

# *The Bondage of the Will:* “I Cannot by My Own Reason or Strength...”

Luther's Response to Erasmus of Rotterdam in 1525,  
and Why it Still Matters



David Jay Webber

Delivered at the Annual Convention of the Evangelical  
Lutheran Synod, Mankato, Minnesota, June 17-18, 2025

# ***The Bondage of the Will: “I Cannot by My Own Reason or Strength...”***

*In nomine Iesu*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Most people who identify themselves as Lutherans would be able to summarize what some of the chief controversies of the Reformation era were, between Martin Luther and his supporters, and the Pope and his supporters. The sale of indulgences would probably come to mind first, since that was the initial trigger that got the whole Reformation movement going. Luther's rejection of the presumed authority of the Pope and his bishops, to bind consciences to beliefs and practices that are not found in Holy Scripture, would also come readily to the minds of most Lutherans, as a key controversial issue. Many Lutherans would also know that there was a big debate over the nature and character of the Lord's Supper. They would know that Luther rejected the Roman doctrine and practice of the sacrifice of the mass, and the Roman teaching that having a mass said for a deceased person can help that person get out of purgatory sooner – similar to how the purchase of a special indulgence for the benefit of a deceased person was said to bring about his release from purgatory. The Lutherans rejected the whole notion of purgatory, and they explained – on the basis of the Lord's institution of the sacrament – that Holy Communion is God's gift to the church, and is not a sacrificial work that the church or its clergy perform for God, to appease him and to win his favor.

But I would venture to say that most Lutherans would likely not be able to identify what Luther himself described as the chief and most crucial issue of his time, in his disputes with the Roman Church and its theologians. History also shows that many professing Lutherans, at various periods of Lutheran history, have actually seemed to agree more with the position of Luther's opponents, than with Luther's position, on this most fundamental issue. This most fundamental issue was the controversy over free will, or the freedom of choice.

Is an unregenerated person able to choose to follow God and to believe in him, so as to bring about or to complete – by this choice – his own conversion to faith in God? Can a person who is not yet a believing Christian, make a choice to become a believing Christian, when he is exposed to God's Word? Or is an unbeliever incapable of making himself into a believing Christian by the use of his own will – due to his inherited spiritual deadness, and due to his inborn hostility to God – so that his conversion, if he *is* in fact converted, is completely a work of God within him? We know that our justification before God – that is, God's acceptance and approval of us for the sake of Christ – is by God's grace through faith, and not by human works. God announces this justification in the message of the gospel. But the deeper question remains: Where does the faith that believes this divine announcement come from? It *seems* to come from *us*, and from our capacity to make choices either for or against God. But is what *seems* to be true, *actually* true?

To be sure, this issue is harder for us to wrap our minds around, than issues like the sale of indulgences or papal power. This fundamental question of how and why a guilty and spiritually dead unbeliever becomes a forgiven and spiritually alive believing Christian, and remains as a believing Christian, is full of mystery and paradox. But to the extent that Scripture does speak to this question, and does explain God's perspective on these things, then to that

extent we are able to know what to confess and believe. That is, on the basis of what Holy Scripture teaches regarding these matters, we are able to know what to believe *about our believing*! And as disciples of the Lord who want always to abide in his Word, and to be in submission to his Word, we are obligated to confess and to believe what God reveals, even if many mysteries and paradoxes remain.

### LUTHER AND ERASMUS: 500 YEARS AGO

This all became a public dispute through a written exchange between Erasmus of Rotterdam and Luther 500 years ago, in 1524 and 1525. Erasmus was a well-respected scholar who in 1516 had edited and published the first printed edition of the Greek New Testament, which Luther had used in his work of translating the New Testament into German. Erasmus had also called for reforms and improvements in the church, especially in the areas of the education and personal moral life of the clergy. For a while people wondered if Erasmus might be a secret Lutheran, and if at some point he might publicly align himself with Luther and endorse the whole Lutheran reform agenda. But in 1524 Erasmus made it clear that he would not be doing that, when he wrote his diatribe “On the Freedom of the Will” (or “On the Freedom of Choice”). Erasmus, in this writing, criticized some things that Luther had previously written on the subject of human choice in spiritual matters in *An Assertion of All the Articles of Martin Luther Condemned by the Latest Bull of Leo X*, penned by the Reformer in 1520. Luther then responded to the diatribe of Erasmus, in 1525, in another treatise entitled “On the Bondage of the Will” (or “On the Bondage of Choice,” in Latin *De Servo Arbitrio*).

Near the end of that 1525 treatise, in which Luther strongly criticized Erasmus’s theological method and his theological conclusions, he did at least pay Erasmus this compliment:

... I praise and commend you highly..., that unlike all the rest you alone have attacked the real issue, the essence of the matter in dispute, and have not wearied me with irrelevancies about the papacy, purgatory, indulgences, and such like trifles (for trifles they are rather than basic issues), with which almost everyone hitherto has gone hunting for me without success. You and you alone have seen the question on which everything hinges, and have aimed at the vital spot; for which I sincerely thank you... (LW 33:294)

Consider how important it was to Luther that the church of Jesus Christ would preach and teach a proper and biblical doctrine of conversion and faith, if *in comparison* he would consider the hawking of indulgences and the multiplication of masses for the dead to be mere “trifles”!

And Luther considered his 1525 treatise on bound choice to be one of only two (or three) literary works of his that he thought would have an enduring value for the church even beyond his lifetime. In a 1537 letter to Wolfgang Capito, Luther indicated that he would not mind if most of his writings would be “devoured” and forgotten. He went on to write: “For I acknowledge none of them to be really a book of mine, except perhaps the one *On the Bound Will* and the Catechism” (LW 50:172). Luther here is probably considering his Small and Large Catechisms together. And it is, of course, in his Small Catechism where Luther puts the main point of the larger treatise into a form easily accessible to all Christians, when he says:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; just as He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

But if Luther would also single out his treatise *On the Bondage of the Will* in such a way, and with such a recommendation, then we as Lutherans would be well-advised to make sure we understand and appreciate the reasons for Luther's lifelong valuing of that work, and the significance of his lifelong convictions on the subject that it addresses.

Erasmus described his response to Luther's earlier 1520 treatise as a "diatribe" or discourse, because this terminology carried the connotation that he was sharing some alternate thoughts to what Luther had written, but was not making strong, condemnatory pronouncements. He was simply offering another view for everyone's consideration. Luther's 1520 "Assertion," to which Erasmus was responding, had been of a different character. And Luther's 1525 response to the diatribe was likewise of a different character, as he once again made confident assertions and pronouncements regarding what Scripture taught.

In his diatribe, Erasmus wanted to persuade Luther to back away from some of his more uncompromising statements regarding conversion by the sovereign working of God alone. Erasmus perceived that according to the way Luther did his theology, he would have to make his arguments for moderation on this point chiefly from Scripture. So, in the diatribe's lengthy Preface and shorter Introduction, Erasmus expressed his intention to do this. Erasmus was convinced that most of the church Fathers of the past taught differently from how Luther had been teaching, but in order to have an effect on Luther's thinking he knew that he would need to focus instead on what the Bible itself said on the subject.

But Erasmus also questioned whether it was really possible to have a definite dogmatic conviction based on Scripture alone, concerning the depth of human sin, the limitations of the unregenerated human will, and the means and method of conversion and faith, since (in his perception) Scripture seems not to be fully clear and consistent in what it teaches about these things. Could we say that the unconverted will chooses to work itself toward faith in God, to orient itself toward God, or at least to open itself up to God's influence, so that faith and conversion would be a cooperative process involving contributions from God and man? Or do we need to say that the unconverted will is completely numb to the things of God, or perhaps is even hostile toward God, so that it can only be *worked upon* by God? This would mean that God transforms or even overrides the corrupted human will, and brings about faith and conversion – when faith and conversion do occur – as a unilateral divine act and gift, which the converting human simply endures and receives.

Erasmus did not think that these questions are answered plainly and decisively in the Bible, apart from the interpretive authority of the church and its tradition. Still, he went on in the first part of his diatribe to discuss various Scripture passages that he thought supported a belief in human free choice. Then, in the second part of his work, he referred to other passages that he admitted seemed to teach against human free choice, and attempted to explain why they probably did not really teach that. In the third part of his writing, Erasmus addressed many of Luther's statements from his previous "Assertion" writing, taking issue with much of what he

had said and with the tone and tenor of how he had said it. And finally, in an Epilogue, Erasmus suggested that many aspects of this debate actually lie in the area of open questions that cannot be dogmatically settled only on the basis of Scripture, and he proposed a mediating and open-minded approach as the most prudent course for all concerned to take.

## TWO VERY DIFFERENT AGENDAS AND APPROACHES

To Erasmus, Christianity was in large measure best thought of as a philosophy of life, characterized by a devout desire to follow the example of Christ in how one lived, so that precision in doctrine was not really that important. Luther, however, came at these matters from a totally different direction, and with a totally different set of concerns. He wanted to know where he stood with God. He wanted to know how he as a sinner could be certain that God forgives him, so that he will not be damned as his conscience told him he deserved.

To Luther, Holy Scripture is God's Word. God is speaking in the Scriptures. And when God speaks to us he does not speak in riddles, but he speaks intelligibly and clearly. He wants to be understood, and by means of the human language that he chooses to use for his revelation he makes himself understood. Scripture does not answer every question that humans might ask about every divine mystery. But what Scripture does say can be believed with certainty as God's incontrovertible truth. As far as human logic is concerned, Scripture does leave some loose ends. But we should not fill in the gaps – where God has remained silent – with human speculation. We should instead focus the attention of our faith where God has *not* remained silent.

In his treatise Luther lays out some general principles of Biblical interpretation that have remained as hermeneutical guidelines that Confessional Lutherans still follow, involving a belief in the fundamental clarity of Scripture, and a methodology of allowing unclear passages to be interpreted in the light of clear passages that address the same subject. The *central* thrust and content of Scripture, in both the Old and New Testaments, is Christ: his divine person, his incarnation and perfect human life, his atoning sacrifice and glorious resurrection, and the coming of his eternal kingdom. Much that might previously have been unclear in the Old Testament became clear when Christ appeared as the fulfillment of God's messianic promises to his ancient people.

There may still be some passages of Scripture, around the periphery of this primary theme, that are still unclear to us, because of our limitations in understanding and perception. But those relatively few passages do not throw shade on the overwhelming clarity of Scripture's central proclamation of Christ and his salvation. Luther admits that

there are many texts in the Scriptures that are obscure and abstruse, not because of the majesty of their subject matter, but because of our ignorance of their vocabulary and grammar; but these texts in no way hinder a knowledge of all the subject matter of Scripture. For what still sublimer thing can remain hidden in the Scriptures, now that the seals have been broken, the stone rolled from the door of the sepulcher [Matt. 27:66; 28:2], and the supreme mystery brought to light, namely, that Christ the Son of God has been made man, that God is three and one, that Christ has suffered for us and is to reign eternally? Are not these things known and sung even in the highways and byways? Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find left in them?

The subject matter of the Scriptures, therefore, is all quite accessible, even though some texts are still obscure owing to our ignorance of their terms. Truly it is stupid and impious, when we know that the subject matter of Scripture has all been placed in the clearest light, to call it obscure on account of a few obscure words. If the words are obscure in one place, yet they are plain in another; and it is one and the same theme, published quite openly to the whole world, which in the Scriptures is sometimes expressed in plain words, and sometimes lies as yet hidden in obscure words. (LW 33:25-26)

In summary, Erasmus defended the notion that human beings by nature possess the ability to choose between good and evil, and therefore also between following God or rejecting God, so that they do have some control over their own salvation. Luther's 1525 response to Erasmus reasserted his previous position, as based on the clear teaching of the Bible, that human beings are incapable of achieving their own conversion to God in whole or in part, through the exercise of a free will which, in fallen sinners, does not actually exist – as far as the higher things of God are concerned. Human beings are instead entirely dependent on God's grace for their salvation from sin and from the spiritual death and corruption that sin brings to all men.

In his treatise Luther reasserts this position by responding to Erasmus's diatribe point by point. Luther is very thorough and detailed. Where Scripture does answer a question that Erasmus raises, Luther demonstrates that answer exegetically. Where Scripture leaves a question unanswered, Luther points this out, and resists the temptation to fill in the logical gaps with human speculation or philosophical reasoning – as Erasmus had often done with respect to difficult passages.

### CALVINISM'S RECEPTION AND (MIS)USE OF LUTHER'S TREATISE

Luther's treatise *On the Bondage of the Will* has been published in English translation several times: in 1823 twice, as translated by Henry Cole and as translated by Edward Thomas Vaughan; in 1957 as translated by James I. Packer and O. Raymond Johnston; in 1969 as translated by Philip S. Watson and Benjamin Drewery, in a volume of the *Library of Christian Classics* series that also included a translation of Erasmus's *Diatribe*; and in 1972 in a revised version of the Watson/Drewery translation as Volume 33 of the American Edition of *Luther's Works*. It is from that last 1972 publication that this essay quotes. It can also be noted that both of the translations from 1823 have long been in the public domain, and while they are still in print in book form, they are also available for free, digitally, online. An audio recording of the Cole translation is also available online, for free, from LibriVox. So, if you would be satisfied with a nineteenth-century rendering, you can read it or listen to it – or both – at no cost.

As we look at the names of these various translators over the decades, we see scholars who can be identified as Calvinist, Anglican, Methodist, and Evangelical. Indeed, there has always been a lot of interest in this treatise beyond the Lutheran Church. In my experience, it seems to me that more Calvinists than Lutherans have read it. Several Calvinists have told me that it is the only book by Luther they have ever read. And if it is not the only one, it is their favorite one. In Reformed circles, Luther's treatise *On the Bondage of the Will* is frequently described as his greatest work. Calvinists have been known to say that this book shows that

Luther was actually a “Calvinist” who believed in and taught a doctrine of double predestination, just as John Calvin did.

Double predestination is indeed taught by Calvin in his famous dogmatic work *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The *Institutes* first appeared in 1536, with the definitive revised version being published in 1559 (in Latin) and in 1560 (in French). One of the chapters bears the title (in English translation): “Of the Eternal Election, by Which God Has Predestinated Some to Salvation, and Others to Destruction.” More specifically, Calvin wrote in his *Institutes* that “predestination” is

the eternal decree of God, by which he has determined in himself, what he would have to become of every individual of mankind. For they are not all created with a similar destiny; but eternal life is foreordained for some, and eternal damnation for others. Every man, therefore, being created for one or the other of these ends, we say, he is predestinated either to life or to death. (Calvin II:176)

But Luther never reached such conclusions about an eternal will and plan of God for condemning the damned, even though he did believe that God had revealed an eternal will and plan for saving the elect in Christ. Lutherans in general rejected the Calvinist teaching as soon as they heard it, and in Article XI of the Formula of Concord they officially and forever reject it.

Luther had written his 1525 treatise before the emergence of Calvin as an influential theologian, and before the publication of Calvin’s *Institutes*. Because Luther was writing at an earlier time – against Erasmus and not against Calvin – a small number of his statements may not have been formulated as carefully as they likely would have been, once Calvin’s teaching on double predestination emerged. We would expect Luther then to have been more careful in some of his wording, and in how he qualified some of his assertions, so as to avoid leaving the impression that he agreed with a double predestination doctrine. And in how he expressed himself on this subject in later writings, he does in fact guard against such misunderstandings. Calvinists, however, interpret those few ambiguous statements in Luther’s 1525 treatise through the lens of Calvin’s later teaching, and by way of inference and extrapolation claim that Luther also taught that God from eternity willed the salvation of the elect, and predestined them to heaven; while God from eternity willed the damnation of the reprobate, and predestined them to hell: so that the eternal fates of both categories of men were predetermined absolutely by the infinite plan and will of God.

Calvinists see Luther as their ally and theological compatriot – in opposition to the various forms of Arminian “decision theology” that are popular today – in Luther’s statement in his treatise that

all men find these sentiments written on their hearts...: first, that God is omnipotent, not only in power, but also in action..., otherwise he would be a ridiculous God; and secondly, that he knows and foreknows all things, and can neither err nor be deceived. These two points being granted by the hearts and minds of all, they are quickly compelled by inescapable logic to admit that just as we do not come into being by our own will, but by necessity, so we do not do anything by right of free choice, but as God has foreknown and as he leads us to act by his infallible and immutable counsel and power. (LW 33:191)

Another of the statements by Luther into which Calvinists read their beliefs is in the summary that Luther penned toward the end of his treatise:

For if we believe it to be true that God foreknows and predestines all things, that he can neither be mistaken in his foreknowledge nor hindered in his predestination, and that nothing takes place but as he wills it (as reason itself is forced to admit), then on the testimony of reason itself there cannot be any free choice in man or angel or any creature. Similarly, if we believe that Satan is the ruler of this world, who is forever plotting and fighting against the Kingdom of Christ with all his powers, and that he will not let men go who are his captives unless he is forced to do so by the divine power of the Spirit, then again it is evident that there can be no such thing as free choice. (LW 33:293)

The trajectories of human logic and reason would indeed take us to the conclusion that if God wills the salvation of the elect, and if only the elect will be saved, then God must will the damnation of the damned. God *not* making a decision to *save* the damned is logically the same as God *making* a decision *not* to save them, which in turn is logically the same as God making a decision *to damn* them. That logic would seem to hold, when all these dots are connected.

But God's revealed Word, and what God impresses upon us for us to believe, do not go where the trajectories of human reason would go. And Luther does not go there, either. Because God has not revealed such a sequence of deductions to us, we do not believe in this or confess this.

### GOD HIDDEN AND GOD REVEALED

As far as the unfathomable mysteries of God's eternal thoughts and plans are concerned, Luther confesses that

God must therefore be left to himself in his own majesty, for in this regard we have nothing to do with him, nor has he willed that we should have anything to do with him. But we have something to do with him insofar as he is clothed and set forth in his Word, through which he offers himself to us... (LW 33:139)

God does not invite us to ponder what cannot ultimately be known and understood about his incomprehensible majesty. This would only frighten and repel us. But God does invite us – in the Scriptures – to find peace and hope in what God tells us about himself, and about his gracious plans for us, in the preaching of his revealed Word. And as Luther goes on to explain, what “God as he is preached is concerned with” is “that sin and death should be taken away and we should be saved. For ‘he sent his word and healed them’ [Ps. 107:20]” (LW 33:140). Luther criticizes Erasmus, however, because his diatribe does not make

any distinction between God preached and God hidden, that is, between the Word of God and God himself. God does many things that he does not disclose to us in his word; he also wills many things which he does not disclose himself as willing in his word. (LW 33:140)



God's hidden will is inscrutable – that is, it is impossible to understand or interpret. We know that he *has* an inscrutable will, but we have no access to it. We cannot construct a theology on the basis of it, or predict what will happen in our own lives or in human history because of it. What resides in that hidden will is, quite simply, not our business. But, as Luther explains,

It is our business...to pay attention to the word and leave that inscrutable will alone, for we must be guided by the word and not by that inscrutable will. After all, who can direct himself by a will completely inscrutable and unknowable? It is enough to know simply that there is a certain inscrutable will in God, and as to what, why, and how far it wills, that is something we have no right whatever to inquire into, hanker after, care about, or meddle with, but only to fear and adore. (LW 33:140)

If we would allow our human reason to make what seem to be logically-necessary deductions about God's infinite knowledge, almighty power, and absolute control over all things, we would end up in a state of fear and despair. But this God of deep mystery and great majesty is not the God with whom we, as fallen and needy sinners, must interact. Instead, God cloaks this mystery and majesty under his Word: as he comes to us, and makes himself accessible to us, in a powerful yet simple message of salvation and spiritual healing. The glory with which he wraps himself, as he makes himself known in his Word of promise and hope, is not the unsettling glory of his unlimited sovereignty, but is the soothing glory of his unlimited love.

### GOD REVEALED IN PROCLAMATION

Another aspect of this mystery is that Christ wills the gospel and “Christian doctrine...to be proclaimed and to reign throughout the world...” Luther also notes:

“The word of God is not bound,” says Paul [II Tim. 2:9]... God has not given us a Word that shows partiality in respect of persons, places, or times; for Christ says: “Go into all the world” [Mark 16:15]. He does not say, “Go to one place and not another”... And he says, “Preach the gospel to every creature” [ibid.], not “to some and not to others.” ...it is one great part of the glory of the Word that (as Paul says)...God is no respecter of persons. (LW 33:57)

Speculations about God's possible hidden thoughts and desires could be a source of confusion and doubt for someone with a guilty conscience who wonders if God actually wants him to hear and believe the gospel. But listening to what God actually says in Scripture dissipates any such confusion and doubt.

Where Calvin later taught that God sends and leads the elect to heaven, and that God also sends and leads the reprobate to hell, Luther in 1525 had set forth a very different contrast. He compared the way in which God's grace shapes and directs the will of believers, with the way in which *Satan* shapes and directs the will of unbelievers. In a well-known passage, where Luther describes the orientation of the human will with the use of imagery picturing God and Satan as riders on a donkey, he states that

the human will is placed between the two like a beast of burden. If God rides it, it wills and goes where God wills, as the psalm says: “I am become as a beast [before thee] and I am always with thee” [Ps. 73:22 f.]. If Satan rides it, it wills and goes where Satan wills; nor can it choose to run to either of the two riders or to seek him out, but the riders themselves contend for the possession and control of it. (LW 33:66)

The main focus and ultimate point of his treatise was always to underscore the revealed biblical truth that the saved are saved by God’s grace alone, according to God’s eternal gracious plan for them. The fate of the damned is not discussed in the same way, and is not attributed to God in the same way.

Many or most Lutherans may not share the opinion of the Calvinists that Luther’s treatise *On the Bondage of the Will* is the best thing he ever wrote, but Lutherans should be more interested in this treatise than they often seem to be. Perhaps in this 500th anniversary year of its initial appearance, they will be.

In this presentation it will not be possible for me to review and summarize Luther’s whole treatise in a full and thorough manner. Entire books have been dedicated to such a task. But I will focus in on some key statements that Luther makes, which I think will serve as good examples of the form and content of the entire work, and which I also think are especially pertinent to issues of faith and theology with which we are still grappling.

### ASSERTIONS

Erasmus had warned against Christian theologians being too assertive in their statements about God and his truth. In the Erasmian spirit, it would be a mark of a proper peace-loving humility before God for a Christian man to couch his words in terms of what *seems* to be, or with qualifications about something being *possible* or *probable*, and not boldly to assert something to be incontrovertibly and undeniably true. This is especially the case when other theologians in other times and places were not so sure about the matter. Luther in particular was criticized by Erasmus for his “obstinate assertiveness,” in his declarations concerning salvation by God’s grace alone without a human contribution. Luther responded that

it is not the mark of a Christian mind to take no delight in assertions; on the contrary, a man must delight in assertions or he will be no Christian. And by assertion... I mean a constant adhering, affirming, confessing, maintaining, and an invincible persevering... (LW 33:19-20)

Such boldness and confidence would not be fitting when discussing things that God has not clearly revealed. But where God *has* spoken clearly and directly, so must we as we confess the truth of what God says. This is not a time for academic gentility and reserve. And so Luther went on to say:

Let Skeptics and Academics keep well away from us Christians... How often, I ask you, does the apostle Paul demand...that most sure and unyielding assertion of conscience? In Romans 10[:10] he calls it “confession,” saying, “with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” And Christ says: “Everyone who confesses me before men, I also will confess before my Father” [Matt. 10:32]. Peter bids us give a reason for the hope that is

in us [I Peter 3:15]. What need is there to dwell on this? Nothing is better known or more common among Christians than assertion. Take away assertions and you take away Christianity. (LW 33:20-21)

Luther also points out the practical and spiritual dangers of Erasmus's attitude, for the consciences of Christians who need to know what is true. Assertions of God's truth, which cut through the confusion and diffuse the doubt, are not only permissible, but are necessary. And so Luther rebukes and corrects Erasmus:

In short, what you say here seems to mean that it does not matter to you what anyone believes anywhere, so long as the peace of the world is undisturbed, and that in case of danger to life, reputation, property, and goodwill, it is permissible to act like the fellow who said, "Say they yea, yea say I; say they nay, nay say I," and to regard Christian dogmas as no better than philosophical and human opinions, about which it is quite stupid to wrangle, contend, and assert, since nothing comes of that but strife and the disturbance of outward peace. (LW 33:23)

As a native New Yorker who is now a transplant in Minnesota, I can say that a clearly-observable trait among people from Minnesota is that they pretty much always try to avoid wrangling, arguing, or having uncomfortable confrontations of any kind; and that they have a desire always to try to keep the peace in all situations and relationships. Erasmus almost seems to have been from Minnesota, or at least from a place much like it. But Luther would say that there are times when the truth is more important than outward peace. Those who speak and preach on God's behalf often need to say things that correct error, and that make people feel uncomfortable. But those who speak and preach on God's behalf also need to say things that people who are frightened and confused need to hear *for* their comfort, and that God wants them to hear clearly and powerfully: regarding his grace toward them in Christ, and regarding his unswerving love for them in spite of their weakness.

### GOD'S GRACE AND PROMISES ARE FOR ME

It is better to know that God wants me to be saved, than to know – or to think – that God wants me to be damned. But for the true comfort of the gospel to be present, I also need to know that what God *wants* to happen, *will* happen. It is not as if God is rooting for me, and is wishing for my salvation, but cannot bring it about until or unless I make my contribution and do my part.

Luther, in his treatise, therefore unfolds the deeper mystery of God's absolute sovereignty over all things – to the extent that this is revealed to us in Scripture. As a fundamental principle of God's existence *as* God, his will and actions are not qualified by contingency – by which a future event or circumstance is understood to be possible, but cannot be predicted with certainty, because something else may happen which would prevent it from occurring. And God's will and actions are also not qualified by mutability – according to which God's eternal plans might be altered, and he might change his mind with respect to a promise or pledge that he has made.

Everything that will happen, God has always *known* will happen. And his knowledge and expectation of what will happen become, *in a certain sense*, his *desire* that it will happen. Nothing

will ever surprise him. God will never need a “Plan B” or an unanticipated “workaround” for what he wishes to accomplish according to his eternal and unchanging will. But again, this basic principle of what divinity means, is not contemplated by Luther for its own sake, but is set forth for the sake of a Christian’s certainty that God’s gracious plans and promises *for his salvation* cannot be thwarted. And so Luther says to Erasmus:

For if you doubt or disdain to know that God foreknows all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutably, how can you believe his promises and place a sure trust and reliance on them? For when he promises anything, you ought to be certain that he knows and is able and willing to perform what he promises; otherwise, you will regard him as neither truthful nor faithful, and that is impiety and a denial of the Most High God. ... And we ought not only to be certain that God wills and will act necessarily and immutably, but also to glory in this fact; as Paul says in Romans 3[:4]: “Let God be true though every man be false,” and again [Rom. 9:6]: “Not as though the word of God had failed,” and elsewhere: “But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are his’” [II Tim. 2:19]. And in Titus 1[:2] he says: “Which God, who never lies, promised ages ago,” and in Hebrews 11[:6]: “Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who hope in him.” (LW 33:42)

Luther is very serious about the importance of a proper teaching about God’s sovereignty and control over all things – for the sake of the reliability of the gospel – so that he even says that

Christian faith is entirely extinguished, the promises of God and the whole gospel are completely destroyed, if we teach and believe that it is not for us to know the necessary foreknowledge of God and the necessity of the things that are to come to pass. For this is the one supreme consolation of Christians in all adversities, to know that God does not lie, but does all things immutably, and that his will can neither be resisted nor changed nor hindered. (LW 33:43)

Luther says that God “necessarily” knows all things. Everything that God has *known* will happen to us, will indeed happen; and everything that God has *planned to do* for us, will indeed be done. But Luther does make an important distinction between *necessity* and *compulsion*. As the mystery of God’s immutable knowledge and will is worked out around us and within us, we do not feel as if something is being forced upon us.

An unbeliever’s bad choices – in favor of Satan’s will and against God’s will – are, for him, natural choices, and are experienced by him to be free choices. He really wants to sin and to worship idols. And one who has been converted and regenerated by God, and whose will has been liberated and enlivened by God’s Spirit, believes in God and desires to serve and obey him, also with a feeling of complete freedom in that faith and in that desire. According to the new nature of a Christian, there is no sense of being forced to faith and obedience. And so Luther explains:

Now, by “necessarily” I do not mean “compulsorily,” but by the necessity of immutability (as they say) and not of compulsion. That is to say, when a man is without the Spirit of God he does not do evil against his will, as if he were taken by the scruff of the neck and forced to it, like a thief or robber carried off against his will to punishment, but he does it of his own accord and with a ready will. And this readiness or will to act

he cannot by his own powers omit, restrain, or change, but he keeps on willing and being ready; and even if he is compelled by external force to do something different, yet the will within him remains averse and he is resentful at whatever compels or resists it. ... This is what we call the necessity of immutability: It means that the will cannot change itself and turn in a different direction...

By contrast, if God works in us, the will is changed, and being gently breathed upon by the Spirit of God, it again wills and acts from pure willingness and inclination and of its own accord, not from compulsion, so that it cannot be turned another way by any opposition, nor be overcome or compelled even by the gates of hell, but it goes on willing and delighting in and loving the good, just as before it willed and delighted in and loved evil. ... So not even here is there any free choice, or freedom to turn oneself in another direction or will something different, so long as the Spirit and grace of God remain in a man. (LW 33:64-65)

Jesus had offered some pertinent observations about Satan's kingdom and God's kingdom in St. Luke's Gospel:

"Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul. And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; but when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil." (11:17-22, ESV)

Luther applies this to what he had been saying:

In short, if we are under the god of this world [Satan], away from the work and Spirit of the true God, we are held captive to his [Satan's] will, ...so that we cannot will anything but what he wills. For he is that strong man armed, who guards his own palace in such a way that those whom he possesses are in peace [Luke 11:21], so as to prevent them from stirring up any thought or feeling against him; otherwise, the kingdom of Satan being divided against itself would not stand [Luke 11:18], whereas Christ affirms that it does stand. ... But if a Stronger One comes who overcomes him and takes us as His spoil, then through his Spirit we are again slaves and captives – though this is royal freedom – so that we readily will and do what he wills. (LW 33: 65)

### **LAW AND GOSPEL**

A deep, systemic flaw that Luther sees throughout Erasmus's diatribe (described by him in feminine terms) is its failure to distinguish between law and gospel:

Diatribe makes no distinction whatever between expressions of the law and of the gospel; for she is so blind and ignorant that she does not know what law and gospel are. (LW 33:132)

Indeed, we cannot understand anything that *Luther* is saying in *his* treatise – by which he is responding to the diatribe – unless we also understand this distinction.

Law and gospel are, as it were, God's "language" of self-revelation. Everything that God impresses upon us through the Scriptures is either a message of mandates and judgments, or is a message of regeneration and forgiveness. And for as long as this world endures, before the Last Day, a defining *purpose* of the law's judgments will be to drive humanity to repentance, so that faith can be kindled or renewed by the grace of the gospel that always follows. In the church, the law always serves, and prepares the way, for the gospel: which delivers us from the evil that threatens us, from the blindness that captivates us, from the condemnation that hangs over us, and from the death that ultimately claims us. Without the proper preaching and application of law and gospel, man will remain in the darkness of his ignorance and unbelief. Luther writes, then, that

Scripture...represents man as one who is not only bound, wretched, captive, sick, and dead, but in addition to his other miseries is afflicted, through the agency of Satan his prince, with this misery of blindness, so that he believes himself to be free, happy, unfettered, able, well, and alive. For Satan knows that if men were aware of their misery, he would not be able to retain a single one of them in his kingdom... Accordingly, it is Satan's work to prevent men from recognizing their plight... But the work of Moses or a lawgiver is the opposite of this, namely, to make man's plight plain to him by means of the law..., so as to prepare him for grace and send him to Christ that he may be saved. (LW 33:130-31)

Regarding this purpose of the law, Luther explains that God's commandments in Scripture do not presuppose or indicate that human nature *as it now exists* – since the fall – is able to *obey* those commandments. To be sure, Adam and Eve *ought* to have remained in a state of loving obedience to God. The *whole human race* that descends from them *ought* to be in such a state *now*. But they did not, and therefore it is not. Hence, as Luther writes, "the words of the law are no evidence for the power of free choice, but show what we ought to do and cannot do" (LW 33:134). Luther more fully unfolds this as he goes on to say

that just as the voice of the law is not raised except over those who do not feel or acknowledge their sin, as Paul says in Romans 3[:20]: "Through the law comes knowledge of sin," so the word of grace does not come except to those who feel their sin and are troubled and tempted to despair. Thus in all expressions of the law you see that sin is revealed, inasmuch as we are shown what we ought to do, just as you see in all the words of promise, on the other hand, that the evil is indicated under which sinners, or those who are to be lifted up, are laboring. Here, for instance, "I desire not the death of a sinner" explicitly names death and the sinner, that is, the evil that is felt as well as the person who feels it. But in the words "Love God with all your heart," we are shown the good we ought to do, not the evil we feel, in order that we may recognize how unable we are to do that good. (LW 33:137-38)

The demands of the law – which men cannot and do not fulfill – do not confirm Erasmus's wishful thinking about free will and free choice. Rather, "all the words of the law stand against free choice," while also "all the words of promise utterly refute it; which means that Scripture in its entirety stands opposed to it" (LW 33:138).

Speculations about God's hardening and damning will – over against those who never do repent, and who are therefore without hope – are not a component of the law that is to be proclaimed, because such speculations would not fulfill the law's purpose of convicting and driving to repentance. The law-gospel message that the church proclaims is always an inviting message of "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 24:47, ESV), addressed to all, and is not sometimes a dead-end message of hopeless and inescapable perdition which would lead only to despair and not to repentance.

According to God's hidden, inscrutable, and unrevealed will, the conclusion might even be reached that some of God's works are evil works – when unbelievers are hardened in their unbelief, or when the wicked are given over completely to their wickedness. But if it be "asked how God can be said to work evils in us, such as hardening, giving men up to their lusts [Rom. 1:24], leading them astray, and so forth," we ought "to be content with the words of God, and believe quite simply what they say, since the works of God are entirely beyond description" (LW 33:175). Reason by necessity will conclude that an omniscient and omnipotent God, outside of and beyond his Word, wills the death of a sinner "according to that inscrutable will of his," since unrepentant sinners do die both temporally and eternally. But faith nevertheless knows instead that "he does not will the death of a sinner, according to his word" (LW 33:140).

So, unlike the dark underbelly of Calvinist teaching, which would include the thought that God has always hated the reprobate and has never desired their salvation, Lutheran preaching says no such thing. And that is because God's Word says no such thing – even if the trajectories of human reason and logic might take some people to that conclusion, based on certain things that God's Word does say concerning his irreversible grace toward the elect.

Erasmus's problem is not that, of course. But Erasmus is confusing law and gospel by treating many gospel passages of Scripture as if they were law passages. When God in Scripture offers and bestows grace and forgiveness, to be received through a divinely-wrought faith, Erasmus turns those *divine gift* passages into *divine demand* passages that command faith, through an exercise of free will, as a condition to be met by human effort before a divine blessing can be had. Luther focuses especially on how Erasmus deals with various passages from the Prophet Isaiah:

Isaiah 1[:19f.] reads: "If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land," where it would have been more appropriate, in Diatribe's judgment, to say, "If I am willing," "if I refuse," if there is no freedom of will. ... Does Diatribe in her excessive wisdom think that the good of the land can be eaten if God is not willing, or that it is an extraordinary and novel idea that we receive good things only if God is willing? Similarly, there is Isaiah 21[:12]: "If you will inquire, inquire; turn and come." What is the point, asks Diatribe, of exhorting those who are in no way under their own control, as if one were to say to a person bound in chains, "Bestir yourself there!"? I ask, on the other hand, what is the point of quoting texts that prove nothing by themselves, and then adding an inference which is a distortion of their meaning and makes them attribute everything to free choice, when all that should have been proved was some sort of endeavor, and that not attributable to free choice? The same may be said regarding Isaiah 45[:20, 22]: "Assemble yourselves and come. ... Turn to me and be saved," and Isaiah 52[:1 ff.]: "Awake, awake, shake yourself from the dust; loose the bonds from your neck." (LW 33:131-32)

Since “it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13, ESV), the human will that God’s promises engage and address is a will that is regenerated and liberated by the Holy Spirit *through the very promises that are offered to it*. And so Luther criticizes Erasmus’s diatribe (again, described in feminine terms):

For out of the whole of Isaiah, apart from that one verse, “If you are willing,” she quotes not a single word of the law, all the rest being Gospel passages, in which the brokenhearted and afflicted are called to take comfort from a word of proffered grace. But Diatribe turns them into words of law. Now, I ask you, what good will anyone do in a matter of theology or Holy Writ, who has not yet got as far as knowing what the law and what the gospel is, or if he knows, disdains to observe the distinction between them? Such a person is bound to confound everything – heaven and hell, life and death – and he will take no pains to know anything at all about Christ. (LW 33:132)

#### PERTINENT WARNINGS AND NECESSARY COMFORT FOR TODAY

Such admonitions and warnings are needed today as well – even among us. The “decision theology” that is so often preached today, among the evangelical Protestants who surround us, demands faith as a human act of the unregenerated will, and as a condition for being saved and “born again.” But proper Christian preaching, after it brings a sinner to conviction through the law, *creates* and *bestows* faith by announcing to the penitent the forgiveness, life, and salvation that Christ has won for the world.

The very concept of regeneration has been hijacked by decision theology, and has been turned into something that is unrecognizable, when compared to what the Bible teaches about the new birth of the Spirit. Jesus uses the imagery of generation and birth to describe the beginning of a new spiritual life, precisely because he wants us to understand that those who are “born again” are “born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:3-4, ESV), and not of water, the Spirit, and a decision of the human will as the capstone and culmination of conversion. Believers receive spiritual life as a pure gift from God – just as all human beings are generated from their human parents and receive their human life as a free gift from them, through the procreative process that God established for humanity.

We do not help to bring ourselves into existence as children of our earthly parents, or to place ourselves into the womb of our mother. This is not something that we do. It is something that is *done to* us. So too do we not help to bring ourselves into existence as children of our heavenly Father, or to place ourselves into the spiritual fellowship and womb of the church. This is something that God does for us and in us, and that is received by faith in his baptismal promises.

But also, as far as the source and origin of that faith are concerned, it “is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (John 6:29, ESV). Holy Baptism – to which the regenerating power of God’s Trinitarian Word is particularly (though not exclusively) attached – is a gospel-gift of God, which creates the very faith that it calls for. The New Testament everywhere describes it in such terms. Baptism is not an empty, external ritual of the law, demanded by God as an act of human obedience.



What Luther criticizes in Erasmus's teaching is the notion that an unregenerated person has the capacity to make an unfettered free choice, in response to God's overtures or directives, either to follow and obey God or to reject and turn away from God. Luther clarifies that

We are not discussing what we can do through God's working, but what we can do of ourselves; that is to say, whether, created as we are out of nothing, we do or attempt to do anything under the general motion of omnipotence to prepare ourselves for the new creation of the Spirit. (LW 33:242)

The answer Luther gives to this question is twofold. First, he points out that

Before man is created and is a man, he neither does nor attempts to do anything toward becoming a creature, and after he is created he neither does nor attempts to do anything toward remaining a creature, but both of these things are done by the sole will of the omnipotent power and goodness of God, who creates and preserves us without our help; but he does not work in us without us, because it is for this he has created and preserved us, that he might work in us and we might cooperate with him, whether outside his Kingdom through his general omnipotence, or inside his Kingdom by the special virtue of his Spirit. (LW 33:242-43)

As sinful and corrupt creatures of God, we are nevertheless tools and instruments in God's hands in spite of ourselves. God operates in and through us as we live and act in this world, and as we make decisions, even without any conscious awareness of how divine providence or divine justice may be working themselves out by means of actions and decisions that God is invisibly shaping and directing for his inscrutable purposes. And second, Luther points out that

before man is changed into a new creature of the Kingdom of the Spirit, he does nothing and attempts nothing to prepare himself for this renewal and this Kingdom, and when he has been recreated he does nothing and attempts nothing toward remaining in this Kingdom, but the Spirit alone does both of these things in us, recreating us without us and preserving us without our help in our recreated state, as also James says: "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of his power, that we might be a beginning of his creature" [James 1:18] – speaking of the renewed creature. But he does not work without us, because it is for this very thing he has recreated and preserves us, that he might work in us and we might cooperate with him. Thus it is through us he preaches, shows mercy to the poor, comforts the afflicted. But what is attributed to free choice in all this? Or rather, what is there left for it but nothing? And really nothing! (LW 33:243)

When I have been made by the Spirit's working to be a new creature in Christ, I am able to know, from Scripture, that this was and is completely a gift of divine grace. I was, as it were, surprised by this grace. Nothing that was going on inside my fallen and corrupted mind, heart, and will – according to my human imaginings, my human thoughts, and my human desires – would have predicted faith in the gospel. But God descended upon me from the outside, changed and recreated me, converted me, and put his Spirit within me. And even now, he alone graciously preserves this new life of faith within me: transforming my mind, enlivening my heart, and redirecting my will.

Luther draws attention to what St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans teaches about the depravity of fallen human nature when he writes in his treatise that,

In the third chapter...he says: "What then? Are we better off than they? Not at all. For we have argued that Jews and Greeks are all under sin" [Rom. 3:9].

Luther then asks:

Where is free choice now? All, he says, all Jews and Greeks are under sin. ... What is the whole world's interpreting worth in face of this clear-as-possible statement? When he says "all" he excepts none, and when he declares that they are under sin, or in other words, are slaves of sin, he leaves nothing of good in them. But where has he stated this case, that Jews and Gentiles are all under sin? ...where he says: "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men" [Rom. 1:18]. And he goes on to prove this from experience, pointing out that in God's displeasure they have been given up to so many vices, as though these fruits of their own ungodliness convict them of willing and doing nothing but evil. (LW 33:252)

And Luther warns that

the wrath that is revealed from heaven against them is going to damn their whole being, unless they are justified through the Spirit; and that would not be the case if they were not with their whole being under sin. (LW 33:253)

Luther also draws attention to St. Paul's use of the Old Testament to bolster his argument, when "Paul proves his point from Holy Writ":

"As it is written," he says, "None is righteous, no, not one, no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless'; no one does good, not even one," and so forth [Rom. 3:10 ff.]. ... It is certain that these things are said of all men, for the prophet [David] represents God as looking down on all men and passing this judgment on them. For so it says in Psalm...[14:2 f.]: "The Lord looks down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any that understand or that seek after God; but they have all gone astray," etc. ... You hear, therefore, that all the children of men, all who are under the law, Gentiles and Jews alike, come under this judgment in the sight of God, that not even one of them is righteous, understands, or seeks after God, but all have turned aside and become worthless. (LW 33:253)

Before conversion, human beings are able to behave outwardly in ways that are *relatively* "good," by the standards of civil righteousness. But in heart and conscience they are not able to "strive after the good," because "they are totally ignorant of God and neither seek after God nor pay any regard to him." They do not "have a power worth anything as a means to the good" because "they have all turned aside from the good and are altogether worthless." These words of Holy Scripture are "entirely clear, and...teach us just this, that all men are devoid of the knowledge of God and full of contempt for him, and they all turn aside to evil and are worthless as regards the good" (LW 33:254).

## IMPORTANT CLARIFICATIONS FOR TODAY

Erasmus had conceded that evidence of humanity's sinful corruption can be seen in man's flesh and in his lower and grosser passions, while he had also maintained that a freedom of choice between good and evil is still to be found in man's higher faculties – that is, in his reason and will. But Luther points out to Erasmus – and to all of his readers – that humanity's inherited “ignorance and contempt for religion and godliness”

are beyond doubt not [only] in the flesh and the lower and grosser passions but in the highest and most excellent powers of men, in which there ought to reign righteousness, godliness, the knowledge of God and reverence for God. In other words, they are in the reason and the will, and therefore in the power of free choice itself, or in the very seeds of virtue and the most excellent thing there is in man. (LW 33:254)

Luther then challenges Erasmus with a series of indicting questions, arising from the teaching of the passages of the Old and New Testaments that Luther had previously cited:

...what does it mean to be wicked but that the will – which is one of the most excellent things – is wicked? What does it mean to be without understanding of God and the good but that reason – which is another of the most excellent things – is ignorant of God and the good, or is blind to knowledge of godliness? What does it mean to turn aside and become worthless but that men have simply no ability in any part of themselves, and least of all in their most excellent parts, to turn to the good, but only to evil? What does it mean not to fear God, but that in all their parts, and especially the higher ones, men are despisers of God? But to be despisers of God is to be at the same time despisers of all the things of God – his words, works, laws, precepts, and will, for example. What now can reason dictate that is right when it is itself blind and ignorant? What can the will choose that is good when it is itself evil and worthless? Or rather, what choice has the will when reason dictates to it only the darkness of its own blind ignorance? With reason in error, then, and the will misdirected, what can man do or attempt that is good? (LW 33:254-55)

Luther then summarizes all this:

So you see that free choice is completely abolished..., and nothing good or virtuous is left in man, since he is flatly stated to be unrighteous, ignorant of God, a despiser of God, turned aside from him, and worthless in the sight of God. The prophet's words are weighty enough, and not less in their own context than in Paul's quotation of them. It is no small matter to say that man is ignorant of God and despises God, for these are the sources of all crimes, the sink of all sins, nay, the hell of all evils. Could any evil not be there where there is ignorance and contempt of God? In short, the reign of Satan in men could not have been described in fewer or more expressive terms than by his saying that they are ignorant of God and despisers of God. That betokens unbelief, it betokens disobedience, sacrilege, and blasphemy toward God; it betokens cruelty and lack of mercy toward our neighbor; it betokens love of self in all the things of God and men. There you have a picture of the glory and power of free choice! (LW 33:255-56)

That is the condition in which the grace of God and the gospel find us. There is no place for optimism regarding the abilities of human reason or human decision-making, with respect to matters pertaining to God and salvation, before God does his transforming and saving work.

For there is nothing else that leads either to the grace of God or to eternal salvation except the word and work of God, since grace or the Spirit is life itself, to which we are led by God's word and work. This life or eternal salvation, however, is something that passes human comprehension, as Paul quotes from Isaiah [64:4] in I Corinthians 2[:9]: "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him." It is also included among the chief articles of our faith, where we say [in the creed]: "And the life everlasting." And what free choice is worth in relation to this article, Paul shows in I Corinthians 2[:10], where he says: "God has revealed it to us through his Spirit." This means that unless the Spirit had revealed it, no man's heart would have any knowledge or notion of it, much less be able to apply itself to it or seek after it. (LW 33:105-06)

And those who know Christ, and who are able to rest in his promises by faith, can also know that the reason why they are able to do this is because the Holy Spirit has indeed revealed these promises to them, and has supernaturally filled them with the hope of everlasting life for Christ's sake. Luther wants us to notice

the saying of Christ in John 6[:44]: "No one comes to me unless my Father draws him." What does this leave to free choice? For he says that everyone needs to hear and learn from the Father himself, and that all must be taught by God. He plainly teaches here, not only that the works and efforts of free choice are fruitless, but that even the message of the gospel itself (which is what this passage is about) is heard in vain unless the Father himself speaks, teaches, and draws inwardly. (LW 33:285-86)

If you have come to Christ, therefore, it is because the Father has drawn you through the gospel. And it is his Spirit that *opened* your heart *to* the gospel, so that you would not harden yourself when you heard it. In the gospel

God holds out not only one of his good things, but all of them, and even Christ his Son himself, yet not a man follows unless the Father inwardly does something else and draws... ..the ungodly does not come even when he hears the Word, unless the Father draws and teaches him inwardly, which He does by pouring out the Spirit. ...for then Christ is set forth by the light of the Spirit, so that a man is rapt away to Christ with the sweetest rapture, and...yields passively to God's speaking, teaching, and drawing... (LW 33:286)

Luther understands salvation by God's grace alone through Christ, apart from any human works or merits, to be "the chief doctrine of the gospel." Those who have tasted of this grace and have been turned to God by it, are thereby graciously brought into the spiritual communion of saints in Christ's church.

For the Church is ruled by the Spirit of God and the saints are led by the Spirit of God (Rom. 8[:14]). And Christ remains with his Church even to the end of the world [Matt. 28:20]; and the Church of God is the pillar and ground of the truth [I Tim. 3:15]. These

things, I say, we know; for the creed that we all hold affirms, “I believe in the holy catholic church”; so that it is impossible for the Church to err, even in the smallest article. And even if we grant that some of the elect are bound in error all their lives, yet they must necessarily return to the right way before they die, since Christ says in John 10[28]: “No one shall snatch them out of my hand.” (LW 33:85)

Luther is not, of course, speaking here of any particular outward ecclesiastical body, where human weaknesses and failings often abound, and where hypocrites and errorists often flourish. Rather, he is speaking of the one mystical body of Christ in which all true believers in Jesus are united to him, and through him to one another.

Luther confesses that

the gospel...is nothing else but a message in which the Spirit and grace are offered with a view to the remission of sins, which has been obtained for us by Christ crucified; and all this freely, and by the sole mercy of God the Father, whereby favor is shown to us, unworthy as we are and deserving of damnation rather than anything else. (LW 33:150)

It is in and through the message of the gospel that God works his new creation upon us and within us. At the deepest level he does not, in his Word, try to coax or cajole our will, but through his Word he liberates and transforms our will. Human reason may wonder why God does not do these things in more dramatic ways or in more direct ways. Why does he bother to use the Word – as that Word is preached, taught, and sacramentally applied – and why does he limit himself to this way of bestowing his Spirit upon an individual? Luther responds:

It has thus pleased God to impart the Spirit, not without the Word, but through the Word, so as to have us as cooperators with him [I Cor. 3:9] when we sound forth outwardly what he himself alone breathes inwardly wherever he wills, thus doing things that he could of course do without the Word, though he does not will so to do. And who are we that we should inquire into the cause of the divine will [cf. Rom. 9:20]? It is enough to know that God so wills, and it is becoming for us to reverence, love, and adore his will, putting a restraint on the rashness of Reason. (LW 33:155)

This is why it is fitting and proper for the Word of God to permeate everything that is preached and prayed, chanted and sung, in the liturgical gatherings of God’s church. Songs and hymns that are shaped by Erasmian assumptions about the ability of the human will to make a free choice for God and against the devil, will be songs and hymns that make an appeal to the will, that seek to persuade the will, and that emotionally manipulate the will, in that direction and for that purpose. But songs and hymns that are shaped by Lutheran and Scriptural assumptions will be songs and hymns that present to the minds and hearts of singers and hearers the wonderful objective message of God’s redemption in Christ, together with all that this redemption means and does for the human race. God’s truth, with its intrinsic power to convert and regenerate, is, as it were, draped *over* the soul of the individual who hears its proclamation. And the miracle of faith is then performed by God’s Spirit *within* that soul.

## THE PROBLEM THAT WON'T GO AWAY

After Luther's death, "synergistic" ideas similar to those that had been promoted by Erasmus began to appear within the Lutheran Church. This problem was addressed by the Formula of Concord of 1577, which reiterated the essence of Luther's Biblical position while also employing some new and different terminology that was designed in response to certain new variations in *false* teaching that had arisen in the meantime. Luther's treatise *On the Bondage of the Will* was not incorporated into the *Book of Concord* in the way that his two Catechisms were, but Article II of the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord – "Concerning the Free Will or Human Powers" – refers favorably to this treatise. On the general subject of the inability of the unregenerated human will to desire God's grace or to cooperate with it in helping to bring about one's conversion from unbelief to faith, a quotation from Luther's *Great Confession concerning Christ's Supper* is included in the text of the Formula. Certain statements of Luther on this subject, from his *Lectures on Genesis*, are also endorsed. And the Formula, as it embraces Luther's public doctrine as the Biblical doctrine, states:

Dr. Luther, of blessed and holy memory, ascribes to our free will no power of its own to prepare itself for righteousness or to seek after it. On the contrary, he says that the human being, blinded and held prisoner, does only the will of the devil and what is hostile to God the Lord. Therefore, there is no cooperation of our will in our conversion, and God must draw and give new birth to the human being. Apart from this, our heart of itself does not for a moment think to turn to the holy gospel and accept it. Luther also described this process in his book against Erasmus, *On the Bondage of the Will*, where he presented and supported his position thoroughly and in detail.

With reference to all three of these private writings of Luther, the Formula then states: "We appeal to these writings and refer others to them" (SD II:44, Kolb/Wengert).

One would think that this would have settled the matter for all Lutherans who take their Confessional subscription seriously, but a controversy on conversion and election opened up yet again in the nineteenth century, in the United States. Among others, C. F. W. Walther in the Missouri Synod, Adolf Hoenecke in the Wisconsin Synod, and Ulrik Vilhelm Koren in the Norwegian Synod, all taught what Luther and the Formula of Concord had taught. But they were opposed in this teaching by some from within their own synods, and by other Lutheran synods as a whole.

The year 1897 saw the publication of a book with the unsubtle title *The Error of Modern Missouri*. This work included contributions from Professor F. W. Stellhorn, formerly of the Missouri Synod, and Professor F. A. Schmidt, formerly of the Norwegian Synod. In a discussion of "The Present Controversy on Predestination," Stellhorn acknowledged that Luther's treatise *On the Bondage of the Will* said some things that he would not want to say. Stellhorn expressed his agreement with an analysis of Luther's treatise by the German Lutheran theologian F. A. Philippi, in his *Kirchliche Glaubenslehre*, which Stellhorn quoted. Philippi had noted that in his response to Erasmus's diatribe,

Luther, to assure the safety of the evangelical basis of salvation, made a truly gigantic assault on this theological dwarf in his work, *De Servo Arbitrio* [On the Bondage of the Will], and did not hesitate to draw also the inferences from his position, but accepted,

with an over-bold defiance born of faith, on the one hand, the theological deduction of an unconditional election, from the premise of the enslaved will; and, on the other hand, the speculative deduction of the bondage of the will, from the premise of an unconditional omnipotence and an eternal prescience. Yet Luther merely accepted the position offered him by his opponent, and permitted himself for the moment to be carried so far beyond his goal only by his opposition. ... And then in his doctrine of justification, and the central position which this assumed with him, as well as in his doctrine of the means of grace, there was shown, already at that time and still more later on, an irreconcilable opposition against this absolute predestination, whereby it was bound to be completely superseded. And therefore, Luther not only never after accepted this doctrine, but taught in fact the very opposite of it in his unequivocal proclamation of the universality of divine grace, of the universal application of Christ's merits, of the universal operation of the means of grace... (quoted in EMM, 12)

So, according to Philippi (and according to Stelhörn, who agrees with him), Luther was led astray by how Erasmus has shaped the debate, into saying things that he did not really mean, and that contradicted other things that he said about God and salvation. Stelhörn himself patronizingly attributes this blunder on Luther's part to the supposition that "it is established that Luther at this time had not yet in all things attained his later clearness" in theology (EMM, 13). Luther's clarifying distinction between God hidden and God revealed appears to have been totally lost on Philippi and Stelhörn. And Stelhörn's dismissive attitude does not seriously take into account the fact that Luther, after he had become a thoroughly seasoned and mature theologian by anyone's estimation, told Wolfgang Capito in 1537 that he thought that this treatise, together with his Catechisms, were pretty much the only writings of his that would have enduring value after his death and on into the church's future. So, Stelhörn's narrative does not align with the historical data. And Stelhörn's theology does not align with the Bible's theology.

In contrast, U. V. Koren, who was on the other side of this debate, saw great value in Luther's treatise. In a letter that he wrote to one N. Tøsseland in 1883, Koren summarized his (and the Lutheran Confessions') position on God's gracious election of his saints in Christ, and on their salvation by God's grace alone:

Now, if God here in time brings it about that "some will accept the offered grace, believe in Christ, and remain steadfast in this faith to the end" and thus be saved – God has accordingly decided this from eternity, and Scripture designates this decision in this way, that He has elected these persons (see Eph. 1:3-5). We know from Scripture that God would do the same for all people, but that the greater number "will not." But we also know from the same Scriptures that when there is anyone who will, this is alone due to God. God has not revealed more to us. And we therefore remain steadfast with that confession: To God alone belongs the glory for salvation; to man himself alone, the blame for condemnation. (KW 3:143-44)

But many in Christendom – and even in outward Lutheranism – reject this paradox. Koren observed that among his opponents, and also among Roman Catholics, it was taught that the reason why those who do believe, believe, is not solely because of God's grace. They think there must be something within certain fallen sinners that inclines them toward cooperating with God

and converting, while there must be something within other fallen sinners that inclines them toward hardening their hearts against God. In their teaching, faith

is not to be ascribed to the grace of God alone; for they make the grace of God dependent on the difference they claim there is between fallen sinners, and so this difference decides the matter, not only in the case of those who are condemned, but also in the case of those who are saved. They speak of that person being “placed in a position of choice,” and that in the final analysis it depends on the self-determination of the unregenerate person whether he will become a believer and be saved. The opposition says, of course, that it is God who through the preparatory grace, gives the ability to choose, but that this ability is used for what is good, hence the real decision in the matter they ascribe to the unregenerate person himself. This is the same conflict as between the Catholics (Erasmus) and Luther, as well as later between the synergists and the strictly Lutheran theologians... (KW 3:144-45)

In another letter, from 1885, Koren offers a more in-depth review and analysis of the debate between Erasmus and Luther, and applies what he reads there to the issues of his day. So that we can get a good sense of the role that Luther’s 1525 treatise *On the Bondage of the Will* played during this epochal period in the history of our mother synod, we will take note of the fact that Koren saw Luther’s treatise as particularly helpful in pointing out that God’s directives to us to choose the good do not imply that we are *able* to *comply* with those directives. Rather, while those divine directives are showing us what we *should* be willing and able to choose, in the end what they are doing is revealing that by our own human strength we *cannot* and *do not* comply with these directives due to the rebellion and spiritual death of our sin. I will quote Koren at length. He writes:

There cannot be guilt except there be responsibility; and still Paul says that man cannot obey the law. It is furthermore asked: What are all these admonitions for, that man is to repent, when it is taught that man cannot in any way or at any time choose other than the way of perdition? We have answered this question in our *An Accounting*, II, Thesis 7. (KW 3:230)

That thesis from *An Accounting* – which finally settled the controversy in the Norwegian Synod in 1884 – declares:

God’s command: Repent ye, Awake, etc., does not prove that it is possible for the unregenerated man by his own strength to obey, any more than the command: “Thou shalt love God above all things,” shows that man is capable of doing this. Such and similar words are means which God uses, both to bring a man to recognize his own impotence and also by the power of the divine Word to produce the effect intended.

Koren continues by noting that the objection to this doctrine that

we have repeatedly been given to hear from Prof. Schmidt...and others of the opposition, is remarkable in that it is a repetition of the attacks on Luther from the side of the Catholics. Erasmus, especially in his writing against Luther, copiously enumerates admonitions and exhortations of Scripture to repent and choose what is good, etc. Erasmus therefore also cites Deut. 30:15-19, where, among other things, it says: “I call



heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live.” He says concerning this:

“What can be said more plainly? God shows what is good and what is evil. It would be ridiculous, were one to say to another: ‘Choose,’ if it were not in the power of this one to incline this way or that way. It would be as if one were to say to a person standing at the parting of the ways: ‘You see two roads here; choose whichever you will’ – if only the one road were open to him.”

And later (the same – Erasmus):

“Here you again have a word about submitting to, choosing, averting – which would be said in vain if man’s will were not free to do what is good, but only what is evil,” etc.

Luther replies to this:

“You say: ‘What can be said more plainly? He lets a person be free to choose.’ I reply to this: What can here be more plain, in fact, than your blindness? For, tell me, dear friend, where He leaves it to man freely to choose. Does he do so with the little word ‘elect’? Then I’m to hear, I suppose, that as soon as Moses commands something, or says: ‘Choose,’ it happens. We are capable of course, of choosing and doing it (whatever it may be). So the Holy Ghost is again not needed... ...we will also look at your simile, which you give us. You say as follows: ‘Would it not be a matter for mockery, and a folly, should I see someone standing at the parting of ways and say to him: ‘You see two ways here; go whichever you will,’ if only one way were open to him, and the other were closed?’ Yes, this simile is a piece of the wisdom I have already spoken of, and which is part of foolish human reason. It is of the opinion, and will not think otherwise, that God derides men with these impossible commandments. We say, on the contrary, that God exhorts and awakens men to see their inability. Therefore all men stand before [two roads], at the parting of ways, and there is but one way open. In fact, there is none open. But by the Law it is shown us how that one way, namely, to what is good, is impossible when God does not give us His Spirit in our hearts; and again, how wide and broad and easy the other is, when God lets us go on as we are going. ... That is why the words of the Law are put in place; not to show that our will is capable of anything or has any strength, but, as it were, by the light to show blind reason how blind it is, and how our will is capable of absolutely nothing. ‘By the law is the knowledge of sin,’ says Paul, Rom. 3:20. He does not say, that by the Law sin is blotted out and removed, etc.” (From Luther’s *Bondage of the Will*)

After quoting from Erasmus and Luther, Koren then adds additional comments of his own, as he points out how his opponents so often misidentify the real issues of the controversy, and beg the crucial questions of the controversy. Everyone agrees that the mind and will of a converted man is active in desiring God and in trusting in him. But *why* are they active? Who activated them? Who transformed them and directed them to God’s Word?

One of the absurd conclusions we are so often given to hear in this controversy is that, when we teach that man cannot cooperate, even in the least, toward his conversion, it follows that he needs do nothing, but only wait till God converts him, etc. This is to frighten people by twisting the issue at stake. There is no controversy concerning what

is to take place in a man, in his understanding and will. Both sides teach alike as to this, or that a person must acknowledge his sin, rue it, seek salvation, obediently accept the Gospel, pray, etc. But here is the question: Who works and effects this in us, that we do all that is necessary in conversion and all that takes place in conversion? We say that God alone works it, and that unconverted man cannot cooperate toward it. And the Word of God says so, as well as the Confession of our church (Formula of Concord, Article II). But our opponents cannot agree to this, as they would then have lost their entire case. Were they to renounce all synergism, they would have to concede that we have been in the right throughout this controversy. (KW 3:232-33)

Human reason has never been able to understand the mystery of God's infinite mind, his sovereign power, and his gracious works. Human reason is unsatisfied with the distinction between God hidden and God revealed. Human reason is unable to fathom how God operates through his Word to turn and direct the unconverted will, so as to convert it.

### **BY GRACE I'M SAVED, GRACE FREE AND BOUNDLESS**

So, whenever and wherever human reason is allowed to play a dominant role in determining a church's theology, or an individual Christian's faith, that theology and that faith will go sour. Either man will be given credit for things that only God has done, or God will be blamed for things that man and the devil have done. Disputes of this nature have flared up at various times in history. Such disputes are still flaring up, and are more threatening to us than we may realize, since the popular religious pieties that surround us in our land are not straight and sound in their teaching on these things. Accordingly, songs and books from that non-Lutheran religious world which we may sing and read, often are not straight and sound on these things. So let us continually cling to the promises of God's Word, to the comforts of the gospel, and to the certainty of God's love for us in Christ that his means of grace renew and build up within us. And let us continually and joyfully sing:

By grace I'm saved, grace free and boundless; My soul, believe and doubt it not.  
Why stagger at this word of promise? Hath Scripture ever falsehood taught?  
Nay; then this word must true remain; By grace thou, too, shalt heav'n obtain.

By grace to timid hearts that tremble, In tribulation's furnace tried –  
By grace, despite all fear and trouble, The Father's heart is open wide.  
Where could I help and strength secure If grace were not my anchor sure?

By grace! On this I'll rest when dying; In Jesus' promise I rejoice;  
For though I know my heart's condition, I also know my Savior's voice.  
My heart is glad, all grief has flown Since I am saved by grace alone.

– C. L. Scheidt, tr. composite  
*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* 226: 1, 8, 9

*Soli Deo Gloria*

## CITED SOURCES

Calvin: John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: Translated from the Latin and Collated with the Author's Last Edition in French*, seventh edition (trans. by John Allen) (Philadelphia: 1936).

EMM: *The Error of Modern Missouri: Its Inception, Development, and Refutation*, with contributions by F. W. Stellhorn, F. A. Schmidt, and others (Columbus, Ohio: Lutheran Book Concern, 1897).

ESV: *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, copyright 2001 by Crossway Bibles (a division of Good News Publishers).

Kolb/Wengert: *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2000).

KW: *U. V. Koren's Works*, 4 vols., edited by Mark E. DeGarmeaux (Mankato, Minnesota: Evangelical Lutheran Synod Historical Society, 2014-2017).

LW: *Luther's Works* (American Edition), multiple vols. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-).

