

An Interpretation of Luther's *The Bondage of the Will*

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Luther's *magnum opus* is generally not considered to be His work against Erasmus, entitled *The Bondage of the Will*. This mid-career work (1525) was seen by Luther himself as one of his greatest works, despite its cool reception by later Lutherans.¹ In fact, as early as the generation after Luther, his followers did not use this work or its arguments. There are several reasons that Lutherans otherwise respectful of Luther's work, both shortly after his time and today, have not enthusiastically received this book.

The Bondage of the Will is challenging, both in style, order, and content. It also suffers from a poor reputation, since Calvinists have made it their own, despite Calvin writing a little-known book on the same topic.² As a result, Luther's work has been skewed as less than confessionally Lutheran. Also, the way it was written lends itself to misunderstanding today. It was written before such a thing as "Calvinism" and a popular Protestant emphasis on the predestination of all people.

The Bondage of the Will is a specific reply to Erasmus' work against Luther. Luther did not present his own proofs or line of argumentation until very late in the book.³ In fact, over 80% of

¹ "Regarding [the plan] to collect my writings in volumes, I am quite cool and not at all eager about it because, roused by a Saturnian hunger, I would rather see them all devoured. For I acknowledge none of them to be really a book of mine, except perhaps the one On the Bound Will and the Catechism." Letter to Wolfgang Capito, July 9, 1537, LW 50:172-173.

² *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defense of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice against Pighius (1543)*, ed. A. N. S. Lane, trans. G. I. Davies (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996).

³ According to one scholar, it rebuts the "*Diatribes* almost sentence by sentence," which made it "formless and

Luther's book is a point-by-point rebuttal to Erasmus's work, *Diatribes on Free Will*.⁴ Whereas Erasmus was a humanist Pelagian,⁵ later disowned by his own Roman church, Luther's response is read in light of a non-Pelagian doctrine, Calvinism, which was not extant at the time of its writing. Instead, Luther wrote against a wide-ranging, semi-Pelagian, Roman scholasticism, which was not as welcome in that church after the Council of Trent.⁶

Luther wrote a devastating polemical work against Erasmus; it is not apologetic at all. In fact, his goal is to make Erasmus repent of writing his work defending the "free will."⁷ One reason Luther cared about this book was the worthiness of his opponent, despite his non-theological nature. Erasmus was perhaps the greatest scholar and linguist at the time, one Luther felt inferior to in learning, but not in the study of Scripture.⁸ This paper contends that Luther's *The Bondage of the Will* is truly a masterpiece of theology. Though it is difficult and cannot be causally read, this work explicates the Gospel in a challenging, yet highly beneficial way. It attacks and slays where we are all weak: overestimating our loftiest faculties, including the reason and will, and underestimating God's free grace. A false view of man's sinfulness and helplessness undercuts Christ and negates whatever gospel or "giftly" language is used. That makes *The Bondage of the Will* a most relevant book to study, not only as history, but as addressing the deepest questions man can have about God in this life.

monotonous." K. Meissinger quoted in Harry J. McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong? An Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther's Major Work, The Bondage of the Will* (New York: Newman Press and Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969), 299.

⁴Luther's work responds only to the *Diatribes's* arguments and Scripture passages, before starting to bring forth His own witnesses. "We have come to the last part of this book, in which, as we promised, must produce our forces against free choice." Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), ed. Philip S. Watson, vol. 33 of Luther's Works [LW] (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 33:246.

⁵According to Luther's definition Erasmus was Pelagian, though, strictly speaking he was semi-Pelagian, meaning only at first does an initial spark of the will merit grace. This small bit on man's part is used to explain why some are saved and others are not. Though full-blown Pelagianism is tantamount to a denial of all effects of original sin, Luther lumped all with any Pelagian tendencies together. This paper will follow Luther's wider use of the term.

⁶Ironically, this pre-Reformation, Pelagian scholasticism is remarkably similar to current Evangelical church thinking. "Contrary to what we often think, in Scholastic theology personal decision is included in the reception of grace." Hans Iwand quoted in *Luther*, McSorley, 332.

⁷"In this book, therefore, I shall press you and all the Sophists hard until you define for me the strength and effectiveness of free choice; and I shall press you (with Christ's aid) so hard that I hope I shall make you repent of ever having published your *Diatribes*." *Bondage*, LW 33:37.

⁸Luther made the extreme claim that the *Diatribes* was the only work of an opponent he had read completely through. *Luther*, McSorley, 298.

Subject Matter

Despite the common assumption, Luther's work does little more than mention in passing the doctrine of election. While the title is quite accurate, this work also deals with many issues tangential to the will and theology in general. The clarity of Scripture and the authority of the church fathers are prominent themes throughout. Some of the most troubling and difficult Scripture passages for the scholar and the average Christian are addressed, particularly the ones dealing with Pharaoh and Judas.

The Bondage of the Will is really about the justification of the sinner, though in reverse. In modern liberal language, Christ and man are both exalted and everything is given to Christ while nothing is taken away from man. Luther sees any possibility of good in man's will as a denial of Christ's suffering and death. Any ability of man to turn toward God implies that Christ did not redeem that part of man. A view of God and man cannot ignore man. Luther tackled the anthropological side of justification with vehemence in order to glorify Christ's righteousness given to man.

Luther's great work is troubling in precisely the ways we need it to be. Luther makes the claim that man only imagines he has a "free will." This stance breaks with all church tradition and also battles against the inherent belief in our own abilities and nature. It can also be said that Luther's case against "free choice" is conversely a bold assertion of God's complete sovereignty in the world. Needless to say, this makes moderns, who are continually told of their "freedom," uncomfortable. Luther makes the claim that we divinize our will, by making it completely "free," in order to prostrate God and bend Him into our mold. "I wish the defenders of free choice would take warning at this point, and realize that when they assert free choice they are denying Christ."⁹

⁹*Bondage*, LW 33:279.

Background of the Debate

Luther gradually broke from his own tradition. Although instructed in a late scholasticism, with the help of Scripture and Augustine, he began to criticize the Pelagianism of his contemporaries.¹⁰ As early as 1516 he begins to make radical statements against man's ability to will anything but evil.¹¹ Following the lead of Augustine, Luther denounces the Pelagianism he sees all around him. "It is false to state that man's inclination is free to choose between either of two opposites. Indeed, the inclination is not free, but captive. This is said in opposition to common opinion."¹²

The controversy which culminates with Erasmus' *Diatribes on Free Will* and Luther's *The Bondage of the Will*, begins in earnest with the *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518). Thesis 13 states: "Free will, after the fall, exists in name only, and as long as it does what it is able to do, it commits a mortal sin."¹³ In the explanation of this thesis, Luther cites John 8:34, 36: "whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."¹⁴ The title of *The Bondage of the Will* is actually from Augustine's *Against Julian*, which Luther makes reference to in the explanation of thesis 13: "You can call the will free, but in fact it is an enslaved will."¹⁵ Though thesis 21 contains the noteworthy distinction between the theologian of the cross and the theologian of glory, thesis 13 was a cannon ball directed at contemporary theology in the Roman church.

After the Leipzig debate in 1519 with John Eck, 41 statements of Luther were officially condemned in 1520 by the papal bull *Exsurge Domine*. It cites Heidelberg thesis 13.¹⁶ Following this pronouncement, Luther's books were burned, altering the course of Luther and Christendom. Luther responded by burning the same papal bull, "which in a sense marked the irrevocable and formal break with Rome."¹⁷ In 1520 Luther defended his statements in *Defense and Explanation*

¹⁰ "[Leif] Grane's study has made it overwhelmingly clear that it was precisely [Gabriel] Biels's theology against which Luther was reacting most strongly." *Luther*, McSorley, 241.

¹¹ In theses drawn up by a student of Luther, it is taught: "Apart from the grace of God man can never keep the commandments or prepare himself for grace either *de congruo* or *de condigno*, but necessarily remains under sin." *Luther*, McSorley, 239.

¹² *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* (1517), LW 31:9.

¹³ LW 31:40.

¹⁴ All passages NKJV, unless noted.

¹⁵ LW 31:49. See *Bondage*, LW 33:108.

¹⁶ *Luther*, McSorley, 251.

¹⁷ Lewis W. Spitz, Introduction to "Why the Books of the Pope and His Disciples were Burned," LW 31:381.

of *All the Articles of Dr. Martin Luther which were Unjustly Condemned by the Roman Bull*.¹⁸ Following the same line of biblical argumentation as earlier, he adds: “For this reason, I wish that the words, ‘free will’ had never been invented. They are not found in Scripture and would better be called ‘self will’ which is of no use.” He concludes his defense: “This error about ‘free will’ is a special doctrine of Antichrist. Small wonder that it has spread all over the world, for it is written of this Antichrist that he will seduce the whole world. Only few Christians will be saved.”¹⁹

However, there were four versions of the response to the bull. The German one, quoted above, is only half the length of the more radical Latin version:

For I have wrongly said that free will before grace exists in name only. I should have said frankly: “free will is a fiction, a name without a correspondent in reality.” Because no one indeed has power freely to think of good or evil, but (as the thesis of Wycliffe condemned at Constance correctly teaches) all things happen by absolute necessity. This is what the poet [Virgil] meant when he said: “all things are determined by a fixed law.” And Christ says in Mt. 10: “The leaf of a tree does not fall to the ground without the will of your Father . . .” and in Is. 41[:23] he insults them when he says: “Do good or evil if you can.”²⁰

This new argument goes far beyond the doctrine of original sin. Indeed, in *The Bondage of the Will* Luther posits that Adam before the fall is dependent entirely on the Spirit and grace to do good. Even he was not “free,” in the sense that he did not need grace to do good.²¹ By stating that perfect Adam was helpless to do good before the fall, Luther absolutizes the need for grace, even apart from sin. This need is part of man’s nature, pre-fall and post-fall; pre-conversion and post-conversion. Consequently, nothing is by chance or randomness, if God is really God. This

¹⁸LW 32:7.

¹⁹LW 32:94.

²⁰The Latin version is not in the English edition of Luther’s Works. *Luther*, McSorley, 254-55. One scholar postulates that it was not for the simple, common person, since it was not in German version. Julius Köstlin, *The Theology of Luther in its Historical Development and Inner Harmony*, trans. Charles E. Hay (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1863), 432.

²¹“Here we are speaking not only of the first man, but of any and every man, though it is of little importance whether you understand it of the first man or of other men, for although the first man was not impotent when he had the assistance of grace, yet by means of this precept God shows him plainly enough how impotent he would be in the absence of grace. But if that man, even when the Spirit was present, was not able with a new will to will a good newly proposed to him (that is obedience), because the Spirit did not add it to him, what should we be able to do without the Spirit in respect of a good that we have lost?” *Bondage*, LW 33:124. Here he states that the law given to Adam in the garden was not to show him his ability to keep it, but his need of the Spirit in keeping it.

new line of reasoning sets the stage for Luther's 1525 work which boldly asserts the sovereignty and "involvedness" of God in this world.

Erasmus Enters the Debate

Erasmus and Luther were not strangers. They had corresponded by letter and had respect for one another. Though he had helped Luther and other Reformers by publishing the Greek text of the Bible and other ecclesiastical literature, Luther saw that Erasmus was not of the mindset to take a hard stand on theological matters. Because of their association, Erasmus was pressured to attack Luther and show his solidarity with the Roman church. "Up until 1524 Erasmus had managed, ... to avoid starting a pamphlet war with Luther and Wittenberg. However, pressured by such friends as the vicar general for the diocese of Constance John Fabri, by his fellow countryman Pope Adrian VI, and by political leaders, Erasmus took up his pen against Luther."²²

Erasmus choice of arguing over "free choice," riled Luther. Not only the topic, but Erasmus' cool, dispassionate *Diatribes* irked him also. He attempted to debate Luther as a "neutral observer," almost as if he were not taking sides.²³ Luther could be speaking to compromising ecumenical theologians today, when he excoriates his "moderate and peace-loving theology."²⁴ Erasmus does eventually proclaim "free will" the victor, although only in a small way, due to practical reasons, namely human responsibility. He was concerned above all with a moral, practical Christianity: "what a window to impiety would the public avowal of such an opinion open to countless mortals! Especially in view of the slowness of mind of mortal men, their sloth, their malice, and their incurable propensity toward all manner of evil."²⁵

The great humanist was offended, as most were and are, of Luther's argument that all things happen by necessity. Erasmus in the *Diatribes* said it "would be unprofitably discussed before the common herd."²⁶ This cautiousness rankled Luther, which explains the abrasive, sarcastic

²²Timothy Wengert, *Human Freedom, Christian Righteousness: Philip Melancthon's Exegetical Dispute with Erasmus of Rotterdam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 68.

²³Wengert, *Human Freedom*, 68.

²⁴*Bondage*, LW 33:43.

²⁵Desiderius Erasmus, "Diatribes on Free Will," in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 17 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 41.

²⁶*Diatribes*, 40.

nature of *The Bondage of the Will*. Erasmus thought he was picking a minor point to quibble with Luther over. Luther, however, thanked him for focusing on the central issue.

Moreover, I praise and commend you highly for this also, 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 You and you alone have seen the question on which everything hinges, and have aimed at the vital spot²⁷

Luther's *The Bondage of the Will* contends against Erasmus that "Hence, inasmuch as you maintain free choice, you cancel out Christ and ruin the entire Scripture."²⁸

The Church Fathers and Scripture

Erasmus agrees to do battle on Luther's home ground: the Scriptures. Even so, they did not agree on the nature of Scripture. Erasmus judged some parts of Scripture to be dangerous and uninviting:

For there are some secret places in the Holy Scriptures into which God has not wished us to penetrate more deeply and, if we try to do so, then the deeper we go, the darker and darker it becomes, by which means we are led to acknowledge the unsearchable majesty of the divine wisdom, and the weakness of the human mind.²⁹

Despite arguing only from Scripture, Luther sees Erasmus as dismissing Scripture and leaning *de facto* on unreliable and contradictory church fathers.

It is not only Erasmus' conclusions which baffle Luther, it is his orientation of neutrality and attitude of indifference in matters of God's teaching. Erasmus contends: "And, in fact, so far am I from delighting in 'assertions' that I would readily take refuge in the opinion of the Skeptics, wherever this is allowed by the inviolable authority of the Holy Scriptures and by the decrees of the Church, to which I everywhere willingly submit my personal feelings, whether I grasp what it prescribes or not."³⁰ Luther opposes this timidity as unholy. "Nothing is better

²⁷ *Bondage*, LW 33:294.

²⁸ *Bondage*, LW 33:282.

²⁹ *Diatrobe*, 38.

³⁰ *Diatrobe*, 37.

known or more common among Christians than assertion. Take away assertions and you take away Christianity.”³¹ The Spirit is given to Christians to confess, not to vacillate.

Luther’s strongest statements on the clarity of Scripture are against Erasmus. To have an unclear authority, is to have no authority. The fact that Scripture is unclear to men, is not the Spirit’s fault who gave the words, but the reader’s fault. The bound will does not allow one to read as an impartial observer and understand. After citing II Tim. 3:16,³² Luther lashes out at Erasmus: “It is true that for many people much remains abstruse but this is not due to the obscurity of Scripture, but the blindness or indolence of those who will not take the trouble to look at the very clearest truth.”³³ As proof, Luther cites II Cor. 4:3-4: “But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.”

Throughout *The Bondage of the Will* Luther attacks the credibility of doing theology based on the church fathers. He must make a significant break from church tradition because none had been as radical as Luther in detailing man’s dependence on God. “Therefore the authority of the Fathers is neither here nor there, and statutes wrongly enacted (as with all which are not in accordance with the Word of God) ought to be torn up and thrown away, for Christ ranks higher than the authority of the Fathers. . . . for we are arguing about the Word of God.”³⁴

Luther recognizes that he is alone. Not even Augustine fully denied that man had a “free will.” After explicating the hardening of Pharaoh by God Himself, not that he hardened himself, Luther pits Scripture against the whole Christian tradition. “What has become of your tropes, your Origen, your Jerome? What of your most highly approved doctors whom a solitary individual like Luther is rash enough to contradict? But it is the foolishness of the flesh that compels you to speak like this, for it treats the words of God as a game, not believing them to be meant seriously.”³⁵

³¹ *Bondage*, LW 33:21.

³² “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness . . .”.

³³ *Bondage*, LW 33:27.

³⁴ *Bondage*, LW 33:58.

³⁵ *Bondage*, LW 33:169.

In fact, Luther has little positive to say about any church father except Augustine, though even he is silenced at points. “You clearly put me into a very unpleasant position by this Introduction of yours, since I cannot easily get out of it without singing my own praises and censuring so many of the Fathers.”³⁶ Yet these holy men were not completely sanctified in this life and often “spoke and acted” according the flesh, not the Spirit. “If the Fathers have sometimes preached free choice, they have certainly spoken from carnal motives (since they were but men) and not by the Spirit of God.”³⁷ This is so because God speaks clearly in Scripture that man is not free to do good apart from Him (Jn. 15:5).

Because human words, partly flesh and partly Spirit, are clearer to sinners than the only fountain of truth, the fathers and tradition often replace Christ’s own Word. “...for it is the *Diatribes*’ one concern that the Scriptures of God should be everywhere ambiguous so that she may not be obliged to use them, and that the authority of the Fathers should be certain so that she may misuse them. Truly a wonderful religion, in which God’s words are useless, men’s words are useful!”³⁸

Luther’s contention is not that the fathers erred in a small point. By allowing some element of freedom in coming to God or at least in not resisting, they allow a place for human merit. But whatever does not depend on Christ is totally against God’s grace. “Now go and boast of your ancient authorities, and rely on what they say, when you see that they have one and all overlooked the clearest and plainest teaching of Paul as this morning star, or rather this sun, because of the carnal notion they doubtless entertained that it would be absurd to have no place left for merits.”³⁹

While Luther did not disrespect the fathers as a whole, he certainly judged them by Scripture. Jerome was particularly hated for his teaching that the law in Paul only meant the ceremonial law.⁴⁰ “Even if there had never been any other error in the Church, this one alone was pestilent and potent enough to make havoc of the gospel, and unless a special sort of grace has intervened,

³⁶ *Bondage*, LW 33:73.

³⁷ *Bondage*, LW 33:74.

³⁸ *Bondage*, LW 33:235.

³⁹ *Bondage*, LW 33:270.

⁴⁰ The “new perspective on Paul” is not actually new. It argues not against the early church or the Roman church, but the Lutheran and Calvinist doctrines of justification.

Jerome has merited hell rather than heaven for it—so little would I dare to canonize him or call him a saint.”⁴¹ While Luther did not always denigrate the fathers, he did subject their words to decisive criticism on the basis of the clear Scriptures.

The Bound Will

Upon his survey of Scripture, Erasmus was convinced that Spirit spoke on both sides of the teaching of the will. “So far we have brought together those passages in the Holy Scriptures which establish free choice and those on the other side which seem to take it wholly away. Since, however, the Holy Spirit, who is their author, cannot be in conflict with himself, we are forced willy-nilly to seek some moderation of our opinion.”⁴²

One of Erasmus’ main arguments was how troubling it seemed to him if all events were in God’s hand. The commandments of law, in his view, did not make sense if man were not free. “Again, as concerns the precepts, if a lord were constantly to order a slave who was bound by the feet in a treadmill, ‘Go there, do that, run, come back,’ with frightful threats if he disobeyed and did not meanwhile release him, and even made ready the lash if he disobeyed, would not the slave rightly call the master either mad or cruel who beat a man to death for not doing what he was unable to do?”⁴³ This tension between man’s captivity and God’s loving nature becomes significant in Luther’s response.

Though St. Paul was unequivocal on the purpose of the law, it has long been assumed in the church that the commandments presupposed some ability to do them. “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20). Logically, a command does not imply the ability to fulfill it. But the Pelagian tendencies within man cause him to overestimate his ability to do the law. Nothing will be understood in Scripture if a man does not know what the “law and the gospel is.”⁴⁴ The command “love God,” does not prove “free choice,” Luther argues.⁴⁵ If it does, there is nothing that man cannot be

⁴¹ *Bondage*, LW 33:258.

⁴² *Diatribes*, 85.

⁴³ *Diatribes*, 88-89.

⁴⁴ *Bondage*, LW 33:132.

⁴⁵ “. . . the fact is that in the sight of God those who are most devoted to the works of the law are the farthest

proven to do.

The conclusion of Erasmus is that we should pretend as if everything depends on God's mercy, though in actuality "the contribution of free choice is extremely small."⁴⁶ Luther, with characteristic flair, says this is worse than full-fledged Pelagianism, where man earns the Father's merit. It cheapens grace, by making salvation and the blood of Christ worth so little. "But our friends say that it is a very little thing, and almost nothing by which we merit grace."⁴⁷ Those who deny grace "abandon [Christ] as a Mediator and most merciful Savior, and count his blood and his grace of less value than the efforts of free choice."⁴⁸

A Novel Proof Against Free Choice

The most troubling aspect of *The Bondage of the Will* is undoubtedly the necessitarian argument. Whereas Luther earlier used the John 8 passage about man's slavery to sin, here he uses a broader argument based on God's foreknowledge. If read out of context and outside of Luther's logic, it can be misleading. Rightly understood, it is a devastating attack on man's "freedom" over against God, but the conclusions that can be drawn from it are limited.

What God foreknows happens. Judas is foretold his falling away, yet it had to happen, because God knew it would. In one way, we can say it was a work of God for Judas to betray Jesus. His evil act was "set in motion by [God's] omnipotence, like everything else."⁴⁹

Luther states his case: "Here then is something fundamentally necessary and salutary for a Christian, to know that God foreknows nothing contingently, but that he foresees and purposes and does all things by his immutable, eternal, and infallible will. Here is a thunderbolt by which free choice is completely prostrated and shattered"⁵⁰ If only God is free, man is not free. The fleshly man does not like to be told he is a slave. "It is not in our power to change, much less resist, his will, which wants us hardened and by which we are forced to be hardened, whether from fulfilling the law, because they lack the Spirit that is the true fulfiller of the law, and while they may attempt it by their own powers, they achieve nothing." *Bondage*, LW 33:259-60.

⁴⁶ *Diatribes*, 89.

⁴⁷ *Bondage*, LW 33:268.

⁴⁸ *Bondage*, LW 33:280.

⁴⁹ *Bondage*, LW 33:185.

⁵⁰ *Bondage*, LW 33:37.

we like it or not.”⁵¹ This is disturbing to fleshly man who does not trust God, yet, Luther is not positing a wrathful God who damns out of His own good pleasure. He is saying God is truly “God who works all in all” (I Cor. 12:6).

“Freedom, in the full and proper sense of the term, belongs in Luther’s view only to God. God is free as being subject to no other power whatsoever, and as acting therefore solely according to his own will. God’s will, however, is in no way capricious or arbitrary, but consistently righteous and good. For what God wills is consonant with his nature, which in Christ—and even in creation, rightly understood—is revealed as love.”⁵²

This motion of God is outside of grace, since it applies to every creature, even the Devil. It speaks to His involvement in all matters, from the grand and profound to the trivial and simple. “. . .for [people] do not sufficiently consider how unrestingly active God is in all his creatures, allowing none of them to take a holiday.”⁵³ It is based on a promise, that He Himself cares and is not distant, but working, in everything His children do. This necessitarian argument should not be treated as a philosophical axiom, which would be dangerous, but as a deduction from the promise of the Gospel. Jesus stated that we can depend on the Father for all things: “Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Mt. 10:29-30). “For our God is not the God of temporal things only, but of all things. Nor will he consent to be your God, or to be worshiped by you with half a shoulder or a limping foot, but with all your strength and all your heart, so that he may be God for you both here and hereafter, in all circumstances, cases, times, and works.”⁵⁴ Luther’s far-reaching teaching recasts what it means to believe in the true God.

It does not take a theological degree to be bothered by God’s omnipotence. Man judges by his experience and sees what he believes to be no god, or at the very least a wrathful one. By exposing our down-playing of God’s activity, we are shown to be blind sinners, who are revolted by God’s true nature and action. Luther qualifies this by saying that God’s involvement is not a

⁵¹*Bondage*, LW 33:187.

⁵²Philip Watson, the “Lutheran Riposte,” introduction to the *Diatribes*, 17.

⁵³*Bondage*, LW 33:178.

⁵⁴*Bondage*, LW 33:201.

reason to attribute exclusive cause to Him, as if no one else were acting also. Luther is making a much more nuanced assertion, than the word “necessity” indicates philosophically or logically.

Since, then, God moves and actuates all in all, he necessarily moves and acts also in Satan and ungodly man. But he acts in them as they are and as he finds them; that is to say, since they are averse and evil, and caught up in the movement of this divine omnipotence, they do nothing but averse and evil things. It is like a horse-man riding a horse that is lame in one or two of its feet; his riding corresponds to the condition of the horse, that is to say, the horse goes badly. . . . Here you see that when God works in and through evil men, evil things are done, and yet God cannot act evilly although he does evil through evil men, because one who is himself good cannot act evilly; yet he uses evil instruments that cannot escape the sway and motion of his omnipotence.⁵⁵

Like Job, we are not able to fathom how God permits, allows, or “causes” evil.⁵⁶ “Then the LORD said to Satan, ‘Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?’” (Job 1:8) The Lord permitted and set limits to Job’s suffering, without doing evil. Luther’s argument is to affirm God’s activity in all things, while by no means impugning His character or questioning His motives—which is quite tempting to reason.

This reliable foreknowledge of God is an assumption based on the loving Father’s grace, not a foundational principle. It is a deduction from the Gospel itself, which promises Fatherly love through Christ’s death. Who would believe in a god who misspeaks or is mistaken? Since He makes incredible promises about our future, He must control and know this future, for the sake of those who hear and believe the Gospel.⁵⁷ While unbelievers recoil at the idea of God who works as God, the believer knows that power and mercy are not mutually exclusive.

And however much you boggle at it, your own and everyone else’s conscience is convinced and compelled to say that if God is not deceived in what he foreknows,

⁵⁵ *Bondage*, LW 33:176.

⁵⁶ God’s attitude, not His specific involvement, is the only thing that can offer comfort to one troubled by suffering. To say God was on vacation is not comforting or useful for faith. The error of acquitting God as anywhere involved in evil, leaves one without religion.

⁵⁷ Scripture speaks of God’s control of all things, but only in a positive and beneficial way. Rom 8:28-33: “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.” I Cor. 10:13: “No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.”

then the thing foreknown must of necessity take place; otherwise, who could believe his promises, who would fear his threats, if what he promises or threatens does not necessarily follow? Or how can he promise or threaten if his foreknowledge is fallible or can be hindered by our mutability?⁵⁸

Luther asserts what the Father will graciously do on account of Christ: “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.”⁵⁹ The unchanging reliability of God’s foreknowledge is based on the bedrock that God does not lie.⁶⁰ Nothing, not even Satan and hell, are outside His power.⁶¹

Luther’s aim is not to paint God as a deterministic puppeteer who controls all things, despite what man may do.⁶² This leads to a fatalistic view, which implies it doesn’t matter what we do, or it accuses God of forcing man to sin. God is not the cause of sin, man and Satan are, or else the threats of His law are not meant. Yet, God is not absent even in evil people. His general omnipotence speaks of His activity in “upholding all things by the word of His power” (Heb. 1:3). *The Bondage of the Will* is not speaking of causality, but God’s loving presence and involvement in this world, on behalf of His children.⁶³

In light of God’s free activity in all things, “free choice is a divine term and signifies a divine power.”⁶⁴ Yet, philosophically, it is assumed man is not a person if he does not possess a “free will.” Anything other than a “free” will is sub-human to enslaved men who fancy themselves

⁵⁸ *Bondage*, LW 33:185.

⁵⁹ *Bondage*, LW 33:42.

⁶⁰ “Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar” Rom. 3:4.

⁶¹ This is exactly how Rom. 8:31, 38-39 argues: “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? . . . For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

⁶² One cannot blame God for unbelief or sin, despite His never-ceasing activity. “It is right, I mean, if you speak of God as preached; for he wills all men to be saved [I Tim. 2:4], seeing he comes with the word of salvation to all, and the fault is in the will that does not admit him, as he says in Mt. 23:[37] But why that majesty of his does not remove or change this defect of our will in all men, . . . we have no right to inquire.” *Bondage*, LW 33:140. To answer why is to simultaneously deny a revealed doctrine of God. It is not given to man to deliberate upon His goodness, but to believe it in Christ.

⁶³ One of the prominent Scriptural examples is King Cyrus, whose edict allowed Israel to return from captivity in Babylon. This unbeliever’s spirit was stirred by the Lord to cause him to act and fulfill God’s will, even though he did not recognize the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob or intend to take orders from Him. “Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing” II Chron. 36:22.

⁶⁴ *Bondage*, LW 33:107.

free. Luther is not discouraging men from making wise decisions in things below, though even those do not happen apart from God's operation. Because the "free will" is defined as the ability to turn toward good, Luther attacks it on the basis of being able to do God's work without Him.⁶⁵ "What we are asking is whether [man] has free choice in relation to God, so that God obeys man and does what man wills, or rather, whether God has free choice in relation to man, so that man wills and does what God wills and is not able to do anything but what God wills and does."⁶⁶

In a striking analogy, man is compared to a beast. "Thus the human will is placed between the two [God and Satan] like a beast of burden. If God rides it, it wills and goes where God wills 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."⁶⁷ This illustrates the complete helplessness and inability of man to come to God or resist evil.

Reason does not think this is fair, that man ruled by Satan cannot change his condition. Luther highlights the contradiction and widens it, to show us how fleshly man is.⁶⁸ It would be easy to trust in a weak god, one who is not involved, or who can simply be pushed aside. These arguments of Luther are misunderstood if used against God's grace or righteousness. They merely make room for true grace by eradicating free choice, that is, any possibility of good apart from Him. "This omnipotence and the foreknowledge of God, I say, completely abolish the dogma of free choice."⁶⁹ Due to hardness of heart, it is impossible for blind flesh to believe God is all-powerful, and at the same time merciful.⁷⁰ To those in unbelief God's grace and omnipotence

⁶⁵ "You however, make free choice equally potent in both directions, in that it is able by its own power, without grace, both to apply itself to the good and to turn away from the good." *Bondage*, LW 33:108-9.

⁶⁶ *Bondage*, LW 33:285. Luther explains that sin that is foreknown must happen, yet it is done willingly by man. Man does not sin involuntarily, even though God's foreknowledge cannot be mistaken. ". . . if God foreknew that Judas would be a traitor, Judas necessarily became a traitor, and it was not in the power of Judas or any creature to do differently or to change his will, though he did what he did willingly and not under compulsion, but that act of will was a work of God, which he set in motion by his general omnipotence, like everything else." *Bondage*, LW 33:185.

⁶⁷ *Bondage*, LW 33:65-66.

⁶⁸ "We thus convict them on the evidence of their own conscience that free choice, when it is devoid of the glory of God, is perpetually guilty of the sin of unbelief, together with all its powers, efforts, and enterprises." *Bondage*, LW 33:266.

⁶⁹ *Bondage*, LW 33:189.

⁷⁰ ". . . free choice by itself is so blind that it is not even aware of sin, but has need of the law to teach it."

are offensive.⁷¹

By extolling God's grace, man conversely is shown to be powerless and entirely dependent on His goodness and His actions. "Thus it comes about that when we do not let God's will alone have the will and power to harden and to show mercy and to do everything, we attribute to free choice itself the ability to do everything without grace, despite our having denied that it can do anything good without grace."⁷² Only God is free. Man, even apart from sin, is helpless apart from the giver "of every good gift and every perfect gift" (James 1:17). Freedom in Christ does not lead to independence and rule, but trust and dependence on the most merciful Lord. "Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?" (Rom. 6:16)

Luther's novel argument, perhaps due to inherent weaknesses and ambiguous terminology, did not become part of the Lutheran heritage.

The early Reformers used various necessitarian arguments to argue their cases. The Reformers in the second phase had the apologetic and pedagogical need to shift from the necessitarian argument. They incorporated theodical concern in their reformulations.⁷³

Theodicy is the attempt to justify God's actions in reference to His goodness. Luther makes no attempt to do this, other than to insist that God is righteous.⁷⁴ He does not reconcile God's justice and the events of this world, but purposely heightens their contrast. Later Lutherans, including the Confessional writers, were more sensitive and apologetic in their approach as to not purposely offend reason, as *The Bondage of the Will* does.

While Luther's argument is easily misunderstood by fleshly reason, the opposite theodical

Bondage, LW 33:261.

⁷¹"Experience shows this plainly enough by the way in which the world, in the persons of those whom it regards as the best and most devoted to righteousness and godliness, hates and persecutes the righteousness of God proclaimed by the gospel, calling it heresy, error, and other abusive names, while advertising its own works and way, which in truth are sin and error, as righteousness and wisdom." *Bondage*, LW 33:261.

⁷²*Bondage*, LW 33:172.

⁷³Kiven S. Choy, *Calvin's Defense and Reformulation of Luther's Early Reformation Doctrine of the Bondage of the Will*, (Grand Rapids: Calvin Seminary, doctoral dissertation; http://www.calvin.edu/library/database/dissertations/Choy_Kiven.S.PDF), v.

⁷⁴God's omnipotence and foreknowledge are "why there has been such sweating and toiling to excuse the goodness of God and accuse the will of man ... though nothing has been achieved by them except that the ignorant have been imposed upon by empty talk and 'contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge' [I Tim. 6:20]." *Bondage*, LW 33:190.

approach easily leads to man absolving or condemning God for His action in this world.⁷⁵ Luther's ultimate goal is show man powerless in spiritual matters, so we can trust, and not doubt, what He says to us. This insight is highly beneficial to those who are indoctrinated into a scientific world-view and affirm God theoretically, while practically living as if He is not involved in the mundane affairs of this world.

Test Cases: Pharaoh and Judas

The *Diatribes* surveys first the passages which seem to support "free choice." Then it discusses passages which seem opposed to it. The first difficulty for "free choice" mentioned is the hardening of Pharaoh's heart (Ex. 9; Rom. 9). Due to the fact that Erasmus explains it away, *The Bondage of the Will* discusses it extensively.

After the sixth plague of boils upon Egypt, Ex. 9:12 states: "But the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh; and he did not heed them, just as the LORD had spoken to Moses." Erasmus explains:

Since, however, it seems absurd that God, who is not only just but good also, should be said to have hardened the heart of a man, so that by the man's misdeeds He might display his own power, Origen, in the third book of his work *Peri Archon* ("On Beginnings"), thus explains the difficulty, and declares that an occasion of hardening was given by God, but he would throw back the blame on Pharaoh who, by his evil deeds, was made more obstinate through those things which should have brought him to repentance, just as by the action of the same rain cultivated land brings forth excellent fruit, and uncultivated land thorns and thistles, and just as by the action of the same sun, wax melts and mud hardens, so the forbearance of God that tolerates the sinner brings some to repentance and makes others more obstinate in wrongdoing. He has mercy, therefore, on those who recognize the goodness of God and repent, but those are hardened who are given an opportunity to repent but who, by neglecting the goodness of God, persist in evil courses.

Jerome's similar explanation is also given: "God hardens when he does not at once punish the sinner, and has mercy as soon as he invites repentance by means of afflictions." Erasmus summarizes: "Now, in truth Pharaoh was created with a will that could turn either way, but of

⁷⁵If God's actions can be explained away or proved to be merciful, grace is also explained away and faith is not needed. There must be room for God to show mercy and man to trust His promises against all earthly hope.

his own wish he turned to evil, and with his own mind preferred to follow evil rather than obey the commandments of God.”⁷⁶

Luther’s response is quite harsh, since Erasmus makes the text say the opposite of what it actually says. “By what authority, for what reason, with what necessity is the natural meaning of the word [to harden] thus twisted”⁷⁷ He calls Erasmus’ interpretation a “trope,” used to dodge the real meaning. Because it is God’s Word, it “must be taken quite simply at its face value. For is it not for us to decide to make and remake the words of God just as we please”⁷⁸ It is the violation of grammar, which incenses Luther. “. . . you change the person and take it to mean ‘Pharaoh hardens himself through [God’s] forbearance.’ ‘God hardens our hearts’ means that we harden ourselves when God delays our punishment.”⁷⁹ Luther will not accept Erasmus’ statement: “the forbearance of God . . . makes others more obstinate in wrongdoing.” “So God being merciful no longer means that he gives grace or shows compassion, remits sin, justifies, or delivers from evil, but on the contrary, it means that he inflicts evil and punishes!”⁸⁰

At the burning bush, the Lord foretold that Pharaoh would not relent, but resist Moses’ and God’s Word: “But I am sure that the king of Egypt will not let you go, no, not even by a mighty hand” (Ex. 3:19). While Pharaoh was hardened, to harden is not to predestine to damnation. It is a temporal punishment.⁸¹ After all, to harden is to intensify and make harder—not change what is good to evil. Rom. 1:28 explains that giving one over to his sin is itself punishment: “And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting.”⁸²

Though God hardened Pharaoh, Scripture also says that he hardened himself.⁸³ As with

⁷⁶ *Diatribes*, 65.

⁷⁷ *Bondage*, 165.

⁷⁸ *Bondage*, LW 33:166.

⁷⁹ *Bondage*, LW 33:167.

⁸⁰ *Bondage*, LW 33:167.

⁸¹ “In no way should this be interpreted or understood as if God did not want to grant Pharaoh or other people salvation but instead preordained them to eternal condemnation in his secret counsel, so they could not or would not be saved.” FC SD XI, 86; Kolb-Wengert, 654.

⁸² II Th. 2:11-12 contains another example of punishment which causes God’s Word to be rejected: “And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”

⁸³ Ex. 9:34: “And when Pharaoh saw that the rain, the hail, and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet more; and he hardened his heart, he and his servants.” He did not sin against his will, but willingly.

God's general motion of omnipotence, there is not just one simple cause. Both statements are true: Pharaoh was not hardened against his will, though God Himself hardened his heart. It may not make logical sense, but this is what the text indicates and is therefore true.

The difficulty for the believer is that God's Word is not only not successful in its expressed evangelical intention, but has the opposite effect on many—they are hardened.⁸⁴ “These things, Reason will repeat, are not the marks of a good and merciful God. They are too far beyond her comprehension, and she cannot bring herself to believe that God is good if he acts this way, but setting aside faith, she wishes to feel and see and understand how he is good and not cruel.”⁸⁵ There is a grave danger in trying to explain how God is good in his harsh dealings with man. That subjects God, who alone is holy, to human standards of justice.

Judas, since his betrayal of Christ was foretold, is likewise troublesome.⁸⁶ Erasmus gives an unsteady interpretation:

God foreknew (and what he foreknew he in some way intended) that Judas would betray the Lord. Thus if you look at the infallible foreknowledge of God, and his immutable will, Judas was necessarily going to turn traitor to his Lord, and yet Judas could change his intention, and certainly he had it in his power to refuse to undertake his treacherous design. You say, “What if he had changed his mind?” The foreknowledge of God would not have been falsified, nor his will hindered, since he himself would have foreknown and intended beforehand that Judas should change his

⁸⁴Performative speech theory applied to theology is inadequate at this point, because God's Word does not perform what it says it will with consistency, from our perspective. “[The performative utterance] does not simply establish, disclose, and confirm it as already existing, but it actually brings it about.” Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, Lutheran Quarterly Books, trans. Jeffrey Silcock and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 155. Man can reject the benefits of Gospel, so that the words do not unfailingly accomplish its goal *ex opere operato*. Performative speech misses the mark when applied to God's Word, because a statement can be true and effective, but have no salutary effect on sinful man. Faith which receives the benefits of the Word cannot be ignored. See the Parable of the Sower (Mt. 13) on how the same Word can have various outcomes. However, the Word of God “that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it” Is 55:11. The Gospel is not an incantation or magical formula, but an inviting promise to be believed. But this powerful Word, however grammatically oriented, is often rejected by evil man. Jesus' words had the opposite effect of His gracious and faith-giving teaching on men a majority of the time (Lk. 10:13-15). That God's powerful Word appears weak and even hardens some must be left an unreconciled mystery to faith, not explained by a secular theory of language. It the Author and content of the Word which makes it powerful, not the way in which is it grammatically construed. Calvinism posits an irresistible grace so man cannot reject, while Pelagianism makes it ultimately man's decision. Lutheranism leaves the two truths side-by-side: man can only reject and only God can cause one to believe. To logically explain why only some are saved, though, is to deny the true Gospel.

⁸⁵*Bondage*, LW 33:173.

⁸⁶John 6:70-71: “Jesus answered them, ‘Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?’ He spoke of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, for it was he who would betray Him, being one of the twelve.” See also Mt. 26:24-25; John 13:25-27.

mind.⁸⁷

In opposition, Luther contends: “We know that the Father begets willingly, and that Judas betrayed Christ by an act of will; but we say this willing [of Judas] was certainly and infallibly going to occur in Judas himself if God foreknew it.” Rhetorically, Luther asks: “Could [Judas] change God’s foreknowledge and make it fallible?”⁸⁸ God could not err in His knowledge concerning Judas, even though Judas willingly and voluntarily betrayed Christ. Luther does not remove the difficulty, but leaves it as it stands in Scripture.⁸⁹

After discussing the difficult passages, Erasmus takes the middle road: “And so these passages, which seem to be in conflict with one another, are easily brought into harmony if we join the striving of our will with the assistance of divine grace.”⁹⁰ That begs the question and does not take Scripture seriously. Luther posits that it is all or nothing: either God or man is free, not both.

In the cases of Judas and Pharaoh, there are many difficulties, yet the text stands without an obvious solution. For both God and man to will, though man wills exactly what God foreknew, seems illogical. Yet, Luther is not answering the most perplexing question: How can God be merciful in these situations? To do so is to look outside of Christ. The text does affirm that these were merciful events for God’s people.⁹¹ Pharaoh did as was foretold, fulfilling the Lord’s promise to Moses and displaying God’s mercy to Israel. Without Judas’ sin, God’s Word would be nullified and the world’s salvation would be uncompleted. Luther, though, will not stand for an emendation of text in order to make it more palatable to human reason. God is not to be judged, interrogated, or questioned in His motives by the Christian. To do so is a mark of unbelief.

⁸⁷ *Diatribes*, 68.

⁸⁸ *Bondage*, LW 33:193.

⁸⁹ “The Son of Man indeed goes just as it is written of Him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.” Matthew 26:24. Jesus does not express personal guilt over Judas’ sin as if it were God’s decision alone, even though it had to happen. Instead, He warns him and laments. Jesus did not hate Judas, since his sin Christ died bearing.

⁹⁰ *Diatribes*, 74.

⁹¹ “God’s foreknowledge provides order in the midst of evil and sets limits to it. It determines how long evil can continue and determines also that everything, even if it is evil itself, serves the welfare of God’s elect.” FC Ep, XI, 4; Kolb-Wengert, 517.

The Hidden and Revealed God

Luther's well-known distinction between the hidden and revealed God plays a large role in the debate with Erasmus. It is easy to make this into a trite distinction and posit two different gods, one good and one bad. Neither is it a way to explain how God is merciful to certain people and seemingly unloving to others.⁹² On the contrary, it explains two ways of looking at God: one by experience, reason and the flesh; the other in faith, in Christ, and by God's word of promise.

Luther contrasts God as He is hidden to man's reason and experience and as He is revealed in the Word. As Isaiah 45:15 says: "Truly You are God, who hide Yourself, O God of Israel, the Savior!" "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 . . ."⁹³ This distinction is used to differentiate what we see from what we believe, which are quite disparate. "Thus [God] does not will the death of a sinner, according to his word [Ez. 18:23, 32]; but he wills it according to that inscrutable will of his. It is our business, however, to pay attention to the word and leave that inscrutable will alone."⁹⁴ The idea of the hidden God stops the believer from inquiring beyond what the Word preaches. "We do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (II Cor. 4:18).

Reason is offended at an omnipotent God. Fleshly man cannot stand a God who foreknows all things and does not act according to human standards of justice. Even the Christian must struggle with this mighty paradox. Because the believer's reason is not made holy, it continues to make judgments and offer its consulting services to the Almighty. "If God is just, He must do this," reason screams like a two year old. However, no answer is ever given to those who seek to

⁹²One scholar claims this: "My analysis confirms the theory that the hidden God implies a 'theoretical doctrine of double predestination.'" Frederik Brosché, *Luther on Predestination: The Antinomy and the Unity Between Love and Wrath in Luther's Concept of God*, in *Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis: Studia Doctrinae Christianae Upsaliensia* 18 (Stockholm: LiberTryck, 1978; doctoral dissertation, Uppsala), 132. A god that can be pin-pointed and dissected is no longer hidden or the true God, whose ways are higher than man's ways.

⁹³*Bondage*, LW 33:139.

⁹⁴*Bondage*, LW 33:140.

judge God's justice. He will remain a hidden God to those who try to access him experientially.⁹⁵ The "hidden God," if uncovered and perceptible, is the false god that reason constructs from experience and her own carnal justice. Though this construction seems to best fit the evidence and God's power, mercy is removed in this picture painted by fleshly reason. "These things [God's hardening], Reason will repeat, are not the marks of a good and merciful God."⁹⁶ The hidden God is what man says about God, not what the gracious Father reveals about Himself.

Luther does not solve the mystery of God's goodness. Instead, he highlights and intensifies the contradiction.

Admittedly, it gives the greatest possible offense to common sense or natural reason that God by his own sheer will should abandon, harden, and damn men as if he enjoyed the sins and the vast, eternal torments of his wretched creatures, when he is preached as a God of such great mercy and goodness, etc. It has been regarded as unjust, cruel, as intolerable, to entertain such an idea about God, and this is what has offended so many great men during so many centuries. And who would not be offended? I myself was offended more than once, and brought to the very depth and abyss of despair, so that I wished I had never been created a man, before I realized how salutary that despair was, and how near to grace.⁹⁷

Grace is by faith, not by sight (II Cor. 5:7). "Luther's original *anfechtung*," his great spiritual distress, was wrestling against God's goodness based on what he saw and knew.⁹⁸ As every believer is, he was humbled in his struggle to comprehend how God could be merciful.

Despair of human ability leads to humility, which is a work of God. "For as long as [man] is persuaded that he himself can do even the least thing toward his salvation, he retains some self-confidence and does not altogether despair of himself, and therefore is not humbled before God . . ." ⁹⁹ God is hidden, up to the point He reveals Himself. The Christian does not see, feel, or experience God's goodness, but believes it on account of the promise.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵After Job and his associates questioned God and strained with all their might to understand the reason for Job's suffering, "the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said: 'Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding'" Job 38:1-4.

⁹⁶*Bondage*, LW 33:173.

⁹⁷*Bondage*, LW 33:190.

⁹⁸Eric Gritsch, "Review of Frederik Brosché, *Luther on Predestination: The Antinomy and the Unity Between Love and Wrath in Luther's Concept of God*," *Theological Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1 (Mr 1979), 191-92. See Jacob's struggle with God in Gen. 38 when he demanded of God: "I will not let You go unless You bless me!"

⁹⁹*Bondage*, LW 33:62.

¹⁰⁰Abraham in Rom. 4 is the prototypical believer, "who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became

Luther's uncompromising distinction between the two ways of knowing God is based on his understanding of faith. "...faith has to do with things not seen [Heb. 11:1]. Hence in order that there may be room for faith, it is necessary that everything which is believed should be hidden. It cannot, however, be more deeply hidden than under an object, perception, or experience which is contrary to it."¹⁰¹ Faith accepts the hidden God who hardens, afflicts, and kills as the faithful and merciful God revealed in Christ. Only in faith are they one and the same God—outside of Christ He must be thought weak or wrathful. "Thus when God makes alive he does it by killing, when he justifies he does it by making men guilty, when he exalts to heaven he does it by bringing down to hell, as the Scripture says: 'The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings to Sheol and raises up (I Sam. 2:6).'"¹⁰²

Faith is not bothered by the example of Pharaoh or Judas. Instead of rationalizing and measuring God's goodness, faith believes in spite of all, even God's damning. "This is the highest degree of faith, to believe him merciful when he saves so few and damns so many, and to believe him righteous when by his own will he makes us necessarily damnable, so that he seems ... to delight in the torments of the wretched and to be worthy of hatred rather than love."¹⁰³ If God saved everyone, who would doubt His goodness? But why does He save so few and His Word produce such a meager crop of righteousness? Faith does not answer the question or solve the mystery but accepts the greater mystery of God's display of love shown in Christ's suffering, punishment, and death.¹⁰⁴ Reason cannot fathom God's goodness in the death of His only Son either. Faith is defiant in the face of the hidden God who appears wrathful.¹⁰⁵ In the words of Job: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (13:15).

the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, 'so shall your descendants be.' And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb."

¹⁰¹ *Bondage*, LW 33:62.

¹⁰² *Bondage*, LW 33:62.

¹⁰³ *Bondage*, LW 33:62-63.

¹⁰⁴ At precisely the point at which this mystery of God's goodness and hidden operative power are reconciled, God's mercy must be denied. Either God is made less than God and His mercy to every individual is dependent on man's response, or God's universal love is denied by saying He loves some and hates others. To raise the problem is to personally experience death, while being promised life. But to answer the question is to leave the pale of orthodoxy.

¹⁰⁵ "To the extent, therefore, that God hides himself and wills to be unknown to us, it is no business of ours." *Bondage*, LW 33:139.

God's Involvement in Suffering

God's immutable foreknowledge and general operation in all things would be easy to swallow in a perfect world or even a world where Christians suffered less than pagans. But God hides Himself in sufferings and promises tribulation to the believer.¹⁰⁶ Christ even exhorts: "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Mt. 16:24-25). *The Bondage of the Will* is troubling precisely because it does not have an academic or theoretical subject matter. It forces us to face the real God, who is involved in our daily lives, including our disappointments, sorrows and pains. Luther pricks the painful scab of tragic events, heartaches, and the anguish that everyone faces. The teaching of an active God makes believing in God's goodness and praying for His will to be done radical acts. Indeed, they are only actions that are done by the Spirit, who reveals Christ through the Gospel.

"...there is no doubt that afflictions come upon us from God against our will, and put us under the necessity of bearing them willy-nilly, nor is it in our power to avert them, although we are exhorted to bear them willingly."¹⁰⁷ Though the flesh reacts against this with fatalism, God's mercy is known through suffering. Paul was willing to lose all things that he "may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of [Christ's] sufferings" (Phil. 3:10). Faith connects the revealed and hidden God, though not rationally by accusing or excusing His goodness.¹⁰⁸ Faith accepts God as good even though He kills.

Many things as seen by God are very good, which as seen by us are very bad. Thus afflictions, calamities, error, hell, and indeed all the best works of God are in the world's eyes very bad and damnable. What is better than Christ and the Gospel? Yet what is more execrated by the world? Consequently, how things can be good in God's sight which are evil to us only God knows, and those who see with God's eyes, that is, who have the Spirit.¹⁰⁹

Faith sees according to God's speech, without seeing at all. The hidden God who appears evil

¹⁰⁶ "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God" Acts 14:22.

¹⁰⁷ *Bondage*, LW 33:203.

¹⁰⁸ "When therefore Reason praises God for saving the unworthy, but finds fault with him for damning the undeserving, she stands convinced of not praising God as God, but as serving her own interests." *Bondage*, LW 33:208.

¹⁰⁹ *Bondage*, LW 33:175.

and damning is in faith what He calls Himself through Christ: Father.

“Luther emphasizes that we must not only accept all tribulation from God but also thank him therefore.”¹¹⁰ Though Satan is rightly said to be the cause of evil, that does not explain it away. For he is not equal to God, but remains subordinate as a creature. “Since, then, God moves and actuates all in all, he necessarily moves and acts in Satan and ungodly man.”¹¹¹ But according to God’s promise these evils serve a higher, divine purpose, therefore, they can be accepted, even with joy. “We also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance” (Rom. 5:3).

Luther follows his own advice and does not explain away troubles by saying God was on vacation. He connects the hidden God and the revealed God as one in the same. Though man’s eyes don’t agree—faith does. For example, in a letter to the baptismal sponsor of his oldest child, he writes directly that God is the merciful “cause” of suffering:

I am sorry that God has heaped more sickness upon you, for I am certain that by God’s grace you are one of those rare birds who take the Word of God very seriously and are faithful to the kingdom of Christ. . . . If God wishes you to be sick, his will is surely better than ours. . . . The exchange [of a heavy burden for a light one] is to be accepted cheerfully. He is a good merchant and a gracious tradesman who sells life for death, righteousness for sin and lays a momentary sickness or two upon us by way of interest as a token that he sells more reasonably and borrows at more favorable rates than the Fuggers and the tradesmen on earth.¹¹²

Here the Gospel is applied, so that what tempts us to doubt God, is the product of the most gracious and loving will of God. This is an assertion of God’s grace and power, not an explanation or defense. “The Holy Spirit is no Skeptic, and it is not doubts or mere opinions that he has written on our hearts, but assertions more sure and certain than life itself and all experience.”¹¹³

Faith does not admit accidents or things beyond God’s control. Separately, God’s omnipotence and goodness are not challenging to accept. But to hold both together must be a work of Holy Spirit, the source of all belief in God’s goodness.

¹¹⁰Broschè, *Luther on Predestination*, 64.

¹¹¹*Bondage*, LW 33:176.

¹¹²Letter to Caspar Mueller, Nov. 24, 1534. Theodore Tappert, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, in *Library of Christian Classics*, vol. XVIII (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960; reprint, Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2003), 39.

¹¹³*Bondage*, LW 33:24.

Contemporary Applications

Scholars, in a similar vein to Erasmus, are especially susceptible to affirming “free choice.” Reason, in scholarship and academia, is often exalted. For Luther, reason and the will are in the same boat, in that both are entirely blinded by sin. Modern scientific theology is the application of rational, naturalistic principles to spiritual things. Learning not taught by the Spirit cannot understand the spiritual words of Scripture.

And what free choice is worth in relation to this article [‘And the life everlasting’], 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 has 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. Take a look at experience. What have the most distinguished minds among the heathen thought about the future life and the resurrection? Is it not the case that the more distinguished they have been, the more absurd the idea of a future life and resurrection has seemed to them to be?¹¹⁴

Like Erasmus, scholars are taught not to confess, but to dispassionately observe the evidence and make rational judgments. Though there is certainly a place for this kind of scholarship and ability, it often creeps into theology proper. When it comes to articles of faith, either man can be judge and ultimate authority or the Father, not both. “Scripture simply confesses the trinity of God and the humanity of Christ and the unforgivable sin, and there is nothing here of obscurity or ambiguity. But *how* these things can be, Scripture does not say (as you imagine), nor is it necessary to know. It is their own dreams that the Sophists are busy with here, so you should accuse and condemn them, and acquit the Scriptures.”¹¹⁵

The philosopher René Descartes, at the beginning of the enlightenment, expressed what today we have inherited as the scientific mindset. By exalting reason, man was thought to be free to judge all things and ideas. “In theological terms the new spirit is often evaluated as a kind of super-Pelagianism.”¹¹⁶ That accurately describes most modern approaches to Scripture. Even at the points it is accepted, it is man’s authority which makes it acceptable. It is a complete denial of sin to assume the mind can contemplate God or Scripture without the Spirit. Sin can

¹¹⁴*Bondage*, LW 33:105-6.

¹¹⁵*Bondage*, LW 33:28.

¹¹⁶Klaus Scholder, *The Birth of Modern Critical Theology: Origins and Problems of Biblical Criticism in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1990), 117.

be talked about in serious terms, while denying it in practice when it comes to approaching the things of God—as if man had a clear mind, able to comprehend the things of God effortlessly.

Exegetical scholars who are academically relevant are almost bound to deny the clarity of Scripture, which Luther saw as a denial of its authority. If a method, criticism, or any information outside the text is necessary to explicate the holy writings, the Scriptures themselves are no longer sufficient, but missing something. To say the text is clear, is to say an interpreter is not needed, except the Holy Spirit who authored the words. If an extra-biblical hermeneutic is needed to wrest meaning out the Scriptures, that means without those principles or methods, it is inaccessible. “For the Spirit is required for the understanding of Scripture, both as a whole and in any part of it.”¹¹⁷ How many hermeneutical approaches make the Spirit and His teachings the main precondition to understanding the text?

Scholars dig ever deeper. The simple, clear truth is not enough for fleshly imagination, so Scripture is interrogated. What seems innocent and humble, can actually be a power play against the holy Word. Questions such as: “Why did the biblical author write this?”; “What is the meaning behind this statement?”; and “What historical conditions caused this writing?” seem innocent, but sit in judgment over the Word of God. To question Scripture is not to listen, but to question the ultimate writer of it, God Himself.¹¹⁸

Luther commented on supposedly dangerous teachings about God: “It would be enough to say that God has willed them to be published, and we must not ask the reason for the divine will, but simply adore it, giving God glory that, since he alone is just and wise, he does no wrong to anyone and can do nothing foolishly or rashly though it may seem far otherwise to us.”¹¹⁹ Our natural inclination is to assume Scripture is unclear, while we are clear. Rather, the problem is entirely with man: “Let miserable men, therefore, stop imputing with blasphemous perversity the darkness and obscurity of their own hearts to the wholly clear Scriptures of God.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ *Bondage*, LW 33:28.

¹¹⁸ Any question of motive or meaning beyond the bare words of Scripture is dangerous speculation because it seeks the hidden God. We are to be satisfied with what God has given us and believe, not cross-examine the divine Word, since we have no power on our own.

¹¹⁹ *Bondage*, LW 33:61.

¹²⁰ *Bondage*, LW 33:27.

On the other hand, it is not the fault of scholarship or learning, but debased reason. Even the uneducated judge by the senses and are no closer to the truth. “Common sense” itself is a philosophical term and describes a rational judgment based on what the senses take in. They fail to discern a God who hides Himself.

“And such ignorance and contempt [of God] are beyond doubt not 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.”¹²¹

All natural men, no matter how much they participate in God-talk, assume He is distant. That is, they assume He is not much of a God, in order that they may be “free” from Him (and slaves to sin). Luther’s vivid picture of God’s ever-active involvement contradicts our notion of God’s goodness. How many people talk of problems and difficulties as if God were away on vacation or unable to prevent them? That is not upholding the Lord of grace. Consider this condemnation of Luther’s work by a Finnish Lutheran: *The Bondage of the Will* “contains an untenable determinism which is not only inconsistent with Scripture and with Luther’s own teaching as a whole, but which is also incompatible with the responsible, personal decision that is essential to Christian faith.”¹²² Even more than Erasmus, this scholar finds offensive the fact that God is the one with freedom, not man.¹²³ Man considers it a superior solution to un-divinize God, rather than deny His love completely. An error in God’s omnipotence or grace, though, means that Christ is lost.

All men are Pelagians at heart. This truth of underestimating our sinfulness and overestimating our ability, explains Luther’s extreme words in *The Bondage of the Will*. While fatalism, an absolute determinism, and Calvinism are certainly errors, they are not as appealing as what gives choice, power, and free will to man. Man is so blind he does not realize he is blind, but

¹²¹*Bondage*, LW 33:254.

¹²²View of Yrjo J. E. Alanen, “Das Wahrheitsproblem in der Bibel und in der griechischen Philosophie,” *KuD* 3 (1957), 230-239 as noted in *Luther*, McSorley, 301.

¹²³Another example: “Luther’s arguments in [*The Bondage of the Will*], maintains [Wolfhart] Pannenberg, rob ‘the encounter with Christ of its decision-character.’” Quoted in *Luther*, McSorley, 332. That was Luther’s point exactly: to take everything away from man. What depends on man will fail, as even Adam without sin did not stand upright. But who relies on God Himself and His promises will stand to eternity.

thinks he has exceptional vision. “This inherited sin has caused such a deep, evil corruption of nature that reason does not comprehend it; rather, it must be believed on the basis of the revelation in the Scriptures.”¹²⁴ While grace is easy to comprehend in theory, it is humbling in actuality to receive. Luther does not make grace easy, because Christ did not die and suffer for those who are alive to God and free from sin.

The errors of Luther’s time are remarkably similar to our own. Many talk of Christ and grace, while denying them by assuming some inherent ability to know or turn to God. Most Protestants and the Roman church admit to some ability to turn toward God, no matter how small. Even Romanists differ little from free-will Evangelicals in actual teaching on this critical matter. For example, one capable scholar writes: “What is overlooked by Luther is the biblical teaching that this captivity or slavery essentially involves our *obedience*, an attitude of man which always involves a free decision.”¹²⁵ This Pelagianism, though called a gift of grace, is not fundamentally different than what Luther or Augustine argued against. It is, in truth, “a special doctrine of the Antichrist.”¹²⁶

Errors which claim man must first invite God by prayer or some act of the will are not new. In 529 the Second Council of Orange, following the teaching of Augustine, stated: “If anyone says that the grace of God can be conferred as a result of human prayer, but that it is not grace itself which makes us pray to God, he contradicts the prophet Isaiah, or the Apostle who says the same thing, ‘I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me’ (Rom. 10:20).”¹²⁷ How applicable and relevant these words are today still.¹²⁸ Decision theology, result-driven methods of witnessing, and seeker-adapted modes of worship all assume that something other the Holy Spirit draws man to God. Luther’s profound work assails

¹²⁴SA, III, 1, 3; Kolb-Wengert, 311.

¹²⁵*Luther*, McSorley, 335.

¹²⁶Luther, *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles* (1520), LW 32:94.

¹²⁷Canon 3. http://www.reformed.org/documents/canons_of_orange.html

¹²⁸Canon 6 states: “If anyone says that God has mercy upon us when, apart from his grace, we believe, will, desire, strive, labor, pray, watch, study, seek, ask, or knock, but does not confess that it is by the infusion and inspiration of the Holy Spirit within us that we have the faith, the will, or the strength to do all these things as we ought; or if anyone makes the assistance of grace depend on the humility or obedience of man and does not agree that it is a gift of grace itself that we are obedient and humble, he contradicts the Apostle who says, ‘What have you that you did not receive?’ (I Cor. 4:7), and, ‘But by the grace of God I am what I am’ (I Cor. 15:10).” Ibid.

that which is most precious to us: our common assumptions about man's excellence and God's remoteness.

Conclusion

Though *The Bondage of the Will* is a uniquely challenging book in Luther's corpus, it should not be forgotten. It is perhaps more relevant than his other polemical works, since it deals with a perpetual problem: man's sinful heart which denies the possibility of grace. Although it can be misunderstood, and its arguments are not easily grasped, its value is in approaching grace from the opposite end of the spectrum. Instead of starting with Christ and His mercy, he demolishes man's supposed freedom from God.

Luther often raises difficulties, problems, and questions of a disturbing nature. To leave unanswered what the Father has not revealed is offensive to reason, but not wrong. Even grace, in all of the Father's goodness, encountered personally, is offensive to the flesh. The existential and paradoxical element of belief is not glossed over by Luther. While not used to change the content of the faith, Luther writes from his own experience and despair to depict the true nature of faith in Christ. The real difficulties the average Christian faces in sickness, death, and distress are no less problematic than what Luther faced.

Luther's book on the bound will is extreme, though without these extremes in doctrine, God's grace evaporates.

For as to what Erasmus repeats in his Epilogue—that if our view stands, then all precepts, all the threats, all the promises, are in vain and there is no room left for merits or demerits, rewards or punishments; and it is either difficult to defend mercy or even the justice of God if God damns those who cannot help sinning, besides other unfortunate consequences, which have so disturbed the greatest minds as to throw them quite off balance—with all these we have already dealt above. We neither accept nor approve that middle way which (in all sincerity, I believe) he recommends to us suggesting that we should concede “a tiny bit” to free choice, so that the contradictions of Scripture and the above mentioned difficulties might be more easily removed; for by this middle way, not only is the issue not settled, but we are no farther forward. For unless you attribute absolutely everything to free choice, as the Pelagians do, the contradictions of Scripture remain, merit and reward are abolished, the mercy and justice of God are done away, and all the difficulties remain which we seek to avoid by means of a tiny, effectual power of free choice, as we

have sufficiently shown above. We must therefore go all out and completely deny free choice, referring everything to God; then there will be no contradictions in Scripture, and the difficulties, if not cured, can be endured.¹²⁹

While the difficulties remain for our reason by not taking the middle way, room is left for God's all glorious grace in Christ. As the cross of suffering must be endured, the intellectual difficulties that occur to us in a fallen world, in protest against the Gospel, must be borne in hope. "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known" (I Cor. 13:12).

¹²⁹*Bondage*, LW 33:245.