

# A Review of Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation

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## Erasmus' Thesis

### The Purpose of His Thesis

Erasmus begins his thesis admitting that among the many difficulties in theology, none is a more "tangled labyrinth" than that of free choice. Not only does he set forth his own views in his work, but he admits also that there have been varying ideas on the issue since the early days of the Christian church.

The reason why he tries his hand at untying the knots in this old issue is because it had recently resurfaced in the writings of John Eck and Luther. He hopes that he might want once and for all make the issue more plain. He writes,

It seems good to my friends that I should try my hand and see whether, as a result of our little set-to, the truth might be made more plain.<sup>1</sup>

This undoubtedly is a kind of arrogance. By taking Luther to task, he inevitable also takes the whole Augustinian theology to task on the issue of the freedom of the will. While he repeatedly appeals to antiquity, yet he seems to reject the greatest voice in the ancient period.

### The Heart of the Issue

The scholar of Rotterdam shows himself to be worthy of the title. He does not shy away from issues, even when dealing with a controversial subject like this. He does not excuse himself but boldly faces the issue that confronts him.

The heart of the controversy is the doctrine of free will. He shows that this is indeed the precise controversy by titling his thesis *The Freedom of the Will*. To this doctrine of the will, he aims to speak.

He admitted that in this issue he had not personally decided on a conclusive position. He writes,

I admit that many different views about free choice have been handed down from the ancients about which I have, as yet, no fixed conviction, except that I think there to be a certain power of free choice.<sup>2</sup>

The subsequent development of the book shows that to be false. He does not only have a slight idea about free choice, but he decidedly chose to reject Luther's and Augustine's doctrine of the will and he goes on to develop his own ideas about it. He tells us that having considered Dr. Luther's position, he is not persuaded by it.

If he rejects the Reformation doctrine of man, what then are his ideas about man?

Before we examine his ideas, we need to go back to our previous statement about the doctrine of man. It must be understood that both Luther and Erasmus were not merely debating the subject of the will in the abstract. They were not debating the loci in dogmatics we call anthropology. What is at stake is the question whether or not man in his fallen state is free and able to do good. To be more precise, they were debating about anthropology as it is related to soteriology. The question was not merely a moral one; it is a spiritual one. The question, in other words, is not just whether man is good or bad; but the question is how is man saved. Is his salvation a work of his own efforts, or is it a cooperation between his weakened will, or a work of the sovereign God apart from any contributions of man? So the question is eventually soteriological.

Erasmus saw this. He was not a blind renaissance scholar. This becomes more apparent in the later part of his work where he raises the question of the relationship between free will and grace. So the question is between particular grace and synergism, Augustinianism and Pelagianism, Dordt and Arminianism. This can also be seen in his definition of the issue. He writes:

By free choice in this place we mean a power of the human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from them.<sup>3</sup>

Here Erasmus rightly connects the two issues of anthropology and soteriology. The issue has to do with whether man is able to choose to receive salvation or to reject it.

## **His Approach**

Erasmus is very careful with his words in his work. He knows that it is first of all a historical question. History shows that men have taken opposite sides. Erasmus, being a good humanist, does not want to offend any side. When he says that he approaches the subject as a debater and an inquirer rather than a dogmatist, he wants to avoid the impression that he is taking sides in the debate. He wants to present himself as a mediator between what he deems two swinging extremes, pure free-willism and sovereign grace.

But he knows also that the issue is scriptural. As such, besides reproducing some ancient opinions, he wants also to reason from Scriptures why his view must be considered as viable, and as the only alternative to Luther's doctrine.

Thus Erasmus' method seems a very commendable one. He tries to be historical and biblical. But, as we shall see, having the right tools is not enough. When biblical data are read with the eyes of human reason, it can only lead to a disastrous consequence. Instead of arriving at a biblical doctrine, one arrives at a diabolical theology that is hostile to Christianity. Into this Erasmus has brought himself.

In the second part of the paper, we will let Luther critique his method and content.

## **His Doctrine of the Will**

Erasmus does not claim to be on the side of Pelagius, the fourth century heretic, in this matter of the human will. He knows well enough that if his doctrine is Pelagian he could not stand against the German Reformer, for then he himself would be charged with the ancient heresy. Up to the time of the Reformation, one can almost say that there were two views of anthropology and soteriology. One either

believes in salvation by works or salvation by grace. In other words one is either a Pelagian (whether pure or semi) or an Augustinian. Salvation is either by sovereign grace or by human merits.

But Erasmus does not want to be as blatant as Pelagius in his heresy. Concerning Pelagius' doctrine of man, he writes,

Pelagius, while he feared for the justice of God, ascribed too much to free choice, and those are not so far distant from him who ascribe such power to the human will that by their own natural strength they can merit, through good works, that supreme grace by which we are justified.<sup>4</sup>

This makes his doctrine dangerous. It is dangerous because his anthropology is subtle. One who is unfamiliar with the issue might imagine that Erasmus' idea is acceptable. After all he couched his ideas in biblical terms such as grace and faith. But by employing these terms, he is using them in a manner that is altogether hostile to the Reformation idea of free grace and *sola fidei*.

Erasmus, in rejecting Pelagianism, nevertheless also rejected Augustine's doctrine of man's will. He believes that Augustine, who once embraced the freedom of the will, was forced by the controversy to take the opposite extreme. This, he says, is exactly the case with Luther as well. Luther, like Augustine, was driven to extreme. Erasmus writes,

After his battle with Pelagius, Augustine became less just toward free choice than he had before. Luther, on the other hand, who had previously allowed something to free choice, is now carried so far in the heat of his defense as to destroy it entirely.<sup>5</sup>

In between these two "extremes" he finds a medium. The medium that he has created is the doctrine of synergism. Synergism is that doctrine of soteriology that ascribes salvation both to God and man. In salvation, God and man make an equal contribution. Salvation is both by merit and grace. Really Erasmus sees salvation as a cooperation. God cooperates with man, and man with God. It is a joint venture, a partnership. The result is that while God receives the glory, man also receives the reward for his merits. His view is best summarized by the statement made popular by John Wesley in the eighteenth century: "God helps those who help themselves." What our renaissance scholar is in essence espousing is really an illegitimate hybrid of grace and free will.

Erasmus expresses his doctrine very clearly in his conclusion to the passages he set forth to defend free will. He writes,

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.<sup>6</sup>

But Erasmus would not deny grace. He cannot because the doctrine of grace is so clear in the Scriptures. But yet neither does he want to deny the priority of free will. So he finds himself in a dilemma, a dilemma which he refuses to admit, but which is clear in his writings. For example, he writes,

We should not arrogate anything to ourselves but attribute all things we have received to the divine grace, which called us when we were turned away, which purified us by faith, which gave us this gift, that our will might be *synergos* (a 'fellow-worker') with grace, although grace is itself sufficient for all things and has no need of the assistance of human will.<sup>7</sup>

One might think that this is orthodox language, but on the same page he adds, in speaking about Philippians 2:13, that "a good will cooperates with the action of grace."

One might immediately ask: Is this not inconsistent?

Erasmus has a way of getting around this apparent inconsistency. He speaks of a remote cause and a secondary cause. He writes,

In each individual action two causes come together, the grace of God and the will of man: in such a way, however, that grace is the principal cause and the will secondary, which can do nothing apart from the principal cause, since the principal cause is sufficient in itself. Just as fire burns by its native force, and yet the principal cause is God who acts through the fire, and this cause would of itself be sufficient, without which the fire could do nothing if he withdrew from it.<sup>8</sup>

Erasmus, following this statement, adds two other analogies. It is sufficient to mention the second one, which is the relationship between a father and his injured son, to see the point he is making and to see the error of his idea. In the illustration, he speaks concerning a son who has fallen and has been injured by the fall, and is offered an apple by the father. He states that the child, whose legs have been weakened by the fall, could not reach out to take hold of the apple. But the father, wanting to motivate the child to recover, desires the child to make the necessary movements toward the fruit and have it as a reward for his works. Since the child, while desiring it, could not make the movement, the father leads him to it by his hands, and thus helps him to obtain the object. The child could not have stood up if the father had not helped him to his feet. He could not have grasped the apple if the father had not assisted his feeble legs. Erasmus even adds that there would have been no apple for the child if the father had not shown one to him. This might sound as if Erasmus here is ascribing all glory to God alone. In fact, at the end of the analogy, he writes,

What then can the infant claim for itself?<sup>9</sup>

But he quickly adds,

And yet it (the infant) does something. But it has nothing to glory in its own powers for it owes its very self to its father.... What, then, does the child do here? It relies with *all its powers* on the one who lifts it, and it *accommodates as best it can its feeble* steps to him who leads. No doubt the father could have drawn the child against his will, and the child *could have resisted by refusing* the outstretched apple; the father could have given the apple without the child's having to run to get it, *but he preferred* to give it in this way, as this was better for the child. I will readily allow that less is due to our industry in following after eternal life than to the boy who runs to his father's hand.<sup>10</sup>

Here in this picture is the sum of Erasmus' synergism. We shall at this point reserve our critique of Erasmus' position until we have listened to the eloquent reasoning of Luther.

Erasmus' view might be close to what Wesleyan Arminianism teaches today. He speaks of a prevailing grace, a grace that precedes man's salvation but that is not efficacious. It is a grace that God gives to all fallen sinners. That grace prepares him for salvation and gives him the ability to appropriate the salvation saving grace offers to him in the gospel. Implied here also is that saving grace is not efficacious and sovereign. It may be resisted and rejected by the sinner's free choice. The idea here is that when he accepts Christ as offered in the gospel, he receives salvation by his own decision. As

such, salvation is his work. Christ could not have entered his life if he had not chosen Him. The sinner must initiate the act and cooperate with the saving grace freely offered to him. As such, salvation is first and foremost man's work! But Erasmus adds also that it is God's work, for it is God who offers the "apple" to him. Without Christ, there is no salvation. One might say that the solution is in Christ, but the decision is in man.

Wesleyan Arminianism, like Erasmus, insists on a prevailing grace. Grace must first work in the sinner's heart before the sinner can be enabled to get a grip on saving grace. But like Erasmus, Wesleyan theology insists also that man after the fall is able to desire the good and choose salvation. To use Erasmus' example, they will say that a sinner not yet regenerated can and does desire the delicious apple offered by the Father.

It is not hard to see that Erasmus' doctrine is the basis for modern decisionism in mass evangelism. Both center in the autonomy of man. Both highlight the fact that man must do something in order to be saved. Both view salvation as a cooperation between God and man. Both see in Christ's death only a possibility of salvation, not a vicarious and efficacious accomplishment of salvation.

## **His Refutation of Luther's Doctrine**

Luther, according to Erasmus, is arrogant. On page 95 he considers Luther's doctrine as a hyperbole, an exaggerated position. Erasmus remarks that he prefers moderation.

In Part III of his book, he titles the division "Examination of Luther's Arguments." He begins with an explanation of the words "flesh" and "spirit" in Galatians 6:3 and Isaiah 40:6-8. He does this because these are the texts that Luther used to set forth the doctrine of man's total depravity. Following Jerome's lead, Erasmus takes the word "flesh" to mean not a sinful flesh, but merely a weakened flesh. By this he meant not a flesh that is earthy and possesses obvious limitations because of its confinement to space and time. He takes it to mean something quite different. The idea, as suggested by Jerome, is that man's flesh is his morally weakened condition. He finds Luther's idea that man is totally depraved as intolerable.

It is to be noted, as we have earlier pointed out, that in refuting Luther's doctrine of man's depravity, Erasmus appeals to both history and Scripture.

When Erasmus appeals to Jerome and cites the authority of the fathers, he is showing that the church of all ages has never held to Luther's extreme. When he appeals to Scripture, he is saying to Luther that the Word of God militates against him. But is this the case?

## **His Defense of Free Will, Scriptural Arguments**

Let us begin first with Erasmus' scriptural arguments, although this is not how he himself commences his apology. He commences the debate with reference to the early fathers, and probably did so because the authority of canonized saints seems always to have carried abundant weight among the people in those days.

The passages cited by Erasmus to set forth his case are the following: Genesis 4:6,7; Ecclesiasticus 15:14-17; Isaiah 1:19-20; Isaiah 45:20-25; Ezekiel 18:31; 33:11.

Besides these, there are also texts which he cites to argue that God's call for us to keep the law implies not only the duty to do it but also the ability to perform it. Such texts are: Genesis 2:16,17; Exodus 20; Jeremiah 26:4.

Other texts that he used are texts which speak of a serious call by God for sinners to repent. He thinks that such a call must necessarily imply natural ability. Such texts are: Joel 2:12; Jonah 3:8; Jeremiah 26:3.

In these texts he reasons that Scripture always speaks about salvation as "a striving after better things."<sup>11</sup>

In addition, he uses those texts that speak about threats and promises for sinners who reject and obey God's commands: Exodus 32:9; Micah 6:3; Psalms 81:13.

Of all these texts, [Ecclesiasticus 15:14-17](#) seems to be the principal text that he used. It is with this text that he begins his defense and it is from this text that he derives his definition of free choice. One can see why he bases his argument strongly on this text, for here he has the elements necessary for his thesis. The elements are, a conditional "if"; a promise; an appeal; and the word "choose," which he claims presupposes ability.

The several texts that he refers to from the New Testament are texts such as: Matthew 23:27; John 14:15; Matthew 5:12; 1 Corinthians 9:24,25; 1 Timothy 6:12, etc.

Looking at these texts, it seems that Erasmus makes a rash jump, for texts that have the words "if" and "reward" in them, or suggested in them, are pertinent.

Although Erasmus thinks that the whole of Scripture supports his view, he nevertheless admits that they are texts which seem to oppose free choice in man. Such texts he considers to be: Exodus 9:12; Isaiah 63:17; Romans 9:17; 9:11-13.

Of all these texts and others, he says that "there are two that stand out in particular."<sup>12</sup> The two are Exodus 9:12 and Romans 9:17. Both of them have to do with God hardening Pharaoh's heart.

Without at this moment examining his exegetical errors, we turn from his scriptural proofs to his theology. Since it is in this part of the book that he discusses his theology, we will present his theology also in the same context.

Firstly, he sees that Scripture makes a clear distinction between man before and after the Fall. He contends that man before the Fall is in no need of grace. He writes,

In man the will was so upright and free that, apart from new grace, he could continue in innocence.<sup>13</sup>

After the Fall, he sees man's will as only weakened, and not totally depraved and corrupted. He writes that the will is, after the Fall, "obscured by sin, but not altogether extinguished."

In other words, he speaks about a partial depravity after the Fall. This is clear from the language that he uses immediately following this statement. He says,

Thus, as the sin of our progenitors has passed into their descendants, so the tendency to sin has passed to all. [14](#)

This, he says, is owing to the fact that after our first parents fell, God immediately acted to forgive their sins, and by his grace has restored man to a morally able condition. By this grace man is enabled to continue to do the right, yet not without the tendency to sin. He underlines the latter and says that sin is not totally rooted out owing to the vestiges of original sin in us.

On the one hand he seems to say that the image of God in man is not totally extinguished, because man is still a reasonable creature. But, as he goes on, it is clear that buried inside these reasonable and moral faculties is the ability to do some good. Although it is not a saving good, nevertheless it is a good that enables him to merit salvation. He writes,

And in these things it is probable that there was a will in some way ready for the good but useless for eternal salvation without the addition of grace by faith.[15](#)

Thus, he sees not only the ability to do good in man, but also that the good he does is able to bring him a step nearer to salvation. The goodness that man does is then a stepping stone to saving faith. This is akin to the idea of a common grace that some Reformed people speak about.

Indeed Erasmus mentions common grace. More than this, to rescue him from his own dilemma, he speaks about three or even four kinds of grace. By grace he means merely a benefit freely given. As such there can be manifold ideas of grace.

Firstly, there is common grace, by which he means the common benefits God gives to all men alike.

Secondly, there is peculiar grace. This is the grace by which,

God in his mercy arouses the sinner wholly without merit to repent, yet without infusing that supreme grace which abolishes sin and makes him pleasing to God.[16](#)

This grace only assists the sinner, but never saves him. It makes him displeased with himself, and leads him to do a good that makes him a candidate for the highest grace. One may call this a preparing grace, but Erasmus calls it an operative grace, or stimulating grace.

This second grace is given to all men alike. This second grace will enable one to cooperate with the third kind of grace, which he calls cooperative grace, that will make man's salvation effective. This third grace, like all the other graces, can be refused and resisted. But when man, having being enlightened and enabled by the preparatory grace, and by his awakened will cooperates with this third grace, then his salvation is completed. Thus he writes,

The first arouses, the second promotes, the third completes.[17](#)

## **Free Will and God's Foreknowledge**

Lastly, let us examine his solution to the problem of man's free will and God's foreknowledge.

Here again, Erasmus displays his ignorance of the issue. Really he has no answer to this relationship because he is not clear as to the precise connotation of these terms. He at first defines foreknowledge

as the same as God's willing. This is good, but this purpose or willing of God is conditional upon man's free choice. Does he mean that God's purpose is then mutable? He at first seems to deny it, but since he prefers to exalt the free will in man, he eventually concedes that God's purpose is indeed dependent upon man's free will. God acts according to man's plan. He writes, concerning the case of Judas,

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 powers to refuse to undertake his treacherous design.<sup>18</sup>

All that he says about God's will being immutable and infallible is just an orthodox coating for his blatant conditional theology. God's decree must turn according to man's decision.<sup>19</sup>

Erasmus hates the doctrine of reprobation. He explains away the doctrine by stating that it is a conditional decree. He even speaks about God's hatred against Esau merely as a "temporal misfortune," and adds that, in Romans 9, where Paul speaks about the Potter and the clay, he was merely using a rhetorical device to repress the wicked Jews' murmuring against God.

We close with the comment with which we started. Right tools do not always guarantee right results. Erasmus has the right tools, but he has the wrong approach. He uses too much human reasoning. He viewed Scriptures with a pair of philosophical glasses. The result is a seriously wrong view of grace. Grace is disgraced by his embarrassing doctrine of human autonomy and will. Erasmus' doctrine of free will must be eradicated root and branch. And no one in his days was able to do this task better than Dr. Luther, his uncompromising opponent.

## Luther's Thesis

### Luther's Reason For His Book

Luther in his Introduction explains why he has not responded sooner to Erasmus. He remarks that it is not because of cowardice nor any such like thing; but rather he has already dealt with the issue of free will in other writings so that he sees it unnecessary to repeat what he has taught in those other places. But, it appears that the disturbances caused by Erasmus' doctrine necessitated a reply from Luther, and so Luther replied, in the most eloquent manner.

In Luther's judgment, the book of Erasmus is worthless, low in quality; and it is the disgusting and distasteful contents that prevented him from an earlier reply. But its evasive method and dangerous doctrine has worried some of Luther's faithful friends, and, fearing what it might do to the Reformation, they urged Luther to write a reply. Luther's chief reason for writing is, as he tells us, that Christian truth is in danger in many hearts.

As such, his reason is chiefly polemical. In his book, Luther takes Erasmus to task, and systematically refutes the humanist's theology bit by bit. He begins by taking to task Erasmus' theology in his own words, showing the inconsistencies of his own language and theology. In the process Luther confesses that, in contending with Erasmus, he has become more sure about his own position. He says,

I owe you no small thanks, for you have made me far more sure of my own position by letting me see the case for free choice put forward with all the energy of so distinguished and powerful a mind.<sup>20</sup>



This is striking because here we see that the truths of the Reformation were not developed in an ivory tower. Rather, truth is always developed in the crucible of real controversy. It is not developed in isolation, but is always developed on the battlefield where heresies rage in fury against the truth.

After Luther tears down Erasmus' arguments, he positively sets forth the Reformation doctrine of free will as it is found in the Scriptures. As such, his purpose is also instructional, hoping also that in this way Erasmus himself might be brought to a correct understanding of the truth. In concluding his Introduction, Luther writes,

Therefore we must pray to God that he may open my mouth and your heart, and the hearts of all men, and that he may himself be present in our midst as the master who informs both our speaking and hearing.<sup>21</sup>

We bring this out because often it is said that Luther is a man who is so aggressive in his polemics that he forgets the welfare of his opponents. But here we see him defending the truth in love. His desire is that his opponent might come to a better understanding of the truth.

## **Luther's Approach**

Luther begins his reply to Erasmus by calling attention to the importance of doctrine. Erasmus has made the statement that doctrinal assertions are not important. Erasmus' preference is a position of no position; that is, doctrinal neutrality and uncertainty. However, in the world of theology, there is no such thing as neutrality and uncertainty. Either one admits that truth is absolute and stands for it or he is against it. Luther correctly points out that Erasmus, in rejecting the doctrinal assertions in the Scriptures, is really taking sides with the Sophists. This is a lesson that must be learned. Why is it that Luther, with the other Reformers, insisted on the importance of doctrine? This is because religion is not a mere matter of opinion. God has revealed His truth in the Scriptures. The Scriptures define for us what we must believe. Luther says,

The Holy Spirit is no Skeptic, and the things He has written in our hearts are not doubts or opinions, but assertions - surer and more certain than sense and life itself.

This of course boils down to the fact that Erasmus does not subscribe to the doctrine of the sufficiency and perspicuity of Scripture. Erasmus stands in the Roman Catholic tradition of holding both Scripture and traditions as authoritative. But still, both are not enough for him. As a humanist scholar, he is compelled by his own system to include also human reason and philosophies. This precisely is Erasmus' problem. It is strange that the man who gives us the Greek New Testament should turn his mind and heart against the doctrines contained in it. In writing in defence of free will, Erasmus refused to submit himself to Scripture. And it is this that Luther first takes issue with. He writes,

Is it not enough to have submitted your judgment to Scripture? Do you submit it to the Church as well? - why, what can the Church settle that Scripture did not settle first?

Hence, Luther, when he takes the humanist to task, begins with a positive setting forth of the doctrine of Scripture. The reason why Luther does this should be obvious to all students of the Reformation. One of the Reformation's mottos is *Sola Scriptura*, that is, Scripture alone. Luther had learned this in his debate with Eck at Leipzig and in his defence before the Roman court. Scripture must be our sole authority in matters of doctrine and life. As such, the issue between Luther and Erasmus is really between truth and error, reason and grace, and an issue of belief and unbelief.

Secondly, Luther's approach is exegetical. He says several times that the issue is an issue in hermeneutics. He accuses Erasmus of twisting Scripture, and wresting the Word to his own destruction.

This however is not Erasmus' method. Erasmus is man-centred both in his theology and in his method. When appealing to the authority of the fathers, Erasmus shows that he is more interested in man's commentaries than in scriptural authority. Erasmus' man-centeredness can also be seen in his purpose in his work. For in his work he aims to arrive at moderation. He wants to please man, and this has led him to develop a theology that is utterly man-centred.

Erasmus even remarked that Scripture has not dealt at length with the issue of free choice and seems to have left the issue open. He admits that Scripture is obscure about the matter. Erasmus in fact makes a strange classification of matters between that which may be known and that which may not be known.

The first are those things that are reserved to be known only in heaven.

The second are those things which God has willed that we should be completely ignorant of. An example of this is the hour of Judgment.

The third are those things which God has willed that we should contemplate, such as the distinctions between the two natures of Christ.

The fourth are those things which God has willed to be plainly evident. Examples are the precepts for the good life.

The fifth are those things that even when made known are not suitable to be made known to men.

His purpose in such a classification is so that he may excuse himself from taking a stand in doctrinal issues. Since Scripture is obscure about the issue, therefore we should not be so dogmatic about it. He himself confesses that he detests doctrinal assertions, and admits that he prefers the opinions of the Skeptics and church councils to those who assert a strong opinion in doctrines.<sup>22</sup> It seems that Erasmus wants to make those who make strong doctrinal assertions to appear to be ultra-fundamentalists who go around beating others with a theological club.

Luther rejects Erasmus' moderation. He insists on definite doctrinal assertions. This is because Scripture is itself clear. Here again we are back to the issue of Scripture. This doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture is denied by Erasmus. Erasmus with his five classifications of scriptural knowledge really is making the Scriptures an unclear book. Luther is annoyed with this, and immediately counteracts it by giving a list of helps how one may elicit the true sense of Scripture. The first rule he lays down is the most fundamental principle in hermeneutics, that is, Scripture interprets Scripture. Secondly, he insists that the way to know the Scriptures is to have our minds opened by Christ. Along with this, too, he asserts that the Spirit is required for the understanding of the Scriptures. Not only is the truth of the Word made clear in our hearts by the Spirit, but Luther also says that truths are made known in the preaching. The former he calls internal clarity, the latter he calls external clarity.<sup>23</sup> Luther's main critique of Erasmus' method is that Erasmus omits both of these principles in interpretation. He fails to interpret Scripture from Scripture; he lacks a spiritual mind; and therefore both his approach and theology are really Christless. Luther's critique of Erasmus' message is this:

Christianity as you describe it includes this among other things: that we should strive with all our might.... These words of yours, devoid of Christ, devoid of the Spirit, are colder than ice, so that they ever tarnish the beauty of your eloquence.<sup>24</sup>

With regard to the issue of free choice, Luther insists (p. 169) that the Scriptures are clear on the issue. Since this is the case, then the doctrine of man's total depravity ought to be preached and taught. He writes,

Consequently, if the dogma of free choice is obscure or ambiguous, it does not belong to Christians or the Scriptures, and it should be abandoned and reckoned among those fables which Paul condemns Christians for wrangling about. If, however, it does belong to Christians and the Scriptures, it ought to be clear, open, and evident, exactly like all the other clear and evident articles of faith.<sup>[25](#)</sup>

## How Luther Sees the Issue

As we have seen in the preceding paragraph, in contrast with Erasmus' method, Luther's method is biblical, exegetical, and also theological. Not only does he deal with the issue in connection with Soteriology, but also he deals with it in relation to theology. He sees here that the glory and the honour of God are at stake. What Luther really wants to do is to set forth the sovereignty of God over against the autonomy of man. As such it is Luther who really deals with the issue. Erasmus, owing to his humanism, evades altogether, perhaps only with some passing and slight remark, the sovereignty of God. He is not able to deal with such a high doctrine for he has no doctrine of Scripture and no idea of theology. So at the heart of the issue is more than just our salvation, but especially the honour of God. Luther's contention is that we must let God be God!

Of the doctrine of sovereignty, there must be no compromise. In response to Erasmus' accommodating view, Luther says,

What I am after is to me something serious, necessary, and indeed eternal, something of such a kind and such importance that it ought to be asserted and defended to the death, even if the whole world had not only to be thrown into strife and confusion, but actually to return to total chaos and be reduced to nothingness. If you do not understand this or are not concerned about it, then mind your own affairs and let those understand and be concerned about it on whom God has laid the charge.<sup>[26](#)</sup>

## Refutation of Erasmus' Doctrine

### Erasmus' Idea of Free Will Refuted

Luther begins his refutation of Erasmus' arguments in support of free choice in part III of the book.<sup>[27](#)</sup>

He commences with a critique of the definition of free choice given by Erasmus. Luther calls his definition a "bare definition," a definition that is narrow and that does not truly set forth the idea that is represented by the term. Thus Luther contends that at the outset there is a problem with the term that is used, for, as he says,

There is a conflict between the definition of the name and the definition of the object, because the term signifies one thing and the object is understood as another.<sup>[28](#)</sup>

In Luther's opinion no man has real free choice. For by free choice is meant,

That which can do and does, in relation to God, whatever it pleases, uninhibited by any law or any sovereign authority.<sup>29</sup>

As such, free choice properly belongs to no one but God alone, for God alone is free to do what He desires to be done. Luther argues that because man is under subjection to God, he cannot be said to act freely on his own, just as a slave cannot be free because he is under the sovereign authority of his master. Luther suggests to Erasmus that perhaps he can consider the terms "veritable choice," or "mutable choice," but not "free choice," for this is a misrepresentation of what man truly is. As such, Luther insists that the term free choice ought to be dropped altogether in the study of man, since such a thing as free choice does not exist in him.

By free choice, Luther understands Erasmus to refer to man's ability to do that which is good toward salvation. Luther elaborates on Erasmus' phrase "power of human will by which man is able," and adds that what he means is,

A capacity or faculty or ability or aptitude for willing, unwilling, selecting, neglecting, approving, rejecting, and whatever other actions of the will there are.<sup>30</sup>

When Erasmus adds that this free choice of man is able to "apply itself" to things which are eternal, Luther sees in this an added emphasis by his foe to underline the fact that the will itself produces the willing and the unwilling, and itself acts as an independent power free from external forces. This necessarily means that, for Erasmus, the preaching of the gospel is a mere presentation which itself does nothing to the hearer. It is up to the hearer himself to act independently of grace to accept or reject the gospel.

Luther astutely observes that when Erasmus defines free choice as an independent faculty that is able to apply itself to salvation, he inevitably says that when a hearer wills salvation, then he is able to perform it. This is logically the case, as Luther shows,

For if you can will or unwill anything, you must to some extent be able to perform something by that will, even if someone else prevents you from completing it.<sup>31</sup>

If Erasmus affirms this, which he must if he is to hold his position consistently, then he inevitably denies grace and the Holy Spirit, and even the cross. But since Erasmus does not entirely attribute the whole of salvation to free will but also to grace, then he really is espousing a half-baked free-will theology. Luther himself, I am sure, finds this confusing, and ridicules such an idea of free will and says that in a way Erasmus is more confusing than Pelagius and even outdoes him, for he does not want to assert that salvation is wholly of man.

Erasmus' definition is therefore unacceptable. For couched in those words that free choice is able to apply itself to salvation is a doctrine of salvation apart from grace. Luther points out to his foe that,

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. You do not realize how much you attribute to it by this pronoun "itself" - its very own self! - when you say it can "apply itself"; for this means that you completely exclude the Holy Spirit with all his power, as superfluous and unnecessary. Your definition is to be condemned....<sup>32</sup>

## Erasmus' Texts Examined

Since Erasmus appeals to certain texts to support his claim, Luther takes those texts cited by him and gives to them a correct interpretation. It is not possible for us to examine all the texts that Luther has dealt with. We shall take a close look only at those texts which Erasmus himself thinks strongly support his case.

The first text that Erasmus took was [Ecclesiasticus 15:14-17](#). We earlier made note that Erasmus relies heavily on this text. Luther himself thinks so also, for this is the first text that he seeks to explain.

He first makes the general remark that the text refers to the creation of man, and thus says nothing at all about free choice. This is clear not only from the explicit phrase, "God made man from the beginning," but also from the expression, "And left him in the hand of his own counsel." This latter phrase points to man's appointed task of exercising dominion over the brute creation. As such the text refers to man before the Fall. In that state of innocence, Luther points out, man was able to exercise a dominion and thus exercise a free choice. He writes,

For in that state, man was able to deal with things according to his own choice, in that they were subjected to him; and this is called man's counsel, as distinct from God's counsel.<sup>[33](#)</sup>

Secondly, Luther points out that, even in Paradise, God added commandments and precepts to his duty, thus limiting his dominion when he forbids him to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is at this point that Luther carefully explains what is implied in the precepts and commandments given to man. He takes his strides carefully here, for he tells us that,

It is therefore at this point, "If thou wilt," that the question of free choice arises.<sup>[34](#)</sup>

It is such expressions containing "ifs" that Erasmus rashly and madly holds to in defence of his position. As we have already noted, Erasmus imagines that a command necessitates the ability to perform the duty, for God cannot command man to do something which he is not able to do.

But Luther contends that there is nothing in such conditional expressions that implies free choice. Luther argues from grammar first of all. He says that verbs in the subjunctive mood assert nothing.<sup>[35](#)</sup> If the writer of Ecclesiastes would want to assert free will, he would have written otherwise, and say probably something to this effect, "Man can keep the commandment of God," or "Man has the power to keep the commandment." In other words, he would have used the indicative mood rather than the subjunctive mood.

Secondly, Luther shows that such commandments are given not to show our ability, but rather to show precisely the opposite, that man is not able to keep the law. He explains with an illustration,

How often do parents have a game with their children by telling them to come to them, or to do this or that, simply for the sake of showing them how unable they are, and compelling them to call for the help of the parent's hands!<sup>[36](#)</sup>

The reason for God giving the law, he says, is that human nature is so blind that it does not know its own powers, or rather diseases, and so proud as to imagine that it knows and can do everything; and for this pride and blindness God has no readier remedy than the propounding of his law....<sup>[37](#)</sup>

Luther insists that man without grace and without the Spirit is not able to keep the law.<sup>38</sup> Such expressions in the imperative are really designed to show precisely this truth of total depravity,<sup>39</sup> and that outside of grace man is really helpless.

Following his clarification of this text in Ecclesiastes, Luther goes on to explain other Old Testament passages that contain the imperative mood. One such text also appealed to by Erasmus is Deuteronomy 30:15,19, "I have set before your face the way of life and of death. Choose what is good." Luther's explanation to this and to all such texts is that such precepts only set forth what man ought to do and not what he is able to do. He writes,

The words quoted are imperatives, and only say what ought to be done; for Moses does not say, "Thou hast the strength or power to choose," but, "Choose, keep, do!" He issues commandments about doing, but does not describe man's ability to do.<sup>40</sup>

From these texts, Luther, thirdly, points out the basic fault in Erasmus' interpretation. In all such texts, Erasmus takes what is the imperative to be the indicative. He says to the Rotterdam scholar,

...as soon as you get hold of an imperative verb you take it as implying the indicative, as if once a thing is commanded it must forthwith necessarily be done or be possible to do.<sup>41</sup>

This distinction between what is expressed in the imperative and what is expressed by the indicative is important. Arminianism errs precisely also at this same point, asserting that God cannot require from man what he cannot do. Luther grieves at such an error, and complains that even "grammarians and street urchins" know the difference in what is expressed by these two moods. He says,

Even grammarians and street urchins know, that by verbs of the imperative mood nothing else is signified but what ought to be done. What is done, or can be done, must be expressed by indicative verbs.<sup>42</sup>

Fourthly, Luther points out that Erasmus fails to distinguish between Law and Gospel. Taking the words from Jeremiah and Zechariah that say, "If you return, I will restore you," and "Return to me, and I will return to you," Luther shows the distinction between what is legal and what is evangelical. The word "return" in its legal use is an expression of a command in which God exacts from us our duty to repent and to return to him. But the word "return" may also have an evangelical usage, and in this sense is an expression not of a command, but of an expression of a divine comfort and promise, "by which nothing is demanded from us, but the grace of God is offered us."<sup>43</sup> Like the first, it does not imply what man is able to do, but shows rather that God Himself promises to do something to a returning sinner. Belonging to this second use is also the text in Ezekiel 18:23,32, "I desire not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn and live." Here Luther sets forth his idea of the offer of the gospel. In the light of the well-meant offer controversy that rages in Reformed circles these days, it is striking that Luther remarks, in his comments about the above text, that,

The word of grace does not come except to those who feel their sin and are troubled and tempted to despair.... 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.<sup>44</sup>

Far from being the case that this text in Ezekiel sets forth free choice, it shows rather that man who lies outside of God's grace, lies only in death, and that "free choice by itself can only go from bad to worse and fall down into hell."<sup>45</sup> In order that man may enjoy the favour of God, he must return by the way of

legal repentance. Only those who see their sins and feel the burden of death see the need for mercy. This means that we must walk according to what the law tells us we must do. For it is only through the law that we recognize our transgressions, that is, our inability to perform our duty, so that we despair of ourselves and flee to God for grace. This then means that free will is hoax. The law tells us what we cannot do, not what we can do!

From the Old Testament, Luther moves on to the New Testament. In responding to Erasmus' use of Matthew 19:17,21, Luke 9:23, John 14:15, and such like verses that have the conditional particle "if" in them, Luther, fifthly, raises the whole question of merits in the Christian life. Here he highlights another fundamental flaw in Erasmus' hermeneutics, that is, he fails to distinguish what belongs to the Old Testament and what belongs to the New Testament. Luther remarks that to the old dispensation belongs threats and punishments; but to the new dispensation belongs promises and exhortations. The point he is making is that the New Testament texts on conditions and exhortations are designed to

... stir up those who are already justified and have obtained mercy, so that they may be active in the fruits of the freely given righteousness of the Spirit, and may exercise love by good works and bravely bear the cross and all other tribulations of the world.<sup>[46](#)</sup>

An example is that Erasmus, on the basis of Matthew 5:12 ("rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven"), sets forth the doctrine of free choice, ignoring the fact that the admonition was given to the early apostles, who were men who already were recipients of grace and were justified.

The problem, as Luther sees it, is that Erasmus has no doctrine of renewal and regeneration. In the words of Luther, he "discusses free choice precisely as it is without grace."

Luther makes a fake distinction at first with regards to the idea of rewards, and speaks as if there are two kinds of rewards. Since there are no such things as rewards of merit, because there is none worthy of any rewards, therefore when the Bible speaks about rewards in connection with a condition, it speaks of them as rewards of consequence. This is clear from such passages as 2 Chronicles 15:7, Romans 2:6,7. Hell and judgment, life and favor are all rewards of consequence depending whether one is in grace or outside of grace. And this, Luther adds, depends on election. Citing Matthew 25:34, Luther says

How can they merit that which is already theirs and is prepared for them before they are born?<sup>[47](#)</sup>

Luther powerfully brings his argument to a logical conclusion, saying that

It is settled then that merit is not proved from reward, at any rate in the Scriptures; and also that free choice is not proved from merit.<sup>[48](#)</sup>

Besides refuting Erasmus' arguments from those texts that he used to defend free choice, Luther also replies to Erasmus' exegesis of those texts that his opponents used to argue against free choice. There are two texts that Erasmus especially brought out. One is from Exodus 9:12, the other is from Malachi 1:2. Both of these texts are used by Paul in Romans 9:11-21.

The issue here is not hard. Luther points out that the problem with Erasmus is that he has a God that is different from the God of the Bible. Erasmus' God is a non-decreeing God who is not sovereign over all affairs. After all, as Luther points out, Erasmus believes that men are

... saved by and damned without God's knowledge, since he has not determined by his certain election who are saved and who are damned ... but he has left it to them to decide whether they want to be saved or damned.<sup>49</sup>

The idea of God's sovereignty in these texts leads Luther to discuss the question of God's sovereignty and evil. Luther's answer to the apparent problem is very simple. He says that God uses wicked men as they already are. The picture he drew to help the reader to understand this is the picture he paints of a horse that is crippled. The rider who sits on and controls the direction of the horse does his riding in correspondence to the condition of the horse. When God, he says, works through evil men,

Evil things are done, but God can not be said to do 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. It is the fault, therefore, of the instruments, which God does not allow to be idle, that evil is done, with God himself setting them in motion.<sup>50</sup>

In Pharaoh's case, when God comes to him with His command to let His people go, Luther says that God is confronting him with an object that he naturally hates, so that Pharaoh in accordance with the wickedness of his own will hates and opposes what is commanded of him. Thus, the command only fans the fire of hatred which already resides in him. Pharaoh, thus, instead of letting God's people go becomes more hardened in his heart. Luther then takes the word "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" to mean "I will act so that Pharaoh's heart may be hardened."<sup>51</sup> That God uses the evil in man's heart to accomplish His will shows that free choice can do nothing but evil.

Turning to the case of Jacob and Esau, Luther says that the sense in the text is very plain. Paul, in quoting the words from Malachi, aims to set forth the truth that the rewards of the two brothers are decreed before they are born. Erasmus tries to get around this clear and certain text by saying that, in Malachi, the hatred that is spoken of against Esau is a mere temporal misfortune, and that the hatred is only directed at some people. Luther, having answered these objections, eventually begs his opponent not to evade the question at hand, but to face the issue, that is, "by what merit or what work they attain to their faith by which they are grafted in or to unbelief by which they are cut off?" Luther's answer to the question is,

Paul teaches that it comes about by no work of ours, but solely by the love and hate of God.<sup>52</sup>

The same thing is true in the illustration of the Potter and the clay. Clearly set forth in this picture is the absolute sovereignty of God. The vessels do not prepare and make themselves, but the master makes them, some to honour and some to dishonour.

He admits that such a doctrine is unpleasant, and is often regarded as even cruel. But because Scripture teaches it, it is true. It is reason that insists otherwise.

Sixthly, Luther rebuts Erasmus' concept of "flesh" in the Bible. Erasmus had earlier tried to disprove Luther's anti-free choice doctrine when he expounded the idea of "flesh" in Genesis 6:3 as corrupted flesh. Erasmus responded by saying that flesh in the text means only weakness and not total corruption. Again Luther puts up a strong case for his position. He shows from several texts that flesh must mean depraved mankind. He puts forth such biblical proofs as Genesis 6:5; Genesis 8:21, etc. Luther's exegetical capabilities shine again when he shows that wherever flesh in the Bible is treated as in opposition to spirit, one can be sure that flesh in that context means everything that is contrary to the



Spirit.<sup>53</sup>

Erasmus tries to get around the problem by saying that man is a trichotomy, composed of a spirit, a soul, and a body. By body, Erasmus means flesh, and says that this bodily part of man is carnal and fleshy, that is sensual. But he contends that the soul and the spirit, the immaterial part of man, is good and sound and is capable of striving after good virtues. Luther, on the other hand, shows that all of these components make up the flesh of man. This flesh is carnal and thus hostile and opposed to God, thus ungodly. The problem with Erasmus' view here is that it of necessity means that Christ came only to die for that part of man which is bad and corrupted, and it makes Christ a partial Saviour!

In his interpretation of these texts, Luther shows how incompetent Erasmus is in dealing with Holy Scripture. In fact Luther calls him a perverter of Scripture.<sup>54</sup> He criticizes Erasmus for appealing to ancient fathers like Jerome and Origen. Luther considers this appeal to ancient authorities as of no weight at all. Luther remarked that they themselves were incompetent exegetes because of their allegorizing hermeneutics. Luther was not interested in historical opinions. He could have cited the opinions of Augustine or Wycliffe, of whom he says they agree with him. But Luther's method is always to make a conscious effort to return to Scripture. He sees this lacking in Erasmus and in fact rebukes him for his excessive appeals to Jerome and the Church fathers.

Where is that promise by which we bound ourselves to conduct our debate on the basis of the Scriptures themselves, not of men's commentaries?<sup>55</sup>

Since his method is humanistic, his theology is consequently also man-centered. In the final analysis, the battle between Luther and Erasmus is between two sources of knowledge, Scripture or man. As such, the issue is a belief in Scripture or a denial of it. This is always the character of heresy. In setting up the teachings of man, it inevitably denies the sufficiency and authority of Scripture and end in unbelief!

## **Luther's Doctrine Set Forth**

### **Luther's Statement Concerning Fallen Man**

Man, in Luther's view, has a very miserable life. This is not only because he is corrupted by sin and depraved in nature, but also because his will is in bondage, and is therefore unable to do anything which is spiritually good. In addition, Luther points out that his corruption has so blinded him that he is even unaware of his own corruption. In refuting Erasmus, he writes,

Scripture, however, lays it down that man is corrupt and captive, and what is more, that he portrays a proud contempt of ignorance of his corruption and captivity.<sup>56</sup>

Luther makes a big point about man's ignorance of his own depravity. In a remarkable insight into man's psychology and his spirituality, Luther remarks that unregenerate fallen man likes to imagine himself to be a free creature. This, of course, he adds, is what the devil has done to him. The devil has so blinded him that he is made to think that he is well and alive without God. For when man becomes aware of his misery, the devil knows that his plan will be defeated; for then man at once will begin to seek for deliverance and refuge in God. Luther, once again appealing to Scriptures, writes,

Scripture, however, 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.<sup>57</sup>

## Sin and Man's Free Will

Luther's doctrine of the will can be found especially near the end of the book where he launches a final attack against Erasmus. Having begun his critique of his enemy with Scripture, Luther is not about to give up the matter. In his final section, Luther again does some serious exegesis, and shows from the writings of the apostle Paul and the apostle John that Erasmus' doctrine of free will is a fallacy.

Most of Luther's argument from the apostle Paul's epistles are taken from the book of Romans. This is interesting because it shows how important a place the epistle plays in the work of the sixteenth century Reformation.

From the epistle of Romans, Luther declares first the doctrine of man's depravity. Quoting from Paul, he declares together with the apostle that the wrath of God is directed against all men. According to Luther, all men without exception are sinners. Taking his cue from Romans 1:18, Luther explains that for man to be a sinner means that he is ungodly and unrighteous. And because of his hostility and wickedness, God shows his wrath against all mankind. There are three important truths regarding man and free will that Luther brings out from this text. The first is that all are without exception sinners. Secondly, he defines sin as basically ungodliness and wickedness. Thirdly, he points out that man's wickedness brings out the wrath of God. Fourthly, he adds that the best of men are "ungodly, wicked and deserving of the wrath of God."<sup>58</sup> This is unlike Erasmus and many other evangelical leaders today who are afraid to make the slightest mention of God's wrath for fear that they might offend men. Lastly, he points out that because everyone is given to such wickedness, there is no possibility that man is able freely to will and do that which is good. He concludes his exegesis of this text with these remarks,

Therefore, Paul in this passage lumps all men together in a single mass, and concludes that, so far from being able to will or do anything good, they are all ungodly, wicked, and ignorant of righteousness and faith.<sup>59</sup>

He argues that this fact of man's deplorable condition is plain before all, so that there is none one who can deny this universal truth. But since his opponent is so blind to this truth, Luther sprinkles several other passages from Romans to let the truth become more apparent to Erasmus. He quotes from Romans 2:9ff., 3:19, but especially 3:10ff. Concerning the last text, he challenges Erasmus,

Here give me a suitable interpretation if you can! Invent troops, allege that the words are obscure and ambiguous, and defend free choice against these damning sentences if your dare!<sup>60</sup>

For Luther, total depravity must necessarily mean total inability. Again, commenting on Romans 3:10, which speaks the truth that depravity is in every man, he concludes,

So you see that free choice is completely abolished by this passage, 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 sin, and worthless in the sight of God.<sup>61</sup>

Luther, unlike Erasmus and many evangelicals, was not afraid to face the question of God's wrath. In fact, as he shows, the doctrine of God's wrath is crucial to the understanding of man's free will. For he

explains that, since all men are without exception under the wrath of God, all men are totally depraved.

## Man's Will and Justification

Luther sees that Erasmus' view is an attack on the Reformation truth that man is justified by faith alone apart from works. Speaking again from Romans, he shows from Rom 3:20 that by the works of the law no man is justified before God. He rejects Jerome's interpretation that the law here in this text refers merely to the ceremonial laws. Referring to Galatians 3:10, Luther asserts that the law referred to is the valid and authoritative moral law. He points out that one of the functions of this law is to show the sinner his sins and misery, that is, to show us our inability. And since this is the case, the law can only show us our sins and cannot deliver us out of them. It is hence ridiculous for Erasmus to assert that man may by his free will obey the law and thus cooperate with God to obtain salvation. Luther insists that Romans 3:21-25 is clear, the "righteousness of God is apart from the law."

Justification is out of God's free grace. Grace, Luther says, is the opposite of works. Commenting on Paul's doctrine of justification by grace through faith, he says that there is no such thing as merit, but all who are justified are justified freely. Erasmus boasted in the meritorious nature of good works and remarked that there is a reward according to works. But Luther says,

For when he (Paul) asserts that justification is freely bestowed on all who are justified, he leaves no one to work, to earn or prepare himself; and he leaves no work that can be called congruous or condign; and thus by a single stroke of this thunderbolt he shatters both the Pelagians with their total merit, and the Sophists with their little scrap of merit. Free justification allows of no workers, because there is an obvious contradiction between "freely given" and "earned by some sort of work."<sup>62</sup>

Given all that he has said about free will, Luther's concluding word should not come as a surprise to us.

Hence, free choice is nothing but a slave of sin, death, and Satan, not doing and not capable of doing or attempting to do anything but evil.<sup>63</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

The modern churchman is afraid of theological debates. Today, dialogue is a more acceptable term, for it is a more peaceful term. Debates, they say, create tension and are divisive and as such never contribute to the understanding of the issue. They are never positive and beneficial. But the Reformers and Luther think otherwise. Theological debates, whether spoken or written, are inevitable and necessary. The one reason is that heresies exist and the gospel truth needs to be defended. What can one learn from dialogues? They contribute nothing to the development of the truth, condemn no errors, and defend no truths. Instead they breed an air of tolerance for teachings that contradict the Word of God. The only thing perhaps that speakers learn from these dialogues is that they are to forget that they are enemies of the truth. All ideas lead to God.

But, according to Luther, all ideas do not lead to God.

For, in the first place, Erasmus is a humanist. He approaches the issue from reason and philosophy and not Scripture. In places where he quotes Scripture, he twists them to say what they do not mean. As a humanist, his concern is with what man is able to do. God's glory, according to him, is seen in His cooperation with man's ability. This is contradictory to Reformation and biblical teachings, which say

precisely the opposite; that is, in the words of Jonathan Edwards, God is glorified in man's dependence.

Secondly, there are only two religions in the world - a religion of works and a religion of grace. To the first belongs Pelagius, Arminius, and Erasmus. These all have a common feature in their theology. They all believe, together with the Roman Catholics, that man's works are meritorious in nature. While the Catholics and the Pelagians make the good works something explicit and external, the other two subtly add that works are not always something visible, but are often invisible. Faith as the activity of believing, for example, is not always seen. But as it is the first movement in the heart towards God, Erasmus says, it is man's work. Man first acts, then God reacts. Faith, which is something that man can produce from his partially corrupted nature, first says yes to God before God can save him. He fails to see that even faith itself is a gift from God, and is therefore a gift of grace.

But the gospel of grace affirms the opposite. God first acts, then man reacts. This reaction is a positive response, a necessary response, and a response that results in conversion. This is because the grace that comes to the sinner is a grace that actively and powerfully converts and transforms. This is the gospel that Luther says the Bible teaches.

As such, denying the gospel of grace is really denying the gospel. Erasmus' gospel is powerless and Christless. Luther writes,

Choose then which you please. If you grant that the Scriptures speak antithetically, you will be able to say nothing about free choice but what is contrary to Christ, namely that error, death, Satan, and all evils reign in it. If you do not grant that they speak antithetically, then you enervate the Scriptures, so that they lose their point and fail to prove that Christ is necessary. Hence, inasmuch as you maintain free choice, you cancel out Christ and ruin the entire Scripture. Moreover, although verbally you may make a show of confessing Christ, yet in reality and in your heart you deny him. Or if the power of free choice is not wholly in error or damnable, but sees and wills what is virtuous and good and what pertains to salvation, then it is in sound health and has no need of Christ the physician (Mat 9:12), nor has Christ redeemed that part of man; for what need of light and life is there where there is light and life?<sup>64</sup>

If there is one credit that we can give to Erasmus, it is to his credit that he alone hits the core issue in the Reformation. Luther writes,

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 (for trifles they are rather than basic issues), with which almost everyone hitherto has gone hunting for me without success.<sup>65</sup>

Looking at Luther, we note that his defense is scriptural and exegetical. He does this only because he, like the other Reformers after him, sees that the only way to reform the church is to bring the Scriptures back to the church and the people. This of course accounts for the success of the Protestant Reformation. The change was brought about by a rediscovery of the authority of the Word and the teachings of the Word. If the debate on free will is to be settled, it must be settled from the basis of the Word of God, and not on the basis of the writings of man.

Luther's doctrine of man may appear to be harsh and unpleasant to many modern men. It should not surprise us that many today will even opt to go with Erasmus' idea. For, after all, he praises man, and

gives him due recognition for all that he does.

Finally, Luther's teaching on the subject can be found in a concise but yet precise form in his Smalcald Articles.

In the Section on Sin, Luther writes,

What the scholastic theologians taught concerning this article (sin) is therefore nothing but error and stupidity, namely,

1. That after the fall of Adam the natural powers of man have remained whole and uncorrupted, and that man by nature possesses a right understanding and a good will, as the philosophers teach.
2. Again, that man has a free will, either to do good and refrain from evil or refrain from good and do evil.
3. Again, that man is able by his natural powers to observe and keep all the commandments of God.
4. Again, that man is able by his natural powers to love God above all things and his neighbor as himself.
5. Again, if man does what he can, God is certain to grant him his grace.
6. Again, when man goes to the sacraments there is no need of a good intention to do what he ought, but it is enough that he does not have an evil intention to commit sin, for such is the goodness of man's nature and such is the power of the sacraments.
7. That it cannot be proved from the Scriptures that the Holy Spirit and his gifts are necessary for the performance of a good work.<sup>66</sup>

With respect to these teachings, Luther's condemnation of them is something with which all Protestant churches must agree.

Having followed this Reformation debate closely, one might be forced to ask the question, "Is there a need for such a debate again at this present time?"

The answer is yes and no. No, because the debate has been won for us already. Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Dordt, and Westminster have eloquently repudiated free-willism. Erasmus' theology has been decisively condemned and rejected in history. Yet there is in a sense a need to renew the debate; for many are ignorant of history and the issues that the church has fought for with its life and blood. Free-willism still prevails. Just as it was the issue in Luther's day, the issue today is still free-willism. Finneyism and decisionism are still the diet of many people all over the Christian scene. The invitation system has deceived many and sells short the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yes, there is still the need to sound the trumpet from the rooftop and shout it in the market place. Michael Horton pleads in his new book, *Putting Amazing Back Into Grace*, to do just that, that is, to emphasize that grace powerfully saves. A debate again? A resounding Yes!

## Endnotes

1. E. Gordon Rupp, P. Watson, ***Luther And Erasmus: Free Will And Salvation*** (The Westminster Press, 1969), p. 35. All quotations are taken from this book unless otherwise stated. [□](#)
2. p. 37. [□](#)
3. p. 47. [□](#)
4. p. 89. [□](#)
5. p. 90. [□](#)
6. p. 74. [□](#)
7. p. 81. [□](#)
8. p. 90. [□](#)
9. p. 91. [□](#)
10. p. 91. Parentheses and emphasis mine. [□](#)
11. p. 56. [□](#)
12. p. 64. [□](#)
13. p. 48 [□](#)
14. p. 49. [□](#)
15. p. 49. [□](#)
16. p. 52. [□](#)
17. p. 53. [□](#)
18. p. 68 [□](#)
19. Interestingly, this concept of a mutable decree has been picked up recently by evangelical Arminians like Clark Pinnock, who in his new book, ***The Openness of God***, promotes the idea that God's plan indeed changes according to man's decision. [□](#)
20. p. 104. [□](#)
21. p. 104. [□](#)
22. p. 37. [□](#)
23. Luther mentions the perspicuity of Scriptures twice. He especially discusses at length what he means by internal and external clarity in pages 158-161. [□](#)
24. p. 114. [□](#)
25. p. 163. [□](#)
26. p. 128. [□](#)
27. However, in the preceding two parts, where Luther takes Erasmus' Preface and Introduction to task, there are also some excellent attacks against Erasmus' doctrine. There will be opportunity in the next part of the paper to return to some of these earlier points made by Luther. [□](#)
28. p. 170. [□](#)
29. p. 170. [□](#)
30. p. 171. [□](#)
31. p. 173. [□](#)
32. p. 175. [□](#)
33. p. 182. [□](#)
34. p. 183. [□](#)
35. p. 183. Luther argues using the Latin Vulgate. [□](#)
36. p. 184. [□](#)
37. p. 185. [□](#)
38. p. 187. [□](#)
39. In using the term "total depravity" in this paper, we are referring to that doctrine of anthropology set forth by the Synod of Dordt 1618-1619. [□](#)
40. p. 191. [□](#)
41. p. 190. [□](#)
42. p. 190. [□](#)
43. p. 197. [□](#)

- 44. p. 199. [□](#)
- 45. p. 200. [□](#)
- 46. p. 211. [□](#)
- 47. p. 213. [□](#)
- 48. p. 215. [□](#)
- 49. p. 228. [□](#)
- 50. p. 233. [□](#)
- 51. p. 235. [□](#)
- 52. p. 254. [□](#)
- 53. p. 265. [□](#)
- 54. p. 263. [□](#)
- 55. p. 267. [□](#)
- 56. p. 185. [□](#)
- 57. p. 193. [□](#)
- 58. p. 294. [□](#)
- 59. p. 295. [□](#)
- 60. p. 298. [□](#)
- 61. p. 300. [□](#)
- 62. p. 311. [□](#)
- 63. p. 317. [□](#)
- 64. p. 323. [□](#)
- 65. p. 333. [□](#)

66. Luther, Martin, The Smalcald Articles, from ***Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings***, edited by Timothy Lull. (Fortress Press, 1989), p. 516-517. [□](#)