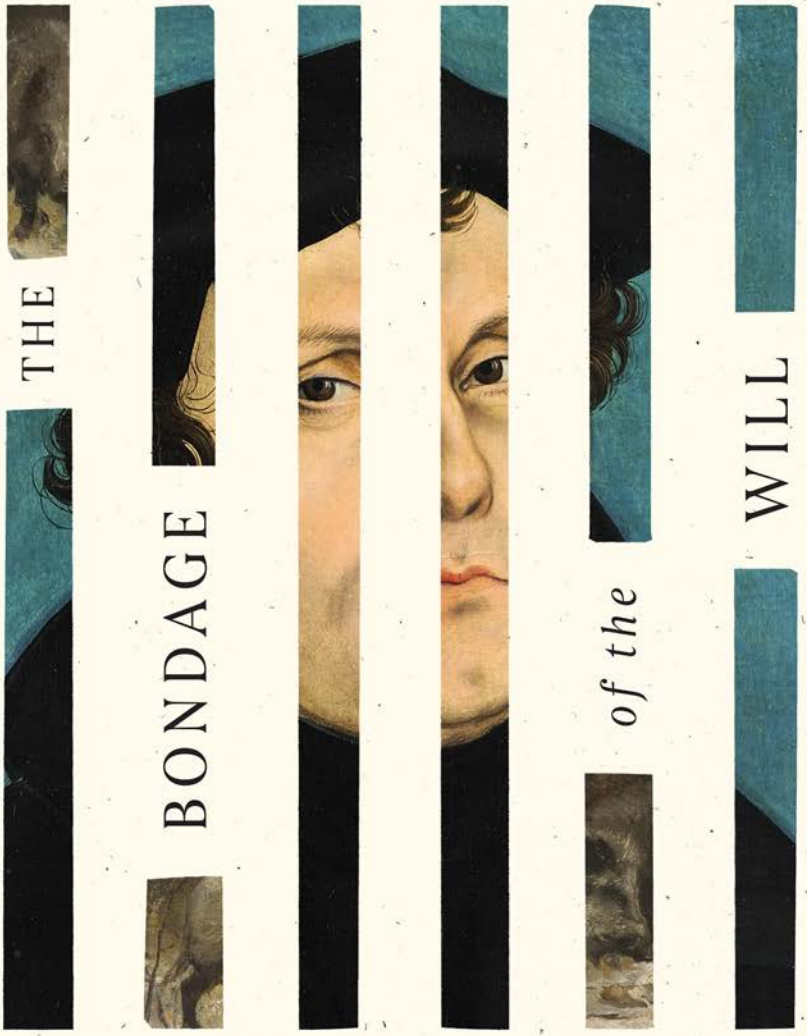
THE BONDAGE *of the* WILL



Martin Luther

500th Anniversary Edition

The Bondage of the Will

THE BONDAGE *of the* WILL

Martin Luther

LIGONIER MINISTRIES

The Bondage of the Will

500th Anniversary Edition

Published by Ligonier Ministries
421 Ligonier Court, Sanford, FL 32771
Ligonier.org

Printed in China
RR Donnelley
0000325
First printing

ISBN 978-1-64289-684-8 (Hardcover)
ISBN 978-1-64289-685-5 (ePub)

Cover design: Ligonier Creative
Lucas Cranach the Elder (1528), *Luther as Professor*. Public Domain.
Interior design and typeset: Ligonier Editorial

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024946593

To the venerable Mr. Erasmus of Rotterdam,
Martin Luther sends grace and peace in Christ.

CONTENTS

AN ANALYSIS OF MARTIN LUTHER'S *The Bondage of the Will*

THE GORDON REVIEW (1967)

R.C. Sproul

It has been almost four and a half centuries since Martin Luther took advantage of the printing press to publish his monumental work *De Servo Arbitrio* (*The Bondage of the Will*).[1] The passage of time has not diminished the crucial relevance of the work that has been acclaimed by many as the manifesto of the Protestant Reformation, and by Luther himself as his own *magnum opus*. Although the book is presented to us as a formal reply to the *Diatribe* of Erasmus of Rotterdam, its contemporary relevance far transcends its historical significance as a serious polemic between the two fertile minds. In this work Luther is concerned with issues that bear heavily upon the *cor ecclesiae* and are inseparably related to the central assertions of Reformed theology, i.e., *Sola Fide*, *Sola Gratia*, and *Soli Deo Gloria*.

Before dealing with an analysis of these issues, it would be profitable to take a second glance at Luther's polemical style and methodology. In his introduction, Luther makes it abundantly clear that he is not interested in mollifying the strength of his assertions by a rhetorical use of flattery. Rather, he attacks the theological competence and the integrity of his adversary in a harsh, if not ruthless, fashion. In biting tones, Luther evaluates Erasmus' work by giving credit to the loftiness of his eloquence, while maintaining

1 "An Analysis of Martin Luther's *The Bondage of the Will*" was originally published in *The Gordon Review*, vol. 10, no. 4, Fall 1967. This book is published on the occasion of the five-hundredth anniversary of *The Bondage of the Will*.

that the content vitiates the beauty of its form. He says candidly: "I thought it outrageous to convey material of so low a quality in the trappings of such rare eloquence; it is like using gold or silver dishes to carry garden rubbish or dung."[2] To translate the latter phrase into contemporary idiom would not be permitted by the canons of good taste. Although Luther's argumentative style may be partially excused by the fact that he was a child of his age and was thus caught up in the controversial spirit of his times, it must still be acknowledged that he was in a polemical class by himself. However, even in this human weakness there is strength in that Luther's position is never obscured by a false conciliatory irenism; in the heat of his controversial tone, his position is tempered into lucidity.

Luther had great disdain for the exposition of doctrine "with respect to persons" and held in the lowest contempt the man who was reluctant to make assertions. He repeatedly gibes Erasmus for making the statement that he finds little satisfaction in assertion, and that he would "readily take up the Sceptic's position wherever the inviolable authority of Holy Scripture and the Church's decisions permit" (66) [7–8]. Luther responds by saying:

> To take no pleasure in assertions is not the mark of a Christian heart; indeed, one must delight in assertions to be a Christian at all. . . . Away now with Sceptics and Academics from the company of us Christians; let us have men who will assert, men twice as inflexible as very Stoics. . . . Nothing is more familiar or characteristic among Christians than assertion. Take away assertions, and you take away Christianity. (67) [8–9]

Surely Luther's passion for assertion cannot be isolated from his passion for the gospel. He is not interested in boldness *per se* but rather in boldness in response to the mandate of the Spirit. Hence Luther gives rise to the formulation that has since become classic: *Spiritus Sanctus non est scepticus*.[3] He concludes his work with the statement, "Now I, in this book of mine, have not 'made comparisons,' BUT HAVE ASSERTED, AND DO ASSERT;

---

2 Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston (Westwood, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1957), 66 [2]. All subsequent references will be by page number in the text. The bracketed numbers refer to the page numbers in this translation by Edward Vaughan.

3 Luther says: "The Holy Spirit is no Sceptic 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" (70) [12].

and I do not want judgment to rest with anyone but urge all men to submit" (320) [280].

The relation between Luther's penchant for assertion and his use of philosophical terminology has been a subject of dispute among theologians. The seminal principles of speculative theology have been laid at Luther's doorstep. Because he employs loaded philosophical categories such as "necessity," "contingency," etc., it has been feared that Luther's treatment of the bondage of the will is too heavily tied to a philosophical concept of determinism. The charge is levied that his doctrine stems more from a logical deduction from a general concept of determinism than from an exegetical basis. Karl Barth makes the statement:

> It is always a mistake to try to establish or understand the assertion of the bondage of the will otherwise than Christologically. It cannot be either proved or disproved by empirical findings or a priori reflections. As a corollary to the confession of the freedom which has been won for us and granted to us in the man Jesus it is a theological statement—a statement of faith. As such, it has nothing whatever to do with the battle between determinism and indeterminism. It is not a decision for determinism; and the fact that this is not clear in Luther's *De servo arbitrio* is the objection that we are forced to raise against this well-known work and also against the ideas of Zwingli and Calvin. . . . It does not consist at all in the fact that man cannot any longer will and decide, i.e. that he is deprived of *arbitrium*, that he has no will at all. If this were the case, he would no longer be a man; he would only be part of a mechanism moved from without.[4]

Thus Barth objects to Luther's lack of clarity regarding the function of the will with respect to determinism. The point, however, which is not obscure in Luther but redounds with the utmost clarity, is that the entire volume from preface to conclusion is not concerned with an isolated or abstract understanding of *arbitrium*. Luther is not debating the question whether man can will or decide *per se*. The issue is whether he can will or decide with respect

4 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2 (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1961), 494. This idea is picked up and employed by Hans Kung in his *Rechtfertigung* (Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Johannes Verlag, 1957), 59.

to matters pertaining to his own salvation. It is perhaps understandable that Barth arrives at such a conclusion about the lack of perspicuity in Luther in light of such statements as, "It is mere logical fancy that there is in man a middle term, *willing* as such; nor can those who assert it prove it" (147) [99]. Statements like this, taken out of context, can easily be misconstrued to infer that Luther is denying not only man's ability to choose Godward, but also *willing* itself. But the context within which Luther is speaking deals with "willing" toward or against Christ. He says: "The truth is rather as Christ puts it: 'He that is not with me is against me.' He does not say: 'He that is not with me is not against me either, but is in an intermediate position'" (147) [99]. Thus Luther is not trying to contend that man does not have a will and is bound by an abstract cosmic determinism but rather that man cannot escape his relationship to God by declaring his neutrality. The issue is not whether man has a will or a faculty of choosing, but rather what is the *status* of that will with respect to its "willing" Christ. If Luther is ambiguous here, he is quite lucid elsewhere when he says:

> I am aware that an ungodly will is a *something*, and not a mere non-entity. . . . I am not speaking of 'natural being,' but of 'gracious' being, as they call it. I know that 'free-will' can do some things by nature; it can eat, drink, beget, rule, etc. (265) [222–23]

Thus Luther's concern is not to debate the metaphysical question of the reality of the human will. Luther nowhere calls man an automaton under the control of a mechanical determinism. His concern is not *ontological* but *theological*, which is precisely what Barth is calling for. When Luther calls "free-will" an "empty term" or "powerless" or "naked" or "nothing," these adjectival qualifiers must always be understood theologically, or more precisely soteriologically. He is addressing himself to Erasmus' definition of free-will, which states:

> Free will is the power of the human will by which a man may apply himself to those things that lead to eternal salvation, or tum away from the same. (137) [87]

Thus it must always be kept in mind that Luther's concern is not to deal with man's ability to will in the abstract but his ability "to apply himself to those things that lead to eternal salvation." Here the Reformer himself limits the discussion to the realm of the theological and repeatedly demonstrates that his is not a barren metaphysical concern. The issue of man's ability or inability to apply himself to salvation is not a peripheral, pedantic one, of interest only to a Gnostic elite group, but it is a religious issue that touches the eye of the Reformation tornado. Luther was defending *Sola Fide* and *Sola Gratia*, not Occam's nominalism. He says to Erasmus:

> You alone, in contrast to all 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, rather than issues—in respect of which almost all to date have sought my blood (though without success); you, and you alone, have seen the hinge on which all turns, and aimed for the vital spot. (319) [279]

The reader of Luther who grasps the full import of these words can no longer speak of an issue of philosophical determinism. To do justice to Luther's intent, one must understand him in the context in which he speaks.

In order to understand the Reformer properly, it is also necessary to see the role Scripture plays in his presentation. Just as the question of the freedom of the will cannot be isolated from the issue of *Sola Fide*, neither can the *Sola Fide* be separated from Luther's doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* in terms of a form-matter schema. It is not by accident that *De Servo Arbitrio* concerns itself almost as much with *Sola Scriptura* as it does with *Sola Fide* and *Sola Gratia*. Paul Althaus has stated:

> There is no precedent for the way in which Luther, as an exegete and as a preacher, thinks in constant conversation with Scripture. Almost every step in his theology receives its basis and direction from Scripture. To be sure he also cites the Church Fathers and can occasionally—as in *The Bondage of the Will*—even call on philosophy or natural reason to provide secondary proof for theological theses. So far as his theology as a whole is

> concerned, however, that remains a secondary and peripheral addition to his method.[5]

On several occasions throughout his book, Luther reminds Erasmus of his pledge to "argue from the canonical scriptures, since Luther submits to the authority of no extra-canonical writer" (109) [55]. Luther refused to allow the issue to be settled by appeals to patristic scholars, popes, martyrs, or miracle-workers. For him, the contest is not to be decided by fire from Mt. Carmel, but from the Word alone. He repeatedly asserts both the sufficiency and perspicuity of the Scriptures in this context. Although Erasmus gives a token agreement to waging the war on these grounds, it becomes evident that he does not share Luther's high view of either sufficiency or perspicuity.

In the review of Erasmus' Preface, Luther challenges his opponent's distinction between two classes of Christian doctrine in terms of the clarity with which they are taught in Scripture. The distinction is between the clear and the recondite. That which falls in the latter category must be elucidated by the church. Over against this incipient dual-source theory, Luther replies, "What can the Church settle that Scriptures did not settle first?" (69) [19]. He goes on to say:

> I certainly grant that many passages in the Scripture are obscure and hard to elucidate, but that is due, not to the exalted nature of their subject, but to our own linguistic and grammatical ignorance; and it does not in any way prevent our knowing all the contents of Scripture. . . . If words are obscure in one place, they are clear in another. To many a great deal remains obscure; but that is due not to any lack of clarity in Scripture, but to their own blindness and dullness . . . (70–71) [13]. Those who deny the perfect clarity and plainness of the Scriptures leave us nothing but darkness. . . . I would say of the *whole* of Scripture that I do not allow *any part* of it to be obscure. (128–29) [76]

Luther counters Erasmus' distinction between the clear and the recondite with his own distinction of the twofold nature of biblical perspicuity. He distinguishes between the external perspicuity, which relates to the

---

5 Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 4. Althaus quotes Luther concerning philosophical concepts and arguments: "I would prefer not to use them at all. . . . If they [pupils] still wish to use them, they must first purify them for theological use. Give them a bath first."

ministry of the Word, and internal perspicuity, which relates to knowledge of the heart.

> If you speak of *internal* perspicuity, the truth is that nobody who has not the Spirit of God sees a jot of what is in the Scriptures. . . . If, on the other hand, you speak of *external* perspicuity, the position is that nothing whatsoever is left obscure or ambiguous, but all that is in the Scripture is through the Word brought forth into the clearest light and proclaimed to the whole world. (73–74) [15–16]

The distinction Luther makes is not a pedantic one, but one that is crucial to Luther and to the Reformation stance on *Sola Scriptura*. Though Luther distinguishes between the internal and external, he never divorces the two. The internal is inseparably related to the external and does not involve a mystical subjective experience that renders the external superfluous. On this distinction rests the strength of Luther's Reformed hermeneutic. Only if the two become isolated from each other does the threat of a docetic view of Scripture emerge. But Luther guards that border precisely *by* the distinction. His concern for the external drives him to a serious corresponding concern for the *words* of Scripture—their context, their intended meaning, etc. There is no flight to a pneumatic or allegorical exegetical method but rather a ringing plea against it. Luther strives to remain always within the context of the "plain" or "simple" meaning of the text. He says:

> No 'implication' or 'figure' may be allowed to exist in any passage of Scripture unless such be required by some obvious feature of the words. . . . We should stick to just the simple, natural meaning of the words, as yielded by the rules of grammar and the habits of speech that God has created among men; for if anyone may devise 'implications' and 'figures' in Scripture at his own pleasure,[6] what will all Scripture be but a reed shaken with the wind, and a sort of chameleon? (192) [147]

---

6 Compare Luther's statement with that found in the Fourth Session of the Council of Trent: "To check unbridled spirits, no one, relying on his own judgment . . . in matters of faith and morals, *distorting* [italics mine] the Holy Scriptures in accordance with his own conceptions, presume[s] to interpret them contrary to the sense which Holy Mother Church, to whom it belongs to judge of their true sense and interpretation." H.J. Schroeder, *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (St. Louis: Herder, 1960), 19 [Denzinger: 1507].

Here Luther takes his stand against Rome's appeal to the methods of biblical interpretation made almost sacrosanct by Origen and Jerome. He says, "Among all the ecclesiastical writers there are scarcely any who have handled the words of God in a more absurd and clumsy fashion than Origen and Jerome"[7] (195) [151]. Thus Luther makes it clear that it is his intention to settle the issue at hand on an exegetical basis whereby the Scripture is to be its own interpreter.

The appeals to reason that Luther makes in several passages (as Althaus points out) have tended to obscure for some the centrality of the *Sola Scriptura* that Luther demands and claims for himself. The philosophical distinctions and terminology appear to have crept in unwarranted and even unnoticed by Luther. This assertion, however, must be treated with the "philosophy of the second glance." It is incumbent upon the reader of Luther that he keep always before him the peculiar type of literature that *De Servo Arbitrio* represents. In this work Luther does employ philosophical terminology, but only in a "secondary and peripheral sense." This use of philosophy is made necessary by the nature of the book. Luther is writing an *Apologia* in the classical sense. His is a "reply" to Erasmus and thus bears a decidedly *ad hominem* character. Luther blames Erasmus for carrying the argument beyond the scope of Scripture and continually decries this transgression of the original boundaries set by both. But though Luther is reluctant to be drawn from his castle of exegesis, he nevertheless accepts the challenge of Erasmus and at times leaves the haven of his own castle to duel with him on his own grounds. His intent is to demonstrate that reason is not Erasmus' ally but his enemy and that what is clearly proclaimed by Scripture is corroborated by reason. Thus Luther seeks to turn Erasmus' arguments on himself. This particular apologetic method was not unique with Luther but was common to the Reformers and their followers.[8]

---

7 Luther often attacks the allegorical and pneumatic exegesis as involving what he calls "exegetical license," which is "to revert to the philosophical position of Anaxagoras: 'Anything may come out of anything'" (194f.) [150].

8 Luther here adopts a method that corresponds somewhat to John Calvin's use of the *indicia*, which demonstrate that though the truths of revelation are not derived from reason, nevertheless they are not inconsistent with it. Revelation, for the Reformers, may have called for a crucifixion of the will or concupiscence, but not of the intellect. An interesting comparison of style and methodology could be made between Luther in this sixteenth-century work and Jonathan Edwards in his classical work on the same subject in the eighteenth century. Edwards' volume, *The Freedom of the Will*, also carries an *ad hominem* stamp, and the utilization of philosophical categories is even more evident. If Luther is charged with speculative theology, Edwards is even more so. But Edwards' method can be elucidated by a perusal of his sermon material.

To say that Luther established his case upon the basis of natural theology is to misunderstand him radically. His *ad hominem* approach is clearly designed to demonstrate that Erasmus' humanistic, abstract concept of freedom is repugnant not only to Scripture but to reason as well.

On more than one occasion, Luther castigates the efficiency of what he calls "Natural Reason." In his understanding of natural reason, it is clear that he stands in the line of Augustine and Anselm. He distinguishes natural reason as reason that is uninformed by revelation. The noetic problem with natural reason is not an ontological lack, or deficiency, but a religious one. The "blindness" of natural man is not due to a lack of faculty, but rather to a lack of grace. He says, "Man's failure to grasp God's words does not spring from weakness of understanding, but rather the wickedness of Satan who reigns over us" (132) [81]. He goes on to say, "Human nature is blind, so that it does not know its strength—or rather, sickness; moreover, being proud, it thinks it knows and can do everything" (153) [105]. Thus, for Luther, the primacy and supremacy of revelation is motivated not by a flight into irrationalism or mysticism but rather by an effort to indicate the prior triumph of God's authoritative Word over the arrogance of the mind of flesh.

The doctrine of the bondage of the will is important, then, not because it is derived from speculative philosophy but because of its integral connection with God's revealed judgment upon man's sin. Luther refuses to yield to Erasmus' judgment that "Free will is one of the 'useless doctrines that we can do without'" (74) [16]. Rather, he responds to this by saying:

> It is in the highest degree wholesome and necessary, for a Christian to know whether or not his will has anything to do in matters pertaining to salvation . . . , for self-knowledge and the knowledge of the glory of God, are bound up with it. (78) [20]

Thus stating the central importance of the doctrine to the knowledge

---

He has a sermonic technique wherein he often first gives the case for his assertions on a biblical basis alone and *then* proceeds to the rational apology. Edwards often prefaced the latter (see his essay on original sin) by exhorting his congregation to be satisfied with the Word alone and chiding them for their recalcitrance that made corroborative evidence necessary. Edwards, as did Luther, saw the *indicia* in terms of condescension to human weakness and unbelief.

of God and self in things pertaining to salvation, Luther counters Erasmus' assertion of the will's ability to apply itself to salvation with his own private bombshell:

> God foreknows nothing contingently, but he foresees, purposes, and does all things according to his own immutable, eternal, and infallible will. . . . It follows, by resistless logic, that all we do, however it may appear to us to be done mutably and contingently, is in reality done *necessarily* and immutably in respect of God's will. (80) [22]

Here the eyebrow of the critic is raised against Luther as he introduces philosophical terminology with such terms as "resistless logic," "contingency," etc. But again fairness demands an examination of Luther's concern. Here the issue is not determinism or indeterminism but rather whether contingency can be ultimately squared with the sovereignty and freedom of God, "in respect of God's will." These last five words condition the content of Luther's statement and place it solidly in the context of religious-theological concern. He defines "contingency" as meaning "by chance." At the same time, he shrinks from the emotionally charged word "necessity" and says that he "wishes a better term were available . . . [;] it suggests some kind of compulsion. The will, whether it be God's or man's, does what it does, good or bad, as it *wants* or *pleases*" (81) [24]. Thus Luther indicates that he is not denying the ability of the will to do what it pleases but only that in doing what it pleases it cannot ultimately frustrate the purpose of God. He is not contending that God accomplishes his purpose by compulsion or coercion of human agency, but rather through and by means of the very desires of men's hearts.[9] With respect to God's hardening of Pharaoh, he says, "When God hardens, he does not create fresh evil within . . . but rather makes good use of the evil already there" (207) [164]. Elsewhere he says, "Yet God does not work in us without us" (268) [225]. To be sure, Luther asserts concurrence, but not determinism in the philosophical or fatalistic sense.

Luther rejects the idea that the "Sophist formula," which maintains that "all things take place necessarily, but by necessity of consequence, and not by

9 Compare this with Calvin's treatment of the same subject in book 1, chaps. 16, 17, and 18 of the *Institutes*.

necessity of the thing consequent," lessens the implications of his own assertion. He grants that there is a difference between the necessity of the being of God and man[10] but points out that the formula does not touch on the issue at hand and is introduced by Erasmus as a *non sequitur*. Luther, however, allowing the formula to stand, sees it as merely serving to strengthen his thesis that all things take place by necessity. He says, "It remains true that each thing does happen necessarily," with an appeal to Isaiah's words, "My counsel shall stand and my will shall be done" (82–83) [25].

Erasmus recoils sharply from the Lutheran thesis that God necessitates all things. He does not deny the truth of it in a certain sense but sees in it a dangerous teaching that is subject to serious abuse. He says, "Some things are of such a kind that even if they were true . . . it would be imprudent to expose them to everyone's hearing" (86) [29]. He adds to this the warning that such a teaching would lead to world upheaval, would open a "flood-gate" of iniquity, and would cause men to refrain from amending their lives. Luther retaliates by accusing Erasmus of sitting in judgment upon the propriety of God's Word and says that fear of abuse indeed must be considered but not to be held so important so as to "warrant the *removal* of the Word of God in order to restrain the *abuse* of it. . . . The Gospel doesn't *add* wickedness to the world, but only brings it to light" (94) [37]. Luther will not let fear of social disturbance or the desire to maintain a carnal peace stop the proclamation of what he considers to be the whole counsel of God. He rebukes Erasmus for implying that the Word of God is useless and to be suppressed. As to his last objection, he replies:

> Who will try to reform his life?—Nobody! Nobody can! God has no time for practitioners of self-reformation, for they are hypocrites. Who will believe? Nobody! Nobody can! But the elect will. . . . If a flood-gate of iniquity is opened . . . so be it. (98f.) [43]

Again, the preceding statement cannot be isolated from the centrality of *Sola Fide* and *Sola Gratia* in Luther's thought. He explains the harshness of his tone by adding: "As long as man is persuaded that he can make even the

10 What the formula admits to is this: "Everything takes place by necessity of consequence, but the things that take place are not God Himself" (82) [25].

smallest contribution to his salvation, he remains self-confident and does not utterly despair of himself" (100) [44]. Here Luther reveals that his concern is not simply to refute Erasmus but to extinguish synergism wherever it may be found. The issue once again is not determinism, but *Sola Fide*. Luther has his eyes fixed on the central issue of the day, the issue of merit and grace.

Luther goes to great lengths to assert that his view of necessity does not incorporate within it a corresponding view of compulsion. He maintains that natural man, apart from the Spirit, does not do evil against his will by coercion but he does it "spontaneously" and "voluntarily." However, this volition or willingness is something that he cannot, in his own strength, restrain, alter, or eliminate. Luther terms this condition a "necessity of immutability."

Therein is the bondage of the will, that it is a prisoner of its own wicked disposition. He says, "Free will without God's grace is not free at all, but is the permanent prisoner and bondslave of evil, since it cannot turn itself to good" (104) [48]. Thus the inability of which Luther writes is not a philosophical one, but a moral one. Conversely, when God works in man to effect a change in his will under the influence of the Spirit, his will is still not under compulsion but acts "of its own desire and spontaneous inclination." Now the Christian experiences what Luther calls "Royal Freedom," in that now we "are servants to a different master and willingly do what He wills. . . . As Paul says, 'We are led captive by him at his will'" (103) [47].

The formula "necessity of immutability" is employed in several passages to distinguish Luther's view from that which he calls "necessity of compulsion." Later, in dealing with the situation of Judas, he defines these concepts more exactly. Necessity of compulsion becomes "necessity of force" (with reference to action), and necessity of immutability becomes "necessity of infallibility" (with respect to time). Luther is pleading only for the latter. He maintains that from the perspective of divine foreknowledge and purpose, it is "necessary" (infallible and immutable with respect to time) that Judas will be a traitor, but he is not *compelled* to be[11] (220) [177]. Luther charges Erasmus with having a view of human freedom that denies the reality of God's sovereign freedom and foreknowledge. He says:

---

11 Compare Luther's concept of "necessity without compulsion" to that of Anselm in his *Cur Deus Homo*, 18.

> The term 'free will' is too grandiose to apply to man. . . . This false idea of free will (That the will can apply itself . . .) is a real threat to salvation, and a delusion fraught with the most perilous consequences. (104–5) [49]

After first defining his own concept of free will, Erasmus moves on to enumerate three views of freedom that he evaluates in terms of their respective acceptability. The first is the view that denies that man can will good without special grace, which Erasmus regards as "severe, but probable enough" (144) [96]. The second, which he regards as "more severe," is the view that free will avails for nothing but sinning and that grace alone works good in us. The third view states that *free will* is an empty term and that all things come to pass of mere necessity; this he regards as "most severe." Erasmus indicates that his attack is directed only against the latter two views. To this Luther responds, "I meant to say nothing and wished nothing to be understood but what is stated in the first view" (148) [100]. He maintains that if Erasmus accepts the first view, then his own definition is destroyed and the argument is over. He says that if the human will is so depraved that it has lost its freedom and is forced to serve sin and cannot, unaided, recall itself to a better state, then "what endeavor or application does this leave?" (149) [100]. Luther challenges Erasmus to "name the child" and indicate forthrightly the source of the power that the will has to "apply itself to things that lead to eternal salvation."

In Luther's eyes, the debate should be over and victory conceded; nevertheless, it rages on. At last the argument becomes centered on exegetical grounds and Luther turns his attention to the biblical evidence brought forth by Erasmus that may conceivably militate against Luther's assertion of the *servum* of the will. Erasmus appeals to several Old Testament passages (and one from the Apocrypha) that contain commandments and exhortations in a conditional way. He maintains that such statements as "If thou art willing . . ." (Ecclus. 15) and "Choose what is good . . ." (Deut. 30:1) and the command of God to Cain to "rule and control" his desires (Gen. 4:7) carry with them the clear implication of moral ability. In Erasmus' eyes, divine commands and obligations would be superfluous if man were unable to obey them. It is this inference that draws a biting rebuttal from Luther. Luther says that such conditional statements as "If thou art willing" (in the subjunctive) assert nothing indicatively. He continues:

> The words of the Law are spoken not to assert the power of the will, but to eliminate the blindness of reason. . . .[12] By the Law is knowledge of sin—not abolition or avoidance. . . . The imperatives express what *ought* to be done; the indicatives what *can* be done. If Erasmus' inference is valid it would demand *plenary ability* as the commands call not merely for endeavoring or applying—but for the *keeping* of the Law. (158f.) [110]

Neither is Erasmus' contention valid that apart from human ability the giving of the law would be superfluous. Luther charges him with failing to see the relationship that the law has to gospel. He says:

> The function of the Law[13] is to lay open to man his own wretchedness, so that, by thus breaking him down, and confounding him in his self-knowledge, it may make him ready for grace and send him to Christ to be saved. Therefore the Law is nothing to laugh at, but is most emphatically serious and necessary. (162) [114]

Luther treats the biblical injunctions to "turning" in a similar fashion. He sees a twofold use of the word "turn" in the Bible, which he distinguishes as legal and evangelical:

> In its legal usage, it is an utterance of exaction and command, requiring not endeavor, but a change in the whole life. In its evangelical sense, it is an utterance of divine consolation and promise, by which nothing is required of us, but the glory of God offered to us. (165–66) [117–18]

Likewise Luther says that the New Testament exhortations are "intended to stir up those who have obtained mercy . . . to bring forth fruits of the Spirit" (180) [133].

The content of Romans 9 occupies a central position in the debate.

---

12 Luther interprets Moses' words in Deuteronomy 30, "That the 'Law is not *above* you,'" as referring not to ability but locality, i.e., the nearness of the Law (being present to view) eliminates ignorance as an excuse.

13 See G.C. Berkouwer's discussion on the debate between Luther and Calvin on the *Usus elenchticus* and the *tertius usus* of the law in his chapter *De Zonde en De Wet* in volume 1 of *De Zonde: Oorsprong en Kennis Der Zonde* (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok, 1958).

Erasmus contends that Paul is here dealing with matters not pertaining to salvation but rather to temporal servitude. Such statements as "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy . . ." or "Jacob have I loved . . . , Esau have I hated . . ." or "The elder shall serve the younger . . ." have no reference to ultimate salvation. Luther replies that such exegesis does radical violence to the context of Paul's words. He maintains that here Paul is dealing with the vital issue of merit and grace in matters of justification. The context shows that the whole covenant promise is involved, inclusive of salvation. Paul, according to Luther, is employing several methods (such as the simile of the potter and clay) to emphasize that our salvation belongs ultimately not to him that endeavors, but "to Him that calleth." The "reward" of salvation is a reward not of merit, but of consequence.

Paul's statements in Romans 9 eliminate, according to Luther, any notion of human merit. The Apostle's words cannot be isolated from those preceding it. The force of these passages cannot be modified by subtle distinctions between *meritum de congruo* and *meritum de condigno*. Luther rejects the distinction and praises the candor of the Pelagians for calling a spade a spade when speaking of merit. He attacks Rome[14] for walking where the Pelagians feared to tread. On the concept of merit of congruity he writes:

> What can excuse their not calling it condign merit, when they assign to it all that pertains to condign merit? Saying that he who endeavors finds grace in the sight of God, whereas he who does not endeavor does not find it? Is this not already a description of condign merit? Do they not make God a respector of works, merits, and persons, when they say that one man is without grace by his own fault, because he did not endeavor, whereas another, because he endeavors, obtains grace which he would not have obtained had he not endeavored? If this is not condign merit, I should like to be told what condign merit may be said to be. . . . Paul pounds both errors into a single pulp with one word when he says that all are justified freely, without the law, and without the works of the law. The assertion that justification is free to all that are justified leaves none to work, merit or prepare themselves, and leaves no work that can be said to carry either congruent or condign merit.

14 The reader must be cautioned against equating the assertions of Erasmus with the official position of the Roman Catholic Church.

> By one cast of this thunderbolt, Paul shatters both the Pelagians with their total merit and the Sophists with their tiny merit. (293–94) [251–52]

That our salvation rests solely on the free grace of God is what human reason cannot bear. It is in this light that Paul speaks of the potter and the clay. The "why does he yet find fault" is an expression of man's hostility to the sovereignty of God. Luther says:

> Man demands that God should act according to man's idea of right. . . . If reason be the canon and we demand equity then it is unjust to reward the undeserving and our only conclusion must be that God *ought* to justify on the grounds of preceding merit. (233) [190]

Although Luther demonstrates how the concept of the bondage of the will may be drawn from its relationship to God's foreknowledge, election, and *Sola Fide*, he is not content to rest his case there. In defense of his position, he does not rest upon derivative evidence but cites the numerous indicative passages of the Bible that exhibit in a declarative manner the fact of man's bondage to sin.

He appeals to the biblical understanding of man as "flesh" to support his thesis. He argues that the Isaian, Johannine, and Pauline uses of "flesh" point to man's condition of inability, apart from regeneration, to move in the direction of salvation. It is the Spirit of God who quickens man, not the endeavors of the flesh, which is in chains. Luther elicits the support of John, who records the words of Christ, "Without me you can do nothing." This "nothing" is understood as referring to ability in matters of salvation and cannot be perverted to mean "a little something" (259) [217]. The "nothing"[15] speaks of effects or achievements of all endeavors of natural man. It does not deny that men act, but only that their actions avail them or effect for them nothing. It is in the same light that Luther understands the passage, "A man can receive nothing except it be given him from above" (John 3:27).

Luther goes on to assert that the comprehensive teaching of the Bible is clear regarding man's fallen condition. The Bible declares the universal guilt of

15 A parallel may be found here between Luther's concept of "nothing" and the classical description of sin as involving a *privatio actuosa*.

mankind. Paul, in Romans 1, indicates that the situation of man is so deplorable as to have him pronounced ungodly, unrighteous, and exposed to the wrath of God. In the third chapter of the same epistle, the judgment is even stronger as Paul proclaims not only universal guilt, but universal *dominion* of sin. All, he says, are under sin, and "there is none righteous . . . , none that understands . . . , none that seeks God" (Rom. 3:10–11). Luther comments, "How then are endeavors after good made by those who are one and all ignorant of God, and neither regard nor seek God?" (280) [238]. The death blow to free will is dealt by Paul in Romans 8. The Apostle writes: "They that are in the flesh cannot please God. . . . The carnal mind is death. . . . The carnal mind is at enmity against God. . . . It is not subject to the law, neither indeed *can* be."

For Luther, salvation is a gift of God, dependent not upon the endeavoring or application of a will enslaved by sin, but upon the merciful grace of God. The words of Jesus are decisive: "No man can come to me except My Father which hath sent me draw him" (John 6:44). Luther comments:

> But the ungodly does not 'come'; even when he hears the word, unless the Father draws and teaches him inwardly; which He does[16] by shedding abroad His Spirit. . . . Christ is then displayed by the enlightening of the Spirit, and by it [he] is rapt to Christ with the sweetest rapture, by being passive while God speaks, teaches, and draws, rather than seeking or running himself. (311) [270]

In this author's opinion, Martin Luther succeeds in this work not only in refuting and annihilating the *Diatribe* of Erasmus, but, to borrow a phrase from one of my mentors, "He dusts off the spot where his opponent stood." But Luther's purpose was far more serious than simply to defeat Erasmus in the combat of lively debate. He determined to assert and proclaim not a neutral anthropology, but the sweetness and excellency that is found in the doxological confession: *Sola Fide! Sola Gratia! Soli Deo Gloria!*

---

16 Luther makes no attempt to answer the question why God visits his redemptive grace on some and not all, but like Calvin is content to leave it in the realm of mystery. "It is not for us to inquire into these mysteries, but to adore them. If flesh and blood take offence and grumble . . . , well, let them grumble" (207) [165].

THE BONDAGE *of the* WILL

INTRODUCTION

Reasons for the Work

Martin Luther opens *The Bondage of the Will* with an introduction that explains his decision to respond to Erasmus after such a long time. He goes through several reasons that have been suggested for the delay, noting that his anger at Erasmus' poor arguments kept him back from writing. Luther explains that he is finally writing because he is a shepherd and has a responsibility to those who have been hurt by Erasmus' case. In this introduction, Luther's well-known sarcastic wit is on full display as the Reformer denigrates Erasmus' argument and asks the humanist scholar to bear with his rudeness as he has borne with Erasmus' ignorance.

In replying so tardily to your Diatribe on Freewill, my venerable Erasmus, I have done violence both to the general expectation and to my own custom. Till this instance, I have seemed willing not only to lay hold on such opportunities of writing when they occurred to me, but even to go in search of them without provocation. Some, perhaps, will be ready to wonder at this new and unusual patience, as it may be, or fear of Luther's, who has not been roused from his silence even by so many speeches and letters that have been bandied to and fro among his adversaries, congratulating Erasmus upon his victory, and chanting an *Io Paean*:[1] "So, then, this Maccabaeus[2] and most inflexible Assertor has at length found an antagonist worthy of him, whom he does not dare to open his mouth against!"

I am so far from blaming these men, however, that I am quite ready to yield a palm to you myself, such as I never yet did to any man, admitting not only that you very far excel me in eloquence and genius (a palm that we all deservedly yield to you—how much more such a man as I: a barbarian who

1 A cry or hymn of praise to Apollo.

2 Judas Maccabaeus, the Jewish leader who led the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucid Empire.

has always dwelt amid barbarism), but that you have checked both my spirit and my inclination to answer you, and have made me languid before the battle. This you have done twice over: first, by your art in pleading this cause with such a wonderful command of temper, from first to last, that you have made it impossible for me to be angry with you; and second, by contriving, through fortune, accident, or fate, to say nothing on this great subject that has not been said before. In fact, you say so much less for Freewill, and yet ascribe so much more to it, than the Sophists[3] have done before you (of which I will speak more at large hereafter) that it seemed quite superfluous to answer those arguments of yours that I have so often confuted myself, and that have been trodden underfoot, and crushed to atoms, by Philip Melanchthon's invincible *Common Places*.[4]

In my judgment, that work of his deserves to be not only immortalized, but even canonized. So mean and worthless did yours appear, when compared with it, that I exceedingly pitied you, who were polluting your most elegant and ingenious diction with such filth of argument, and was quite angry with your most unworthy matter for being conveyed in so richly ornamented a style of eloquence. It is just as if the sweepings of the house or of the stable were borne about on men's shoulders in vases of gold and silver! You seem to have been sensible of this yourself, from the difficulty with which you were persuaded to undertake the office of writing on this occasion, your conscience, no doubt, admonishing you that with whatever powers of eloquence you might attempt the subject, it would be impossible to so gloss it over that I would not discover the excrementitious nature of your matter through all the tricksy ornaments of phrase with which you might cover it—that *I* would not discover it, I say, who, though rude in speech, am, by the grace of God, not rude in knowledge. For I do not hesitate, with Paul, to thus claim the gift of knowledge for myself, and with equal confidence to withhold it from you, while I claim eloquence and genius for you, and willingly, as I ought to do, withhold them from myself.

So I have been led to reason thus with myself. If there are those who have neither drunk deeper into our writings nor yet more firmly maintain them

---

3 The schoolmen who arose around the middle of the twelfth century, associated here by name to the Sophists of ancient Greece, teachers of rhetoric and philosophy, often criticized for their deceptive arguments.

4 The first Lutheran systematic theology, published in 1521, by Philip Melanchthon, who worked closely with Luther during the Reformation period.

(fortified as they are by such an accumulation of Scripture proofs) than to be shaken by those trifling or good-for-nothing arguments of Erasmus (though dressed out, I admit, in the most engaging apparel), such persons are not worth being cured by an answer from me; for nothing could be said or written that would be sufficient for such men, even if many thousands of books were repeated a thousand times over. You might just as well plow the seashore and cast your seed into the sand, or fill a cask that is full of holes with water. We have ministered abundantly to those who have drunk of the Spirit as their Teacher through the instrumentality of our books, and they perfectly despise your performances; and as for those who read without the Spirit, it is no wonder if they are driven like the seed with every wind. To such persons God would not say enough, if he were to convert all his creatures into tongues. So I was almost determined to leave these persons, stumbled as they were by your publication, with the crowd that glories in you and decrees you a triumph.

You see, then, that it is neither the multitude of my engagements, nor the difficulty of the undertaking, nor the vastness of your eloquence, nor any fear of you, but mere disgust, indignation, and contempt (or, to say the truth, my deliberate judgment respecting your Diatribe) that has restrained the impulse of my mind to answer you—not to mention what has also its place here, that ever like yourself you with the greatest pertinacity take care to be always evasive and ambiguous. More cautious than Ulysses,[5] you flatter yourself that you contrive to sail between Scylla and Charybdis,[6] while you would be understood to have asserted nothing, yet again assume the air of an assertor. With men of this sort, how is it possible to *confer* and to *compare*, unless one possesses the art of catching Proteus?[7] Hereafter I will show you with Christ's help what I can do in this way, and what you have gained by putting me to it.

Still, it is not without reason that I answer you now. The faithful brethren in Christ impel me by suggesting the general expectation that is entertained of a reply from my pen, inasmuch as the authority of Erasmus is not to be

---

5 The Roman name for Odysseus, the hero of Homer's *Odyssey*.

6 Mythological sea monsters, between which Odysseus needed to sail; often used metaphorically to describe how avoiding one risk means falling into another.

7 A Greek sea god known for his ability to change shape and elude people; Plato used the myth metaphorically to describe Socrates' need to grab onto a dialogue partner to get an answer to an important question and also to describe arguments that, because of their weakness, change form.

despised, and the true Christian doctrine is brought into jeopardy in the hearts of many. At length too it has occurred to me that there has been a great want of piety in my silence, and that I have been beguiled by the "wisdom" or "wickedness" of my flesh into a forgetfulness of my office, which makes me debtor to the wise and to the unwise, especially when I am called to discharge it by the entreaties of so many of the brethren. For although our business is not content with an external teacher, but, besides him who plants and waters without, desires the Spirit of God also (that he may give the increase, and being himself life, he may teach the doctrine of life within the soul—a thought that imposed on me), still, whereas this Spirit is free, and breathes not where we would, but where he himself wills, I ought to have observed that rule of Paul's, "Be instant in season, out of season"; for we know not at what hour the Lord will come. What if some have not yet experienced the teaching of the Spirit through my writings, and have been dashed to the ground by your Diatribe! It may be that their hour has not yet come.

And who knows but that God may deign to visit even you, my excellent Erasmus, by so wretched and frail a little vessel of his as myself? Who knows but that I may come to you in a happy hour (I wish it from my heart of the Father of Mercies through Christ our Lord) by means of this treatise, and may gain a most dear brother? For although you both think ill and write ill on the subject of Freewill, I owe you vast obligations for having greatly confirmed me in my sentiments by giving me to see the cause of Freewill pleaded by such and so great a genius with all his might, and yet after all so little is effected that it stands worse than it did before. This is an evident proof that Freewill is a downright lie, since, like the woman in the gospel, the more it is healed by the doctors, the worse it fares. I will give unbounded thanks to you if you are made to know the truth through *me*, even as *I* have become more fixed in it through *you*. Nevertheless, each of these results is the gift of the Spirit, not the achievement of our own good offices. We must therefore pray to God to open my mouth and your heart and the hearts of all men, and to be present himself as a Teacher in the midst of us, speaking and hearing severally within our souls.

Once more, let me beg of you, my Erasmus, to bear with my rudeness of speech, even as I bear with your ignorance on these subjects. God does not give all his gifts to one man, nor have we all power to do all things—or, as

Paul says, "There are distributions of gifts, but the same Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:11). It remains, therefore, that the gifts labor mutually for each other, and that one man bears the burden of another's penury by the gift that he has himself received; thus will we fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2).

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What reasons does Luther provide for his delayed response to Erasmus?
2. How does Luther justify his decision to finally respond despite his initial reluctance?
3. How does Luther characterize Erasmus? What tone does Luther take with his opponent?
4. Despite Luther's tone with Erasmus, where does he display a degree of humility?
5. Why do you think the debate over the freedom of the will is theologically important?

PART I

Erasmus' Preface Reviewed

In part 1 of *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther responds to Erasmus' preface and argues against the great humanist scholar on several fronts. Luther focuses much of his critique here on Erasmus' stated displeasure with dogmatic assertions. The Reformer stresses that assertions are of the essence of Christianity because God's Word is clear on doctrine and we must be unafraid to declare what Scripture declares. Luther concedes that making assertions can cause tumult in the world but that the Word comes to change the world, so upheaval is inevitable when we faithfully proclaim it as God has intended.

Here Luther also stresses that our lacking free will does not mean that we are forced to do what we do not want to do, but means only that we ultimately will what God has immutably decreed. Understanding this truth, Luther says, comforts us because knowing that God's immutable decree governs all things helps us understand that the Lord's promises must come to pass and so we can trust God. A right understanding of the will, Luther suggests, enables the elect to truly know, love, and worship God, and we should not fear teaching on the bondage of the will according to Scripture because everything revealed in God's Word promotes spiritual health. Luther also points out a key weakness in Erasmus' failure to discuss the nature of God's knowledge, showing that Erasmus actually undermines his own argument in several key ways.

SECTION 1

Luther defends assertions, adherence to the truths of the faith as revealed by Scripture.

I would begin with passing rapidly through some chapters of your Preface by which you sink our cause and set off your own. And first, having already in other publications found fault with me for being so positive and inflexible in assertion, you in this declare yourself to be so little pleased with assertions that you would be ready to go over and side with the Skeptics[1] on any subject in

1 Followers of ancient philosophical skepticism, which advocated for the suspension of judgment due to the uncertainty of knowledge; skepticism had a revival during the Renaissance period.

which the inviolable authority of the divine Scriptures and the decrees of the church (to which you on all occasions willingly submit your own judgment, whether you understand what she prescribes or not) would allow you to do so. This is the temper you like.

I give you credit, as I ought, for saying this with a benevolent mind that loves peace; but if another man were to say so, I would perhaps inveigh against him, as my manner is. I ought not, however, to permit even you, though writing with the best intention, to indulge in so erroneous an opinion. For it is not the property of a Christian mind to be displeased with assertions; no, a man must be absolutely pleased with assertions, or he will never be a Christian. Now (that we may not mock each other with vague words), I call "adhering with constancy, affirming, confessing, maintaining, and invincibly persevering" *assertion*; nor do I believe that the word "assertion" means anything else, either as it is used by the Latins or in our own age. Again, I confine "assertion" to those things that have been delivered by God to us in the sacred writings. We do not need Erasmus, or any other master, to teach us that in doubtful matters, or in matters unprofitable and unnecessary, assertions are not only foolish but even impious—those very strifes and contentions that Paul more than once condemns. Nor do you speak of these, I suppose, in this place, unless either (1) adopting the manner of a ridiculous orator, you have chosen to presume one subject of debate and discuss another, like the one who harangued the Rhombus;[2] or (2) with the madness of an impious writer, you are contending that the article of Freewill is dubious or unnecessary.

We Christians disclaim all intercourse with the Skeptics and Academics,[3] but admit into our family assertors twofold more obstinate than even the Stoics[4] themselves. How often the Apostle Paul demands that *plērophoria*[5] or most assured and most tenacious "assertion" of what our conscience believes!

---

2 An allusion to Juvenal's Fourth Satire, in which, comically, the Roman Emperor Domitian holds a council to decide what to do about a large fish, the "Rhombus"; during the council, a blind man excessively describes the beauty of the fish by pointing to it on his left when the fish was to his right during his entire speech.

3 Members of Plato's school, the Academy, which itself fell into a period of skepticism after Plato's death.

4 Followers of Stoicism, a philosophy that taught the development of principled self-control and determination to overcome emotion.

5 "Full conviction" or "full assurance"; see Col. 2:2; 1 Thess. 1:5; Heb. 6:11; 10:22.

In Romans 10 he calls it "confession," saying "and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (v. 10). And Christ says, "He who confesses me before men, him will I also confess before my Father" (Matt. 10:32). Peter commands us to give a reason for the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15). And what is the need of many words? Nothing is more widely known and more celebrated among Christians than assertion: take away assertions, and you take away Christianity. Indeed, the Holy Ghost is given to them from heaven, that he may glorify Christ and confess him even unto death—unless it is not asserting to die for confessing and asserting! In short, the Spirit is such an assertor that he even goes out as a champion to invade the world, and reproves it of sin, as though he would provoke it to fight (John 16:8); and Paul commands Timothy to "rebuke, and to be instant out of season" (2 Tim. 4:2). But what a droll sort of rebuker would he be who neither assuredly believes nor with constancy asserts himself the truth that he rebukes others for rejecting? I would send the fellow to Anticyra.[6]

But I am far more foolish myself in wasting words and time on a matter that is clearer than the sun. What Christian would endure that assertions be despised? This would be nothing else but a denial of all religion and piety at once, or an assertion that neither religion, nor piety, nor any dogma of the faith is of the least moment.

And why, I ask, do you also deal in assertions? "I am not pleased with assertions, and I like this temper better than its opposite." But you would be understood to have meant nothing about confessing Christ and *his* dogmas in this place. I thank you for the hint and, out of kindness to you, will recede from my right and from my practice, and will forbear to judge your intention, reserving such judgment for another time or for other topics. Meanwhile, I advise you to correct your tongue and your pen, and hereafter to abstain from such expressions; for however your mind may be sound and pure, your speech (which is said to be the image of the mind) is not so. For if you judge the cause of Freewill to be one that it is not necessary to understand, and to be no part of Christianity, you speak correctly, but your judgment is profane. On the contrary, if you judge it to be necessary, you speak profanely and judge correctly. But then there is no room for these mighty complaints and

6 An ancient Greek city-state known for producing a plant believed to cure insanity.

We want to see men and women around the world connect the deep truths of the Christian faith to everyday life.

Order your copy of this title, download the digital version, or browse thousands of resources at ***Ligonier.org****.*

LIGONIER MINISTRIES