

## MARTIN LUTHER ON FREE-WILL

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Martin Luther (November 10, 1483-February 18, 1546) was a German monk, theologian, and church reformer. Luther's theology challenged the authority of the papacy by holding that the Bible is the sole source of religious authority and that all baptized Christians are a priesthood of believers. According to Luther, salvation was attainable only by faith in Jesus as the Messiah, a faith unmediated by the church. These ideas inspired the Protestant Reformation and changed the course of Western civilization. His translation of the Bible into the vernacular, making it more accessible to ordinary people, had a tremendous political impact on the church and on German culture. It furthered the development of a standard version of the German language, added several principles to the art of translation, and influenced the translation of the English King James Bible. His hymns inspired the development of congregational singing within Christianity. Luther began the Protestant Reformation with the publication of his Ninety-Five Theses on October 31, 1517. In this publication, he attacked the Church's sale of indulgences. He advocated a theology that rested on God's gracious activity in Jesus Christ, rather than in human works. Nearly all Protestants trace their history back to Luther in one way or another.

*The Bondage of the Will* was the shot heard around the world during the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Unfortunately, almost 500 years after the Reformation, most of the beneficiaries of the Reformation have never heard of or read this crucial book. What is worse, many have exchanged the Gospel for the free will heresy.

During a Sunday school class on the history of the Reformation, I once heard a taped lecture delivered by a seminary professor in which he highly recommended this book. This tape was from a Reformed church. After waxing eloquent about Luther's masterpiece and saying quite emphatically that all Christians should read this book, he finally admitted that he himself had not read it. I would say that he is not typical of but is actually more knowledgeable than most Christians today, for most Christians do not even know that the Reformers denied free will. If anyone today denies that man has a free will, he is likely to be ostracized, censored, and, perhaps, labeled a heretic.

Martin Luther began the Reformation with a denial of free will. This was fundamental to the Biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. At the time, Erasmus, a brilliant scholar, wrote a diatribe called *Discussion on the Freedom of the Will*, defending the Roman Catholic doctrine. In response to Erasmus' diatribe, Luther wrote a point-by-point rebuttal titled *The Bondage of the Will*. Luther's work, a masterpiece, is irrefutable. (Perhaps this is the reason why most Christians simply choose to ignore it rather than read it and debate against it.) Only a small selection of Luther's point-by-point rebuttal will be considered here.

J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, translators of Luther's masterpiece from German and Latin to English, say in the Introduction:

Free will was no academic question to Luther; the whole Gospel of the grace of God, he held, was bound up with it, and stood or fell according to the way one decided it . . . It is not the part of a true theologian, Luther holds, to be unconcerned, or to pretend to be unconcerned, when the Gospel is in danger . . . [T]he doctrine of *The Bondage of the Will* in particular was the cornerstone of the Gospel and the foundation of faith (40-41, emphasis added).

In particular, the denial of free will was to Luther the foundation of the Biblical doctrine of grace, and a hearty endorsement of that denial was the first step for anyone who would understand the Gospel and come to faith in God. The man who has not yet practically and experimentally learned the bondage of his will in sin has not yet comprehended any part of the Gospel (44-45). Justification by faith alone is a truth that needs interpretation. The principle of *sola fide* [by faith alone] is not rightly understood till it is seen as anchored in the broader principle of *sola gratia* [by grace alone] . . . for to rely on oneself for faith is not different in principle from relying on oneself for works (59). The Bible teaches that faith itself is and has to be a gift of God, by grace, and not of self (*Ephesians* 2:8). It is safe to deduce that for Luther, any evangelist who advocates free will has not only "not yet comprehended any part of the Gospel," but also that he has not yet preached the Gospel at all; his is a counterfeit gospel.

Those who want to downplay doctrines, that is, truth, might agree with Erasmus. In a letter to Louvain, Erasmus testified of himself, "I for my part would prefer to be deceived in a good many things rather than to fight for the

truth in so great a universal tumult” (35). “Christianity, to Erasmus, was essentially morality . . . Erasmus recognizes no organic dependence of practice upon faith. Peace in the Church was of more value than any doctrine” (43). Does this not sound remarkably like many neo-evangelical churches today — peace at the price of truth?

The opposite was true of Luther: “Christianity was to Luther a dogmatic religion, or it was nothing” (44). Fundamental to upholding a doctrinal Christianity is the upholding of logic. If logic is ignored or denigrated, no doctrine can be known to be true or false. Luther was himself a rigorous logician. In 1508, he lectured in Aristotelian logic at the University of Wittenberg (21). Roland Bainton wrote of Luther, “Reason in the sense of logic he employed to the uttermost limits” (47). At the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther was ordered to recant his teachings on threat of excommunication. Luther thundered, “Unless I am convinced by Scriptures and plain reason [for Luther, this meant logic], my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything. Here I stand, I can do no other!”

In concluding the Introduction, Packer and Johnston make a stinging but accurate remark:

Much modern Protestantism would be neither owned nor even recognized by the pioneer Reformers. *The Bondage of the Will* fairly sets before us what they believed about the salvation of lost mankind. In light of it, we are forced to ask whether Protestant Christendom has not tragically sold its birthright between Luther’s day and our own. Has not Protestantism today become more Erasmian [and Roman Catholic in theology] than Lutheran [and Reformed]? Do we not too often try to minimize and gloss over doctrinal differences for the sake of inter-party peace? Are we innocent of the doctrinal indifferentism with which Luther charged Erasmus? Do we still believe that doctrine matters [in particular, the doctrine of *The Bondage of the Will*]? Or do we, with Erasmus, rate a deceptive appearance of unity as of more importance than truth? (59-60). To accept the principles which Martin Luther vindicates in *The Bondage of the Will* would certainly involve a mental and spiritual revolution for many Christians at the present time . . . We are compelled to ask ourselves: If Jesus Christ is the same yesterday,

today, and forever — is any other position than Luther’s possible? Surely no more important or far-reaching question confronts the church today (60-61).

### *On Free Will*

Erasmus was anything but consistent. He described the power of free will as small and wholly ineffective apart from the grace of God (104). His exact words were: “As in those who lack grace (special grace, I mean), reason is darkened but not destroyed, so it is probable that their power of will is not wholly destroyed, but has become ineffective for upright actions.” The point of contention, at least in this section, concerns salvation. Erasmus was saying that in conversion, a man needs “special grace” from God to be able to make a decision to believe. Man’s will is free; and concerning salvation, his will is free but too weak to be of any effectiveness apart from the grace of God. Erasmus could not see the fallacy in his reasoning.

Luther showed him:

Hence it follows that free will without God’s grace is not free at all, but is the permanent prisoner and bondsman of evil . . . What is ineffective power but (in plain language) no power at all? So to say that free will exists and has power, albeit ineffective power, is, in the Sophists’ phrase, a contradiction in terms. It is like saying free will is something which is not free . . . (104).

Erasmus then contradicted himself in defining free will. He wrote: “Moreover, I conceive of free will in this context as a power of the human will by which a man may apply himself to those things that lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from the same.” Both definitions of free will concern salvation. Erasmus first defined free will as “ineffective power apart from God’s grace.” Then he defined free will as effective power without the need of special grace.

Furthermore, Erasmus not only provided two contradictory definitions of free will, but the free will that he defends in his *Discussion* is a totally different sort, namely, the power to choose anything, not just salvation. Luther therefore wrote: “So the free will you define is one thing, and the free will you defend is another.”

There are many, even in the Reformed circles, who say that man has free

will, but it is not absolutely free. Even Packer, in the Introduction, misunderstood Luther. Packer wrote, “It was man’s total inability to save himself and the sovereignty of Divine grace in his salvation, that Luther was affirming when he denied free will” (48). Luther not only denied free will concerning salvation, but he destroyed all free will by saying that it is “nothing at all!” (142). Luther denied any kind of free will in man.

The translators, commenting on the sovereignty of God, wrote, “The Creator directly energizes and controls all the acts of His creatures. All events are necessitated by His sovereign will.” So far, so good. But then Packer continues, “Human actions are genuinely spontaneous, and authentically express each man’s nature, for God works in all things according to their nature . . .” (51). If they are spontaneous, how can they be necessitated? Spontaneous means: “. . . of one’s free will” . . . “arising without external constraint or stimulus.” Luther had an appropriate answer:

If anyone should tell you that a thing was free, which of its own power could go only one way, that is, the bad way — it could indeed go the other way, that is, the good way, but not by its own power, only with the help of another — could you refrain from laughing, my friend? For on these grounds I shall easily establish that a stone or a log has free will, because it can go up and down; though by its own power it can only go down, and can go up only with the help of another! (142-143).

Luther continued: “To give the name of freedom to something that has no freedom is to apply to it a term that is empty of meaning. Away with such freaks of language!” (148-149).

Free will is obviously a term applicable only to the Divine Majesty; for only He can do, and does (as the Psalmist says) “whatever he wills in Heaven and Earth” (*Psalms* 135:6). If free will is ascribed to men, it is ascribed with no more propriety than divinity itself would be — and no blasphemy could exceed that (104).

### ***On Directives and Conditional Statements***

Erasmus, along with many addle-pated preachers of today, asserted that commands and conditional statements in the Bible imply that man has free will. If not, why would God bother to give commands and promises?

Luther replied: “ ‘If thou art willing’ is a verb in the subjunctive mood, which

asserts nothing. As the logicians say, a conditional statement asserts nothing indicatively” (151). On imperatives, Luther said that by the Law (commands), God brings us to a knowledge of our impotence, if we are his elect; or else, if we are his proud enemies, he taunts and mocks us by his Law [compare *Romans* 3:20, 5:20, *Galatians* 3:19, 24] (153). Even grammarians and schoolboys at street corners know that nothing is signified by verbs in the imperative mood than what ought to be done, and that what is done or can be done should be expressed by verbs in the indicative. How is it that you theologians are twice as stupid as schoolboys, in that as soon as you get hold of a simple imperative verb you infer an indicative meaning . . .? (159). Luther’s biting condemnation applies to all theologians today who commit the same logical blunders.

Promises do not imply free will, either. Luther wrote: “[P]romise does not prove we can do anything; it proves only this, that if anyone does this or that, he shall then have a reward” (181). In other words, promises and rewards only show what one will get if he fulfills the conditions, not what conditions he can fulfill. To infer otherwise, Luther calls “ridiculous logic.”

### ***God, the Ultimate Cause of Evil***

If man’s will is not free but under God’s sovereign control, this would necessarily lead to the conclusion that God is the ultimate cause of evil. Many find this idea very hard to swallow, even many within Reformed circles. Before I read Luther, before I read Calvin, I read Gordon Clark. In *Religion, Reason and Revelation*, Clark attributed the ultimate cause of evil to God. I was totally shocked when I read it, but his arguments were irrefutable. I thought it was a novel idea, at least until I read Luther and Calvin. Then I found that this was the position of the Reformation all along. (This view does not in any way deny secondary causes.)

Commenting on Pharaoh’s heart being hardened by God, Luther wrote: “His [Pharaoh’s] evil will would not have been moved or hardened of itself, but as the omnipotent Agent makes it act (as he does the rest of his creation) by means of his own inescapable movement” (207). God did not merely “permit” Pharaoh’s heart to be hardened of itself. God “makes it act by means of his own inescapable will.” Furthermore, God did not simply look into the future and see what Pharaoh would do. God is the one who actually caused the hardening of his heart. On God’s foreknowledge, Luther wrote: “Had

there been in Pharaoh any power to turn, or freedom of will that might have gone either way, God could not with such certainty have foretold his hardening” (211). In other words, foreknowledge is due to foreordination, not vice versa.

Luther continued:

It would certainly be a hard question, I allow — indeed, an insoluble one — if you sought to establish both the foreknowledge of God and the freedom of man together; for what is harder, yea, more impossible, than maintaining that contraries and contradictories do not clash?

The apostle, therefore, is bridling the ungodly who take offense at his plain speaking, telling them they should realize that the Divine will is fulfilled by what to us is necessity, and that it is definitely established that no freedom or “free-will” is left them, but all things depend on the will of God alone (215).

Two things should be observed from the above quotations. First, to hold contradictories as both true is not the position of the Reformation, but the position of a muddle-headed thinker (or non-thinker). Second, Luther calls the free-willists “ungodly.”

So the foreknowledge and omnipotence of God are diametrically opposed to our “free-will.” Either God makes mistakes in his foreknowledge, and errors in his action (which is impossible), or else we act, and are caused to act, according to his foreknowledge and action. And by the omnipotence of God I mean, not the power by which he omits to do many things that he could do, but the active power by which he mightily works all in all. It is in this sense that Scripture calls him omnipotent. This omnipotence and foreknowledge of God, I repeat, utterly destroy the doctrine of free will (217).

The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart was not done by the passive permission of God. Nor did God merely foresee it as an observer passively observes the future. God caused it to come to pass by his “active power.” This view certainly establishes God as the ultimate cause of evil. But does this view make man a mere puppet on a string? Luther answered: “It is true that Judas acted willingly, and not under compulsion, but his willing was the work of God, brought into being by his omnipotence, like everything else” (213).

Man acts willingly. A puppet not only does not have free will; it does not have any will at all. Man has a will, but his will is in the hands of God, and he directs it wherever he likes (Proverbs 21:1). Therefore, God never causes man to act against his own will, for it is the very will that he controls. Judas acted willingly, not by compulsion.

### *God and the Law*

Plato asked through the mouth of Socrates, “Do the gods do something because it is virtuous? Or is something virtuous because the gods do it?”

Luther answered: “What God wills is not right because he ought, or was bound, so to will; on the contrary, what takes place must be right, because he so wills it” (209). The God of the Bible is not like the pagan gods of Plato and Aristotle. His sovereignty is absolute. “So this is the time and place to adore . . . the true Majesty in its awful, wondrous, incomprehensible judgment, and to say: Thy will be done, as in Heaven, so on Earth” (216). How many Christians recite the Lord’s Prayer without realizing its meaning!

### *The Essential Issue*

These numerous quotations are intended to establish unquestionably and definitively that the denial of free will was the position of the Reformation. The Reformers had always been settled on this crucial issue. This was the “manifesto” of the Reformation. On this issue the Gospel, and Reformation Christianity, stands or falls. The selling of indulgences and other ecclesiastical abuses were not the central issues. They were the occasion for the Reformation, not the cause. Luther at the end of his rebuttal, praises Erasmus thus:

I give you hearty praise and commendation on this further account — that you alone, in contrast with others, have attacked the real thing, that is, the essential issue. You have not wearied me with those extraneous issues about the Papacy, purgatory, indulgences and such like trifles . . . You, and you alone, have seen the hinge on which all turns, and aimed for the vital spot (319).

Erasmus had understood the issues clearly and went straight for the jugular. If Erasmus had succeeded in this debate against Luther, Roman Catholicism would have triumphed, and the Reformation lost. What Erasmus failed to do 500 years ago, he now succeeds magnificently among the supposed posterity

of the Reformation, who are even now returning to Rome. If there is ever going to be a reclaiming of the Gospel, if there is ever going to be a second Reformation, this essential issue — the bondage of the will — must once again be proclaimed and successfully defended. No lesser victory will do.

*The Bondage of the Will*, Martin Luther. Translated by J. I. Packer and O.R. Johnston. Revell Publishers, 1957, 320 pages.