>1</sup> will or mutable will.

#### Sect. XLII-XLIII

Luther next considers Erasmus' definition as it stands supposing that by "power of the human will" he means "a power, or faculty, or disposition, or aptitude, to will or not to will, to choose or refuse, to approve or disapprove, and what other actions soever belong to the will" (124).

Luther further assumes that by "which lead unto eternal salvation" must be meant "the words and works of God, which are offered to the human will, that it might either apply itself to them, or turn away from them" (125). The Law and the Gospel constitute the words of God, with the Law requiring works and the Gospel faith. "For there are no other things which lead either unto the grace of God, or unto eternal salvation, but the word and the work of God: because grace or the spirit is the life itself, to which we are led by the word and the work of God" (125).

## Sect. XLIV

Consequently, Luther rewords Erasmus' definition as follows:

"Free-will", is a power of the human will, which can, of itself, will and not will to embrace the word and work of God, by which it is to be led to those things which are beyond its capacity and comprehension (127).

Luther reasons that if "it can will and not will, it can also love and hate. And if it can love and hate, it can, to a certain degree, do the Law and believe the Gospel." This would mean the "human will can will its own death and perdition" and, indeed, that "it can will all things while it can will embracing the word and work of God." But, asks Luther, "what is here left to grace and to the Holy Spirit?" He observes, "This is plainly to ascribe *divinity* to 'Free-will'" since "to will to embrace the Law and the Gospel, not to will sin, and to will death, belongs to the power of God alone" (127).

Luther insists that free will is a divine term and signifies a divine power. He charges that Erasmus has outstripped the Pelagians in assigning to free will such divine power, which none had previously done, except the Pelagians. Luther also observes that in doing this Erasmus has worked with a half-baked concept of free will since, unlike the Pelagians and Sophists he has not distinguished between the power of discerning and the power of choosing, but has rather treated the latter as though it alone was what is meant by free will. Luther shudders to think what Erasmus would have done if he had been dealing with a full conception of free will.

Luther also reasons that Erasmus is adopting a philosophical position which philosophers have not agreed upon, namely the idea that a thing can give motion to itself, in this case, 'free will' giving motion to itself and 'applying itself' to eternal things. But in so doing Erasmus locks himself into self-contradiction having already stated that "the human will is utterly ineffective without grace" (128).

## Sect. XLV

Luther summarises Lombard's position: "'Free will' is the faculty of discerning, and then choosing also good, if with grace, but evil if grace be wanting" (129). In this he accords with Augustine who taught that free will "of its own power, cannot do any thing but fall, nor avail unto any thing but to sin." Indeed, in writing against Julian Augustine calls free will "under bondage" rather than "free". Consequently, Erasmus' mere use of the pronoun *itself* utterly excludes "the Holy Spirit with all His power, as a thing superfluous and unnecessary" (129).

Luther ridicules the idea of calling something "free" which by its own power can only go one way, a bad way, and can only go the right way by another's help. On this basis a stone or log of wood has free will since by its own power it can only go downwards, yet with another's help, upwards.

Sophists might be able to justify calling free will "free will" *by accident*, meaning "that which may at some time be set free by another", but then "free will" becomes an empty name and avoids dealing with the thing itself, the reality of "free will."

## Sect. XLVI

Luther notes the appeal to Ecclesiasticus 15:15-18 as justifying the concept of free will. Luther avoids the argument about the canonicity of this book but simply notes that the text does not declare, in plain words, what free will is and what it can do (a

more lengthy analysis of this text is found on pages 140-151. He similarly argues that various Old Testament texts, namely Genesis 4:7, Deuteronomy 30:19, Isaiah 1:19 [with 30:21; 45:20; 52:1-2; Jer 15:19; Mal 3:7], Ezekiel 18:23 and Deuteronomy 30:11-14 are not concerned with what people *can do* but with what they *ought to do*, 151-153; 153-158; 160-164; 166-171; 174-179).

#### Sect. XLVII

Luther summarises Erasmus' critique of other views concerning free will. Erasmus regards as "severe" the opinion of those "who deny that man can will good without special grace, who deny that it can begin, who deny that it can make progress, perfect..." Erasmus regards as "more severe still" the opinion of those who contend that free will "avails unto nothing but to sin, and that grace alone works good in us." Thirdly, he considers "most severe" the opinion of those who say "free will" is an empty term, "for that God works in us both good and evil" (133).

But this treats three different opinions as though they belong to three different sects. Luther points out that Erasmus' definition does not square with the first opinion, even though Erasmus, while calling it "severe" still deems it to be "very probable". Erasmus thus muddies the waters by effectively dealing with two concepts of free will simultaneously, free will as per his definition and free will as that which cannot will good without grace.

#### Sect. XLVIII-XLIX

Erasmus had granted that without special grace, free will/man cannot will good. In one place Erasmus even states "that the human will after sin, is so depraved, that having lost its liberty, it is compelled to serve sin, and cannot recall itself into a better state" (135). Yet, in contravention to the inescapable logical implications of this, Erasmus wants to insert "a mere logical figment", a vertible will, maintaining 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 (137).

But Jesus said, "He that is not with Me is against Me" (Mt 12:30). He did not say, "He that is not with Me is yet not *against* Me, but *in the medium*" (138). "Neither God nor Satan admit of a *mere abstracted willing* in us..." (138).

#### Sect. L

As we noted previously, the second opinion regarded by Erasmus as "more severe still" maintained that free will "avails unto nothing but to sin". This was Augustine's opinion, expressed in many places, especially his book "Concerning the Spirit and the Letter". The third opinion, "the most severe", maintained that "free will" is an empty term, and "that everything we do, is done from necessity under the bondage of sin" (139). The Diatribe opposes these two opinions.

For Luther, however, all three opinions express *one sentiment*, since free will "having once lost its liberty, is compulsively bound to the service of sin, and cannot will any thing good", so that free will "is a mere empty term, whose reality is lost" (139). For a lost liberty is no liberty at all. So the Diatribe tries to treat as diverse and contrary three opinions that in reality express the same sentiment.

## Sect. LI-LIV

[This section, as indicated above, involves a detailed analysis of Ecclesiasticus 15:15-18, arguing that this text does not declare, in plain words, what free will is and what it can do]

## Sect. LV-LXIV

Having shown that various passages [see above under XLVI] considered to support a doctrine of free will are not concerned with what people can do but with what they ought to do (151-171), Luther, referring to Ezekiel 18:23, distinguishes between *the preached and offered mercy of God* and *the secret and to be feared will of God* (171), between *God preached* and *God hidden* (172), between *the word of God* and *God himself* (173). So, "He does not '*will* the death of a sinner,' that is, *in His word*; but He *wills* it by that *will inscrutable*" (173).

With respect to *God preached* it is right to say that "if God does not desire our death, it is to be laid to the charge of our own will, if we perish" (173). But it is not right to inquire as to *why* God does not take away or change this fault of the will in all or to inquire as to why God lays it to the charge of the will which people can't avoid (Rom 9:20).

## Sect. LXV

Luther reconsiders this argument: "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 forms of precepts, must of necessity stand coldly useless" (174). Again he points out that all that these accomplish is to show what ought to be done. Luther devotes particular attention to Deuteronomy 30:11-14 in this regard.

Luther observes that the Diatribe uses Scripture in a manner that undermines its own design, namely to show that free will cannot will anything good without grace and is an endeavour that cannot be ascribed to its own powers.

## Sect. LXVI

Luther here introduces the consideration of various New Testament texts appealed to by proponents of free will. He describes arguments based on these texts as akin to "a king of flies attended by his forces armed with lances and shields of straw or hay, drawn up in battle array against a real and complete army of veteran warriors", with what he dubs "the human dreams of the Diatribe... drawn up in battle array against the hosts of the words of God" (179). The Achilles of these flies is an appeal to Matthew 23:37-39: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered thy children together, and though wouldest not." It is reasoned that if all things are done from necessity then Jerusalem can protest about being held responsible for the killing of the prophets, since, being the *will* of God, would therefore have been done of *necessity* by Jerusalem.

Luther asks what is achieved by such an argument, since it assumes, mocking the notion of an enslaved will, that the will is "free, whole, and able to do all things which the prophets have spoken", something at odds with the position adopted in the Diatribe, namely the "probable opinion" that free will cannot will good. The argument

based on Matthew 23:37-39 is caught on the horns of a dilemma, speaking of a free will incapable of willing good being charged with failure to heed the prophets and presenting Christ shedding useless tears, weeping as though they could have willed good while knowing they couldn't.

Luther warns against disputing the secret will of God. It is Jesus as God Incarnate who says, "I would and thou wouldst not!" Jesus was sent "that He might desire, speak, do, suffer, and offer unto all, all things that are necessary unto salvation, although He should offend many, who, being either left of hardened by that secret will of Majesty, should not receive Him thus desiring, speaking, doing and offering" (181). He continues,

It belongs also to this same God Incarnate, to weep, to lament, and to sigh over the perdition of the wicked, even while that will of Majesty, from purpose, leaves and reprobates some, that they might perish. Nor does it become us to inquire why He does so, but to revere that God who can do, and wills to do, such things (181).

#### Sect. LXVII

Luther anticipates that his appeal to the secret will of God will be deemed to be a convenient invention. Luther stresses Romans 9:19 (cf. Isa 58:2) as demonstrating this is no invention; "that it is not lawful for men to search into that will of Majesty" (182-183).

#### Sect. LXVIII

Luther takes up Matthew 19:17 and combines this with all the conditional ifs and imperative verbs of the New Testament. He gives examples as to why appeal to these considerations is useless:

If thou wilt equal Virgil in singing, my friend Mevius, thou must sing in another strain. If thou wilt surpass Cicero, friend Scotus, instead of thy subtle jargon, thou must have the most exalted eloquence. If thou wilt stand in competition with David, thou must of necessity produce Psalms like his. Here are plainly signified things impossible to our own powers, although, by divine power, all these things may be done. So it is in the Scriptures, that by such expressions, it might be shewn what we cannot do ourselves, but what can be done in us by the power of God (184-185).

The point of such statements is to communicate two truths: "That we can do nothing ourselves; and that, if we do any thing, God works that in us" (186).

#### Sect. LXIX

Luther next considers the argument that the frequent mention of good and bad works and rewards implies a concept of merit that is inconsistent with nature and necessity. In line with this Matthew 5:12 is understood as teaching that the heavenly reward implies those concerned have merited eternal life.

Commenting on New Testament promises and exhortations Luther speaks of Erasmus' inability to discriminate between Old and New Testaments, the latter presupposing new birth and Matthew 5:12 addressed to Jesus' apostles.

#### Sect. LXX

With respect to the concept of merit, Luther points out that the essential question is "not what reward is to be given, or how it is to be given, but, whether or not we can do those things, for the doing of which the reward is to be given" (188-189). Luther

considers the view "that necessity, has neither merit nor reward", noting that "if we speak of the *necessity of compulsion*, it is true: if we speak of the *necessity of immutability*, it is false" (189). Luther here points out that there will be no reward or ascription of merit to an unwilling worker. However, reward or punishment follows naturally for those who work good or evil willingly, even though they can't alter the necessity by their own power.

With respect to merit or reward the issue is one either *of the worthiness* or *of the consequence*. Since so-called "free will" can't will good the good will, merit and reward necessarily belong to grace alone and worthiness is ruled out. But the concept of merit or reward is appropriate when one speaks in terms of consequence since there is nothing either good or evil that does not have its reward. The error many make in speaking of merits and rewards is that of arguing about worthiness, which has no substance, when we should instead be arguing about consequences. So there is a hell for the wicked "even though they themselves neither conceive nor think of such a reward for their sins" and "there remains a kingdom for the just, even though they themselves neither seek it nor think of it" (190). Given Matthew 25:34 it is better to speak of the kingdom meriting the sons of the kingdom rather than of them meriting the kingdom.

#### Sect. LXXI

All the passages which speak of rewards are concerned with the consequence of reward and not with the worthiness of merit. Luther summarises:

Wherefore, as the words of the law are for instruction and illumination, to teach us what we ought to do, and also what we are not able to do; so the words of reward, while they signify what will be hereafter, are for exhortation and threatening, by which the just are animated, comforted, and raised up to go forward, to persevere, and to conquer; that they might not be wearied or disheartened either in doing good or in enduring evil (192).

#### Sect. LXXII

Since the words of the law have no effect upon the will Reason may ask why God acts through his Word when the will is impotent and is not empowered by the Word and everything depends on the power and operation of the Holy Spirit. Luther responds that God does not give the Spirit apart from the Word, but through the Word. For God wants us to be his co-workers so that as we preach the Word God works by his Spirit in the lives of those in whom it pleases God to work. Yes, he could do this work apart from the Word, but that is not his *will*. It is God alone by his Spirit who works in us both merit and reward.

#### Sect. LXXIII

On the basis of Matthew 7:16, 20 - "By their fruits you shall know them" - it is quibbled that this implies the fruits are not done by necessity. In response Luther points out that we often lay claim to something as "ours" which we did not make ourselves, but merely received from others. Consequently, those works can also be called "ours", since God gave them to us by the Spirit, just as we can call Christ "ours", though we did not make him, but merely received him. The same goes for "our" eyes, hands, feet, etc.

## Sect. LXXIV

It has also been argued that when John 1:12 speaks of God giving people the power to become sons of God that this implies people have a God-given ability to exercise their wills in becoming God's sons. Luther responds that John is speaking of a power given to us from above, not of any power of free will inherent in ourselves.

## Sect. LXXV

Luther similarly exposes the weakness of the argument to show that a doctrine of free will is implicit in such texts as Romans 2:4.

**Second Part**

## Sect. LXXVI-LXXXI

Luther begins by inveighing, in a lengthy manner, against attempts to treat the plain words of Scripture as metaphorical (claiming that "there is, in the most simple and clear passages, a *trope*; 204), in particular the misreading of God "hardening" Pharaoh's heart as meaning, for example, "to give an occasion of becoming hardened" or that "by the same longsuffering of God, some are hardened and some converted" in the same way as "under the same sun, mud is hardened and wax melted; as by the same shower, the cultivated earth brings forth fruit, and the uncultivated earth thorns" (216).

Luther argues that so-called "free will" is "nothing but mud, nothing but uncultivated earth", since it cannot will good and that to teach otherwise is to treat God as one who does not exercise "His wisdom, will, and presence, in choosing, separating, and inspiring, but leaving the troublesome and irksome business of accepting or refusing His long-suffering and His anger, entirely to men" (217).

## Sect LXXXII-LXXXIV

Luther recognizes that it seems absurd to reason that God, being just and good, should exact of "free will" impossibilities and that when "free will" cannot will good and of necessity serves sin, that sin should still be laid to its charge. Yet the attempts to treat the plain words of Scripture as metaphorical lead to greater absurdities, including the absurdity of ascribing all things to "free will".

Luther points out that Pharaoh was already a wicked man, as all fallen people are, before God hardened his heart and that it is absurd when thinking of God's work in Satan and fallen man to conceive of their natures as though they were neutral. Rather, when God works in Satan and wicked man he does so in accordance with how "they themselves are, and as He finds them" (223). Consequently, since "they are themselves averse and evil, being carried along by that motion of the Divine Omnipotence, they cannot but do what is averse and evil" (224). God himself cannot do evil, but he works the evils by evil men. "The fault, therefore, is in the instruments, which God allows not to remain actionless" (224). The wicked man must necessarily err and sin, unless he is amended by God's Spirit, just as a carpenter will cut badly with a broken-edged axe.

## Sect. LXXXV-LXXXVI

The sinner is no more able to overcome his aversion to God and his self-seeking than he can avoid his own existence.

God's work of hardening sinners, like Pharaoh, is not to be compared with a malignant liquor-seller, who, being bad, pours poison into, or mixes it up in, a vessel that was not bad and "did nothing but receive, or passively accomplish the purpose of the malignity of the poison-mixer" (226).

Indeed, even Satan, in all his evil, is carried along by God's sovereignty to accomplish God's will. In line with this David recognized that when Shimei uttered evil blasphemies against him, he did so in the outworking of God's sovereignty (2 Sam 16:10).

#### Sect. LXXXVII

God presented to the impious and evil will of Pharaoh his word and his work, which Pharaoh's will hated, and it is precisely in this way that God hardened Pharaoh, knowing full well Pharaoh's nature and how he would respond. That is, "God presents outwardly to his enmity, that which he naturally hates" (228). All this illustrates that God knows an evil will can will nothing but evil.

#### Sect. LXXXVIII

Luther takes up the question as to why God does not stop exercising his omnipotence in a way that results in the will of the wicked being moved to go on in evil and even become worse. Luther responds that if God was to stop exercising his omnipotence in this way he would in fact cease to be God at all and, indeed, God himself would be sacrificing his own goodness in order that evil people should not become more evil.

Luther anticipates that the question might now be asked as to why God does not change the evil wills which he moves. But this belongs to the unsearchable mysteries of God, as does the answer to such questions as why God permitted Adam to fall or why he caused all of us to be infected with the same sin, instead of creating us from other seed or instead of first cleansing sin from Adam before creating us from him.

But the moment we try to supply a reason we are making the will of God subject to some rule or standard by which it should act, rather than recognizing that the will of God "is itself the rule of all things" (230). Whatever takes place as the outworking of God's will is necessarily right precisely because God so wills: "A cause and a reason are assigned for the will of the creature, but not for the will of the Creator; unless you set up, over Him, another Creator" (231).

#### Sect. LXXXIX-XC

Luther strives to show that the Exodus account is crystal clear in teaching that the hardening of Pharaoh was not due to punishment being withheld from him by a long-suffering God, but, indeed, deliberately aroused in him by God so that God might be universally glorified through the very resistance of Pharaoh and the actions he took to delay Israel's deliverance. Further, the revelation that God was hardening Pharaoh's heart all served to comfort the weak and strengthen their confidence in God.

#### Sect. XCI-XCII

Luther moves on to a consideration of Romans 9, noting how Erasmus seeks to avoid the clear meaning of the text through various ways of sporting with words. For example, Erasmus contends "that there is a necessity of the consequence, but not a necessity of the thing consequent" (235). But Luther counters: "If God be not deceived

in that which he foreknows, that which he foreknows must, of necessity, take place" (237). Further, "God wills those same things which He foreknows" (237). Consequently, "whatever God *foreknows*, must, of *necessity*, take place" (240).

#### Sect. XCIII

Luther argues that:

natural Reason herself is compelled to confess, that the living and true God must be such an one as, by His own liberty, to impose necessity on us. For He must be a ridiculous God, or idol rather, who did not, to a certainty, foreknow the future, or was liable to be deceived in events, when even the Greeks ascribed to their gods 'fate inevitable.' And He would be equally ridiculous, if He could not do and did not do all things, or if any thing could be done without Him. If then the prescience and omnipotence of God be granted, it naturally follows, as an irrefragable consequence that we neither were made by ourselves, nor live by ourselves, nor do any thing by ourselves, but by His Omnipotence. And since He at the first foreknew that we should be such, and since He has made us such, and moves and rules over us as such, how, I ask, can it be pretended, that there is any liberty in us to do, in any respect, otherwise than He at first foreknew and now proceeds in action! (241-242).

In short, "the prescience and Omnipotence of God, are diametrically opposite to our 'Free-will'" (242). Here Luther clarifies that by God's omnipotence he is not referring to "that power by which He *does not* many things that He *could do*, but that *actual power* by which He powerfully *works all in all*" (242).

#### Sect. XCIV-XCV

Luther recognizes that the greatest offence to common sense or natural reason is given by the thought "that the God, who is set forth as being so full of mercy and goodness, should, of His mere will, leave men, harden them, and damn them, as though He delighted in the sins, and in the great and eternal torments of the miserable" (243).

Luther admits that he himself had often felt so offended, "even unto the deepest abyss of desperation", only to later realize how near that desperation was to grace. It is the desire to avoid this offensiveness that causes distinctions to be invented between the *ordinary* will of God and the *absolute* will of God; between the necessity of the consequence and the necessity of the thing consequent.

But even natural Reason, while suffering this offence and inventing contrivances to remove it, is compelled to recognize that God is omnipotent, not merely in power but in action and that he knows and foreknows all things, it being impossible that he should err or be deceived. Further, Romans 9:20-21 reinforces all this.

#### Sect. XCVI

Erasmus maintained: "With reference to the immutable prescience of God, Judas was of necessity to become a traitor; nevertheless, Judas had it in his power to change his own will" (247). Luther retorts that this is an absurd statement, not only because, as already demonstrated, the will cannot will anything but evil, but also because it implies Judas could change the prescience of God and render it fallible.

## Sect. XCVII-XCIX

Luther also takes issue with the Sophistic attempt to distinguish between the *necessity* of the *consequence* and the *thing consequent*. The necessity of the consequence is that if God foreknows a thing it must of necessity take place, leaving no place for free will. However, Erasmus argued that “since Judas can change his willing to betray, therefore, there is no necessity of the thing consequent” (250). Luther points out the inherent contradiction: Judas is able to will not to betray, yet Judas must of necessity will to betray.

Luther discusses Romans 9:11-16 which speaks of how God chose Jacob when he and his brother Esau were “not yet born”. Erasmus argued that this did not pertain to the salvation of man. Luther perceives Jerome’s influence here and is scathing of Jerome, declaring that there were many things he impiously wrote. Luther stresses that Paul’s point is that they did not attain to what is said of them by the power and merits of free will. He comments:

The question here, is not, whether that servitude pertained unto salvation, but from what *merit* it was imposed on him who had not deserved it (253).

## Sect. C-CI

Luther observes that, if anything, the same point is even more strongly implicit in Genesis 25:23, the text on which Paul’s argument is based. He also rejects Erasmus’ approach to Malachi 1:2-3 where he argues that God does not love nor hate as we do and that the passions of love and hate don’t pertain to God. Luther retorts,

We know well enough, that God does not love or hate as we do; because, we love and hate mutably, but He loves and hates from an eternal and immutable nature; and hence it is, that accidents and passions do not pertain unto him (255).

But, this being so, Erasmus’ *Diatribes* at this point, while trying to evade the issue of free will, actually reinforces the argument against it, since this very nature of God makes it patently clear that the love and hatred of God are immutable and eternal and, therefore, existing not merely before any merit or work of free will, but, indeed, before the universe was created.

## Sect. CII

Even if Luther was to concede that Malachi 1:2-3 concerned the *effect* of love and of hatred, this too can hardly be said to occur without, and independent of, the will of God.

Nor does Luther have any patience with Erasmus’ view that Malachi 1:2-3 does not concern “that hatred by which we are damned to all eternity”, but rather relates to temporal affliction. But this would imply that Paul had mishandled the Scriptures. Luther responds that even if we were to concede that the hatred of Malachi 1:2-3 concerned merely temporal affliction this does Erasmus’ position no good. The point is still being made that there is no free will. Luther protests to Erasmus, “I am arguing about merit, and you are all the while talking about reward” (257). Since, therefore, Erasmus implies merit *is* involved Luther demands to know from him what merit there was in Jacob that moved God to love him and to hate Esau before they were born?

Yet Luther, appealing to Malachi 1:6, will not accept that Malachi 1:2-3 concerns merely temporal affliction. For Malachi is plainly speaking of two people proceeding

from the two patriarchs, "the one received to be a people and saved, and the other left and at last destroyed" (258).

#### Sect. CIII

Erasmus further quibbled that Romans 9 is written "to beat down the arrogance of the Jews" and "that God is said to hate men before they are born, because, He foreknows that they will do that which will merit hatred" (259). Consequently, Erasmus argues, "the Jews were cut off from the olive tree on account of the merit of unbelief, and the Gentiles grafted in on account of the merit of faith" (259).

But the fact that people are grafted in by faith and cut off by unbelief does not demonstrate that they *can* believe or fall away *by the power of free will*. And, on this point, Paul makes it plain

that this comes to them by no work of theirs, but only according to the love or the hatred of God: and when it comes to them, he exhorts them to persevere, that they be not cut off. But this exhortation does not prove what we *can do*, but what we *ought to do* (260).

#### Sect. CIV-CV

Erasmus also argued that Isaiah 45:9 and Jeremiah 18:6 in speaking of people being clay in God the Potter's hand are texts concerning temporal affliction which Paul over-uses in relating them to eternal election and reprobation. Luther objects to the insinuation that Paul was mishandling Scripture.

Luther does not believe that Paul is directly using these texts and is rather using his own image. Still, it seems incomprehensible to argue, as Erasmus does, that "the liberty of the will is not destroyed by our being as clay in the hand of an afflicting God" (261). Absurdly, Erasmus appeals to 2 Timothy 2:20-21 to support his claim, arguing that verse 21, which speaks of the person who cleanses himself becoming a vessel of honour, that this demonstrates that free will is operational notwithstanding the fact that among the various vessels in the great house there are some for honour and some for dishonour.

First, the question might be asked whether 2 Timothy 2:20-21 is dealing with the same subject as in Romans 9:11-23. But even if it were so, we must be careful to catch the purpose behind Paul's use of this figure of speech and not simply snatch at detached words. In 2 Timothy 2:20-21 the purpose behind this figure of speech and what makes it effective is the truth that God knows his own (verse 19). Consequently, this purpose parallels Paul's meaning at Romans 9:21, since both texts prove there is no such thing as free will.

Secondly, to use "If a man purify himself from these" in defence of free will is to make a nonsense of Paul's argument for these words pertain to those who are vessels of honour, the elect, in contrast to those who are vessels of dishonour, the reprobate. Further, the entire argument of Paul is thereby rendered absurd. For then he would be pointlessly having vessels murmuring against God, the potter, when the fault is clearly not in the potter but in the vessel. "For who would murmur at hearing him damned, who merited damnation!" (265).

## Sect. CVI

Also, Erasmus' Diatribe on the basis of Madam Reason absurdly objects that to deny free will is to regard the fault as being in the potter rather than in the vessel since the vessel is undeservedly thrown into the fire, having no power of its own to prevent this. But, in effect, the Diatribe expresses the sentiment of the impious voiced by Paul: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" (Rom 9:19). Reason cannot bear Paul's teaching, requiring that God act according to human laws and do what seems right to men, or cease to be God! Luther captures this evil mentality: "That Majesty which is the Creating Cause of all things, must bow to one of the dregs of His creation" (266). Luther asks, "Moreover where remains the power of the potter to make what vessel He will, if, being subject to merit and laws, He is not permitted to make what He *will*, but is required to make what He *ought*?" (266-267).

## Sect. CVII

Luther decides to play along with Erasmus' reasoning. Suppose God *ought to be* such an one, who should have respect unto *merit* in those who are to be damned. Must we not, in like manner, also require and grant, that He ought to have respect unto merit in those who are to be *saved*? (267).

That is, if we follow Reason "it is equally unjust, that the undeserving should be crowned, as that the undeserving should be damned" (267). But if this is the case "then, woe unto you, sensibly miserable sinners, under that God! For who among you can be saved!" (267).

It follows that because

Reason praises God when He saves the undeserving, but accuses Him when He damns the undeserving; it stands convicted of not praising God as God, but as a certain one who serves its own profit; that is, it seeks, in God, itself and the things of itself, but seeks not God and the things of God (268).

## Sect. CVIII-CIX

Luther defies Erasmus to produce any passage that attributes all to man, with respect to meriting salvation. Luther also points out that it is nonsense to treat "If a man purify himself" and "God worketh all in all" as contradictory. The belief that such statements are in contradiction is due to the absurd approach to language that concludes "a certain thing is commanded: therefore, we are able to do it, and do do it, or the command is ridiculous." As Luther points out, if interpreting imperative or conditional words were this easy then this would prove that free will can do all things, and this would mean the Diatribe itself was in self-contradiction.

## Sect. CX

Luther notes the empty repetitive reasoning of the Diatribe:

If a man do nothing, there is no place for merit, and where there is no place for merit, there can be no place either for punishment or for reward" (273).

But again if such reasoning proved anything it would be that all merit is in the power of free will and there is no place for grace. Yet the Diatribe vainly tries to argue that merit is partly man's work and partly God's work. Luther insists that Paul's image of the potter and clay stands unshaken and invincible.

## The Diatribe's Attempt to Refute Passages Cited by Luther Against Free Will

Sect. CXI-CXXXI

In this next section Luther deals with the following texts:

1. Genesis 6:3: "My Spirit shall not always remain in man; seeing that he is flesh."

Erasmus:

- (a) Denies "flesh" connotes moral corruption and insists it concerns only human infirmity.
- (b) Argues it only applies to the people of that age and not even all of them, given the exception of Noah.
- (c) Argues, following Jerome, that the Hebrew should be understood as speaking not of God's severity but of his mercy. The basis for this is the notion that the Spirit expresses God's indignation and that, therefore, Genesis 6:3 is promising a merciful end to this.

Luther insists that Jerome cannot produce one passage of Scripture attributing indignation to God's Spirit and, even if he could, cannot demonstrate that this is the meaning in this context. Luther also appeals to Paul's concept of "flesh" as implying sinfulness (1 Cor 3:3; 5:7). He notes too that the context makes it abundantly clear that God is voicing angry words when he utters Genesis 6:3. Luther protests:

But it is with these trifling vanities that Jerome and Origen have filled the world: and have been the original cause of that pestilent practice - the not attending to the simplicity of the Scriptures (276).

Luther reasons: "... if, even while the Spirit of God is among them calling and teaching, they only become worse, what will they do when left to themselves without the Spirit of God!" (277). Since, all are flesh (Jn 3:6) it is plain the words of Genesis 6:3 apply to all in all ages and that "flesh" stands in opposition to "Spirit" (cf. Jn 6:63), though Luther recognizes that there are also abstracted senses of "flesh" which simply denote the human physical state and nature (Mt 19:5; Jn 6:55; Jn 1:14). At any rate, Luther takes it that the Diatribe fails to change the fact that Genesis 6:3 stands directly against free will.

2. Genesis 8:21: "The thought and imagination of man's heart, is evil from his youth" & Genesis 6:5: "Every imagination of man's heart is only evil continually" (278-279).

Erasmus argued these texts did not deny free will since: "The proneness to evil which is in most men, does not, wholly, take away the freedom of the will" (279).

First, Luther insists "all" men, not "most" are clearly intended. He also observes that a proneness or inclination to evil is treated as a relatively insignificant matter, "as though it were in our own power to keep ourselves upright, or to restrain it" (279). By contrast, these texts speak of "the continual bent and impetus of the will, to evil" (279).

3. Isaiah 40:2: "She hath received at the Lord's hand double for all her sins" (280). Once again Jerome, preposterously, claims this statement concerns divine vengeance, even though the entire context concerns remission of sins. Luther understands the previous clause to be saying "her warfare has ended" (cf. NIV: "her hard service has been completed") and sees Israel as depicted as those who carried on a warfare of sin as soldier-sinners; a people who could not but sin and who, the more they fought, the

more they sinned. But they receive their forgiveness "from the hand of the Lord", that is, not obtained by their own powers or on account of their own merit.

In arguing that man, assisted by God's help, can prepare himself by moral works the Diatribe appeals to Acts 10:31: "that his [Cornelius'] prayers and alms pleased God before he was baptized, and before he was inspired by the Holy Spirit." Luther disputes this understanding of Cornelius' life before he was baptized and had heard the gospel concerning Christ's resurrection, arguing that it does not follow that he was without the Holy Spirit, as the example of John the Baptist also shows.

4. Isaiah 40:6-7: "All flesh is grass, and all the glory of it as the flower of grass: the grass is withered, the flower of the grass is fallen: because the Spirit of the Lord hath blown upon it."

Again Jerome absurdly understands "spirit" to signify indignation and "flesh" but the infirm condition of man. Rather, everything that can be said of people, including free will, is covered by the phrase "all flesh is grass". Indeed, it is people, devoid of the Spirit of the Lord, who are "flesh". At length Luther takes issue with the entire approach adopted in the Diatribe and insists the whole human race is "flesh", devoid of the Spirit of God.

Luther criticizes his critics for the examples they appeal to in arguing that some people are conspicuous for the meritorious good they do. Luther notes all their examples concern an external display of works and asks his critics, "For did you ever see their hearts?" (293). Luther makes the point that all people, the Romans, Greeks, Jews and all the race of men, "did whatever they did of virtue or valour, from a thirst after [their own] glory" (293).

In a major statement Luther observes,

But though this be meritoriously good before men, yet, before God, nothing is less meritoriously good than all this; nay, it is most impious, and the greatest of sacrilege; because, they did it not for the glory of God, nor that they might glorify God, but with the most impious of all robbery. For as they were robbing God of His glory and taking it to themselves, they never were farther from meritorious good, never more base, than when they were shining in their most exalted virtues (293-294).

Luther persists in drawing a sharp distinction between "flesh" and "spirit" insisting that in God's sight all that which is deemed meritoriously virtuous and good in man's sight is "flesh" and subservient to Satan's kingdom: "that is, ungodly, sacrilegious, and, in every respect, evil!" (295).

Luther reasons that if this "meritoriously virtuous" aspect of man was to be deemed not ungodly then an absurd conclusion follows:

Shall we rate the price of His [Christ's] blood so low as to say, that it redeemed that part of man only which is the most vile, and that the most excellent part of man has power to work its own salvation, and does not want Christ? Henceforth then, I must preach Christ as the Redeemer, not of the whole man, but of his vilest part; that is, of his flesh [as redefined by Erasmus]; but that the man himself is his own redeemer, in his better part!" (296).

Luther now faces the protest from Erasmus' Diatribe that if the whole man, even when regenerated by faith, is nothing but "flesh", then where is the "spirit" born of the Spirit?

Luther teaches "that he who is thus regenerated, is no longer flesh, excepting as to the remnants of the flesh, which war against the first fruits of the Spirit received" (298).

5. Jeremiah 10:23: "I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps."

Erasmus' Diatribe maintains that this passage is concerned with the events of prosperity rather than with the power of free will. Against this Luther points out that in context Jeremiah "saw that he taught the ungodly with so much earnestness in vain" and "was at once convinced, that his word could avail nothing unless God should teach them within; and that, therefore, it was not in man to hear the Word of God, and to will good" (299).

Luther hypothetically considers the implications of treating this text as if it did in fact concern events of adversity and prosperity:

if the event of these things which are temporal, and over which man, Gen. i. 26-30, was constituted lord, be not in our own power, how, I pray you, can that heavenly thing, the grace of God, which depends on the will of God alone, be in our own power? (300).

6. Proverbs 16:1, 9: "It is of man to prepare the heart, but of the Lord to govern the tongue."

The protest was made against Luther that because he taught "all things are carried on by necessity" he makes a nonsense of this verse, making it unnecessary for man to prepare his heart. Luther, notes that the uncertainty of our knowledge concerning all future things places upon us a necessity, fearing God, to exert ourselves all the more, trusting God for the result. We do not become presumptuous or complacent.

7. Proverbs 16:3: "Commit thy works unto the Lord."

To twist this statement into a defence of free will is like taking "I am thy God" and construing it as "Thou makest Me thy God" or taking "Thy faith saved thee" and construing it as "Thou makest thy faith".

Erasmus' diatribe tries to soften the force of Proverbs 16:4 and 20:1 by saying God "never created a creature evil" and that he only "inclines" but "does not immediately compel" the heart of the king (303). But Luther points out that here Erasmus is misrepresenting his position, since in explaining the working of God's sovereignty Luther was not speaking of creation but of the "continual operation of God upon the things created" and not of compulsion, but of "the necessity of immutability". That is, the inclining, is not so snoring and lazy a thing, as the Diatribe imagines, but is that most active operation of God, which a man cannot avoid or alter, but under which he has, of necessity, such a will as God has given him, and such as he carries along by his motion (304).

8. John 15:5: "Without me ye can do nothing."

Luther easily sweeps aside, but at considerable length, a pathetic attempt by the Diatribe to confuse "nothing" with "that which is imperfect" or "little" ("a certain small degree"). This discussion involves considerations of other texts such as 1 Corinthians 3:7; 13:2 and John 3:27.

In the course of this discussion Luther observes Erasmus inability to discriminate between what the creature can do in co-operation with the operating God and what we can do of ourselves. The essential point being that

God... does not work *in us without us*, seeing we are for that purpose created and preserved, that He might work in us and that we might co-operate with Him, whether it be out of His kingdom under His general omnipotence, or in His kingdom under the peculiar power of His Spirit; - so, man, before he is regenerated into the new creation of the kingdom of the Spirit, does nothing and endeavours nothing towards his new creation into that kingdom, and after he is re-created does nothing and endeavours nothing towards his perseverance in that kingdom; but the Spirit alone effects both in us, regenerating us and preserving us when regenerated, without ourselves.. (318).

Sect. CXXXII

Luther goes on to protest the way in which the Diatribe seeks to use passages of Scripture which exalt God's grace as establishing free will, though Luther does not dispute

That all the works of man *may be* good, if they be done by the assisting grace of God. And moreover that there is nothing which a man might not do by the assisting grace of God (319).

Sect. CXXXIII

Luther now moves to the making of his own assertions. But first he refuses to accept Erasmus' recommendation of adopting a moderate medium, of according some little to free will, since this brings no improvement or benefit. Luther urges Erasmus to deny free will altogether and ascribe all to God, for then "there will be in the Scriptures no contradictions" (322), only possible difficulties to be either remedied or endured.

Sect. CXXXIV

Further, Luther urges Erasmus not to think that Luther's assertion that there is no such thing as free will as an inflexible position he has adopted expressive of his temper, given his reputation for conducting discussions with ardour. Indeed, Luther comments, Then, who more happy than Luther - to be honoured with the universal testimony of his age, that he did not maintain the Cause of Truth lazily, nor deceitfully, but with a real, if not too great, ardour! (322).

### Third Part

In the first part Luther has demonstrated that all the arguments urged in support of free will actually stand against free will. In the second part he has showed that all the Scriptures "free will" sought to refute stand invincible. In this third part Luther produces his "two champion-generals with a few of their legions - Paul, and John the Evangelist!" (324).

Sect. CXXXV-CXXXVIII

#### *Paul Against Free Will*

Romans 1:18 teaches that all people do nothing but that which merits wrath. Further, given 1:16-17, it is plain that free will

even in the most exalted of men, not only has wrought, and can work no righteousness, but does not even know what is righteous before God. - Unless you mean to say, that the righteousness of God is not revealed unto these most exalted of men, but to the most vile! (327-328).

Luther challenges:

shew me one of the whole race of mankind, be he the most holy and most just of all men, into whose mind it ever came, that the way unto righteousness and salvation, was to believe in Him who is both God and man, who died for the sins of men and rose again, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father, that He might still that wrath of God the Father which Paul here says is revealed from heaven? (328).

Luther challenges Erasmus to look at the most eminent philosophers and consider what they have written concerning the wrath to come, and to consider the Jews instructed by many successive prophets. The fact is

that that which was the most excellent in the most excellent of men, not only did not follow this way of righteousness, not only did not know it, but even thrust it from them with the greatest hatred, and wished to away with it when it was published and revealed? So much so, that Paul saith, this way was "to the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Gentiles foolishness" (1 Cor. i. 23) [329].

Consequently it is certain

that 'Free-will' is nothing else than the greatest enemy to righteousness and the salvation of man: for it is impossible, but that there have been some among the Jews and Gentile Greeks who wrought and endeavoured with all the powers of 'Free-will;' and yet, by all that endeavouring, did nothing but carry on a war against grace (329).

It is absurd to say free will can endeavour towards good when goodness and righteousness are to it a "stumbling-block" and "foolishness." Indeed, Romans 1:21 condemns as "foolishness" the most sublime and exalted thoughts and opinions of the most exalted and most excellent Greeks. Further, Romans 2 condemns those Jews who, without the faith, were most wise, most religious and most honourable. So we must conclude that "free will" is worst when it is best "and that, the more it endeavours, the worse it becomes, and the worse it is!" (331-332).

Sect. CXXXIX

Moving on, Romans 3:9 leaves no room for free will, driving home the point in verses 10-23. Luther calls on Erasmus to acknowledge "that the most excellent faculty in man is not only ungodly, but ignorant of God, existing in the contempt of God, turned to evil, and unable to turn towards good" (335). The will, reason, indeed, all human faculties stand in contempt of God, his words, works, laws, precepts and his will. The fact that no one seeks God means no one can even make a beginning in themselves, but are wholly dependent on the initiative of God's grace.

Sect. CXL-CXLIII

Romans 3:19-20 press the matter still further. Yet when Paul states that none can be justified by "works of the law" some quibble that he only has in mind the ceremonial works which, following Christ's death now lie wholly in the past. Luther attributes this notable error to Jerome's influence. It would make no sense to limit "works of the law" to ceremonial works since then how can it be said that all are unrighteous and need grace? Further, Luther points out the ceremonial laws were as much commanded and exacted in the old law, and in the Decalogue, as the moral works. And when Paul speaks of the works of the law he is not speaking of an abrogated law but "of the law in force and authority" (341). Indeed, Galatians 3:10 makes it clear that "works of the law" is concerned with "all the laws that are written in the Book of the Law" (342).

## Sect. CXLIV-CXLV

Luther further points out that Paul, like Jesus (Jn 3:6) sets the Spirit in opposition to the works of the law, meaning

that every thing which is not of the Spirit is flesh, be it never so specious, holy and great, nay, be they works of the divine law the most excellent, and wrought by all the powers imaginable; for the Spirit of Christ is wanting; without which, all things are nothing short of being damnable (343).

So by "the works of the law" Luther means not only "the works of the whole law" but also "that in the works of the law, every thing is condemned that is without the Spirit" (344). Indeed, by the law comes knowledge of sin (Rom 3:20). The law does not help man but casts him down into despair in desperate need of another light, the voice of the Gospel, "revealing Christ as the Deliverer from all these evils" (345). Citing too Galatians 3:19 and Romans 5:20 Luther drives home his point that

the law is necessary, which might give the knowledge of sin, in order that, he who is proud and whole in his own eyes, being humbled down into the knowledge of the iniquity and greatness of his sin, might groan and breathe after the grace that is laid up in Christ (346).

## Sect. CXLVI

Romans 3:21-26 are "very thunder-bolts against 'Free-will'" (347). Christian righteousness exists without the works of the law, since the works of the law can contribute nothing towards its attainment (cf. 3:28, 20). Even more so, the righteousness of God exists without free will, "since the most devoted effort of 'Free-will' is, to exercise itself in moral righteousness, or the works of that law, from which its blindness and impotency derive their 'assistance!'" (348).

## Sect. CXLVII

Further, Paul "denies that any thing which is not this faith, is righteous before God" (349). And that which is not righteous must be sin:

But here the ungodly man sins against God, whether he eat, or whether he drink, or whatever he do; because, he abuses the creature of God by his ungodliness and perpetual ingratitude, and does not, at any one moment, give glory to God from his heart (350).

## Sect. CXLVIII

Romans 3:23 is another thunderbolt. If free will workers do not sin why doesn't Paul exclude them? Luther takes "glory of God" to mean "glory in God", people glorying in God. If free will were not sinful but good then its consequence would be unashamed glorying in God, confident that what it has done would be pleasing and acceptable to God. Luther defies Erasmus to produce anyone "who can honestly, and from his heart, say of any one of his devoted efforts and endeavours - This pleases God!" (351).

Further free will is at odds with the freely given justification spoken of in Romans 3:24 since it necessarily tries to make a place for merit, whatever lame semantic attempts might be made to say it does not. By contrast, Romans 3:24 makes it clear that there is no place for merit at all.

## Sect. CXLIX

Luther contends:

It has happened to these assertors of "Free-will" according to the old proverb, "Striving dire Scylla's rock to shun, they 'gainst Charybdis headlong run (354).

The promoters of free will, in seeking to distance themselves from Pelagians, deny the "merit of worthiness" and yet, "by the very way they deny it, they establish it more firmly than ever" (354). Luther deems this worse than Pelagians, since at least the Pelagians were open and candid in asserting the merit of worthiness, "thus calling a boat a boat, and a fig a fig"; and teaching what they really think" (354). Luther describes the promoters of free will as "twice-dipped Pelagians" (355).

But "a free justification allows of no workmen" (355); cf. Romans 11:6; 4:4.

#### Sect. CL

Luther has no patience with reliance on church fathers who are at odds with Paul's teaching:

Go now then and boast of the authorities of the ancients, and depend on what they say; all of whom you see, to a man, disregarded Paul, that most plain and most clear teacher (357).

#### Sect. CLI

Luther moves to a consideration of Romans 4:2-3, which contrasts a righteousness of works, moral and civil, with righteousness of faith. The former must not be confused with works of the law or of ceremonies since Abraham was living long before the law. With respect to the latter Luther stresses the word "imputed", a word repeated over 10 times in Romans 4. Free will must be either numbered with the "man who works" or the "man who does not work". The fact that Paul speaks of the "man who works" dashes the Sophist's snarl that though *man* be evil his *work* may not be evil. Clearly, "the works and devoted efforts themselves of man are condemned, whatever they may be, by what name soever they may be called, or under what form soever they may be done" (359), especially including their good and meritorious works.

#### Sect. CLII

Luther lists but does not develop a series of other arguments to indicate there is no place for free will (360-361):

- Since grace comes by the purpose of God, or by election, it comes of necessity and, therefore, not by any devoted human effort or endeavour.
- Since God promised grace before the law it does not come by works or by the law; otherwise it would no longer be a *promise*.
- If works were of any avail faith would come to nothing. But Abraham was justified before the law was given.
- Righteousness cannot be obtained by the law, which is the strength of sin, exposing it, not removing it, and making the conscience guilty before God. If the law provides no help even more so is free will powerless to help us.
- We (that is all persons without exception), cannot do anything which is not sin and damnable because we all lie under the same sin and damnation of the one man Adam.

#### Sect. CLIII

Luther indicates that to give a place to free will makes a mockery of Paul's pervasive use in his writings of such words as "all", "none", "not", "not one", "without", "thus", "they are all gone of out of the way, there is none that doeth good, no not one" (361-362).

## Sect. CLIV

Luther next considers Paul's distinction between those who live according to the flesh and those who live according to the Spirit (Rom 8:5, 9; cf. Jn 3:6). In the former case he plainly states that such persons "cannot please God" and that "the carnal mind is enmity against God" and "It is not subject to the law of God neither indeed can be" (364). Without any proven basis, Origen dreamt up a three-fold affection: flesh, soul and spirit, with soul identified with the medium of affection which Origen claimed could be inclined either towards the flesh or the spirit. Against this Paul only knows that everything that is without the Spirit is flesh. Paul does not only say that they *are not* subject, but that they *cannot be* subject; cf. Mt 7:17; 12:34. So "we not only speak that which is evil, but cannot speak that which is good" (365):

'Free-will' is nothing but the servant of sin, of death, and of Satan, doing nothing, and being able to do or attempt nothing, but evil! (365).

## Sect. CLV

Luther now looks at Romans 10:24, citing Isaiah, showing "that grace comes so free, that no thought concerning it, or attempt or desire after it, precedes" (366). The contrast concerning futile Jewish striving after righteousness in Romans 9:30-31 shows the endeavour of free will is all in vain, even when it strives to do the best.

## Sect. CLVI

The apostle John's theology is next regarded, beginning with John 1:5, 10-11. Luther explains that the term "world" means the whole race of men, which therefore comprehends free will, "as that which is most excellent in man" (368). Since the world does not know the light of truth, hates Christ and his, does not know or see the Spirit, is settled in enmity, etc. free will is plainly guilty of all that is laid to the charge of the world by John. This is clearly expressed in John 1:12-13: "they become the sons of God, neither by the birth of the flesh, nor by any devoted human effort whatever, but by a Divine birth only" (369).

## Sect. CLVII

John 1:16 indicates that not only is grace not received because of any devoted effort on our part, but because of the merit of Christ, meaning free will is nothing at all. Indeed, to assert free will is to deny Christ. For if I can obtain grace by my own efforts I do not need the grace of Christ. The advocates of free will express their denial of Christ in their very lives, with Christ being for them no longer a sweet Mediator but a dreaded Judge, whom they strive to please by the intercessions of the Virgin Mother, and of the Saints; and also, by variously invented works, by rites, ordinances, and vows; by all which, they aim at appeasing Christ, in order that He might give them grace (372).

## Sect. CLVIII

Nicodemus "is a man in whom there is every thing that you can desire, which 'Free-will' is able to do", but revolts from the true way of salvation and is confounded by it (Jn 3:9).

## Sect. CLIX

Further, Christ is "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6). Consequently, since free will "is neither Christ nor in Christ, must be bound in error, in a lie, and in death" (374). One can say nothing for free will excepting that which is contrary to Christ. To

claim a place for free will is to imply that error, death, Satan and all evils dwell in Christ. All who so do may pretend, verbally, to confess Christ but are actually denying him.

Sect. CLX

Given John 3:18 if free will is included in the number of those who believe than it has no need of grace. The only alternative is to acknowledge it is damned in the sight of God. Unbelief is not just one of the grosser affections but, indeed, is the "chief affection seated and ruling on the throne of the will and reason; just the same as its contrary, faith" (377). To be unbelieving is to deny God and make him a liar (1 Jn 5:10). So it is absurd to think that a power that does this will strive after that which is good.

To grant free will a place is to say Scripture lies. Free will also makes a mockery of John 3:36.

Sect. CLXI-CLXII

John 3:27 teaches free will must be nothing. John 3:31 requires us to class free will with "he who is of the earth", the world (Jn 8:23). John 6:44 leaves no room for free will, indicating that even the word of the Gospel itself is useless, unless the Father draws the hearer. It is a slur on this crystal clear Scripture to misuse Augustine by arguing: "that God draws us, in the same way as we draw a sheep, by holding out to it a green bough" (380). But the point of the text is that God holds out not merely one good thing but even his own Son and, despite this, no-one follows him unless the Father draws him.

Sect CLXIII

John 16:9 shows that it is sin not to believe in Christ, which is located "not in the skin, not in the hairs of the head, but in the very reason and will" (381). Since the world, ignorant of this sin, must receive revelation by the Spirit's reproof it follows that free will, together with its will and reason, must be accounted a captive of this sin and, therefore, condemned before God.

Luther summarises:

In a word: Since the Scripture declares Christ everywhere by positive assertion and by antithesis (as I said before), in order that it might subject everything that is without the Spirit of Christ to Satan, to ungodliness, to error, to darkness, to sin, to death, and to the wrath of God, all the testimonies concerning Christ must make directly against 'Free-will'; and they are innumerable, nay, the whole of Scripture. If therefore our discussion is to be decided by the judgment of the 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! (382).

It is common knowledge among Christians, no matter what "the great theologians and defenders" of free will might say, that "we are compelled to serve in the kingdom of Satan, until we be liberated by a Divine Power" (383).

Sect. CLXIV

Luther focuses now on "that truly Achillean Scripture of mine", namely Romans 7 and Galatians 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" (383). Luther argues:

If the nature of man be so evil, even in those who are born again of the Spirit, that it does not only not endeavour after good, but is even averse to, and militates against the good, how should it endeavour after good in those who are not born again of the Spirit, and who are still in the 'old man', and serve under Satan? (383).

Here Paul is not concerned merely with the so-called 'grosser affections', but enumerates among the works of the flesh such evils as idolatry, contentions and divisions, all of which are described as reigning in the reason and the will.

Luther confesses that even if it were possible for him to be granted free will he would not want it. He does not want to be placed in a position in which he must accomplish something to secure his own salvation. Not merely because of his inability to stand in the face of many opposing dangers, but also, even if there were no dangers, conflicts or devils, this would compel him "to labour under a continual uncertainty, and to beat the air only" (384). He would never be able to arrive at a settled certainty as to how much he should do to satisfy God, adding "as I myself learned to my bitter cost, through so many years of my own experience" (384).

He confesses:

But now, since God has put my salvation out of the way of my will, and has taken it under His own, and has promised to save me, not according to my working or manner of life, but according to His own grace and mercy, I rest fully assured and persuaded that He is faithful, and will not lie, and moreover great and powerful, so that no devils, no adversities can destroy Him, or pluck me out of His hand. "No one (saith He) shall pluck them out of My hand, because My Father which gave them Me is greater than all" (John x. 27-28) [384-385].

Sect. CLXV

Against those who find it difficult, if there is no place for free will, to defend God's mercy and justice, because they think this means God damns the undeserving, Luther points out: "if His righteousness were such, that it was considered to be righteousness according to human judgment, it would no longer be divine, nor would it in any thing differ from human righteousness" (385-386); cf. Romans 11:33.

Sect. CLXVI

Luther observes that in everyday life often the wicked prosper and the good suffer greatly. This might indicate that either there is no God or that God is unjust. But the Gospel easily deals with this matter by teaching that there is a life after this life, with judgment to follow death. Similarly, we can expect that the difficulties people have about God's mercy and justice with respect to the damning of many will also be resolved on the day of judgment.

Luther advises holding in consideration the three lights: the light *of nature*, the light *of grace* and the light *of glory*. By the light of nature it is not possible to prove *how* God can be just, given that the good are afflicted and the wicked prosper. Yet this is resolved by the light of grace. Similarly, by the light of grace it is not possible to prove *how* God can damn a person, who according to his own abilities, can do nothing but sin and become guilty. If we judge this merely by the light of nature and of grace then we would conclude the fault is not in the miserable person but in the unjust God. What other judgment could be reached given that God crowns one wicked person freely, without any merit, while he refuses to crown another and even condemns him or her,

who is perhaps less or, at least, not more wicked than the one he chooses to save? However, the light of glory brings us to another conclusion. It will show that God, to whom alone belongs the judgment of incomprehensible righteousness, is indeed perfectly righteous. In the meantime we believe this, being confirmed in our confidence by the way in which the light of grace solves a problem otherwise insoluble by the light of nature.

### Conclusion

Sect. CLXVII

On five grounds Luther allows no place for free will:

1. The foreknowledge and fore-ordaining of God, with nothing taking place except in accord with his will.
2. Satan's control over sinners, as he fights against God, never releasing them except when forced to by the power of God's Spirit.
3. Original sin is so devastating that even in the lives of the godly we see a continued striving against that which is good, showing the impossibility of any person, devoid of the Spirit, being able to turn towards good and the inevitability of turning towards evil.
4. Since the Jews, for all their striving after righteousness, "ran rather into unrighteousness, while the Gentiles, though following unrighteousness, attained a free righteousness for which they never hoped.
5. Christ as Redeemer becomes superfluous, or the Redeemer of only the grossest part of man, if we blasphemously and sacrilegiously deny he redeemed people by his blood.

Sect. CLXVIII

Luther now presents a personal appeal to Erasmus to fulfil his promise to yield to the one who would teach him better than he knew. Luther commends Erasmus for entering into this debate and for alone seeing "the grand hinge upon which the whole turned" (391). He urges him to accept his teaching as a Moses by a Jethro or a Paul by an Ananias. He reminds Erasmus that he himself had said he did not *assert*, but *collected*, an effective acknowledgment that he had not mastered his subject.

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<sup>1</sup> I have not been able to find a dictionary in which the word *vertible* is to be found. I assume that Luther intends it to be used interchangeably with *mutable*.