

LUTHER and ERASMUS

The Debate on the Freedom of the Will

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[Arizona-California District Pastoral Conference, October 25-27,
1988, Mt. Olive Ev. Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, Nevada]

LUTHER AND ERASMUS: The Debate on the Freedom of the Will

My dear Erasmus... 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. You and you alone have seen the question on which everything hinges, and have aimed at the vital spot...¹

Thus Luther closes his tour de force, *De Servo Arbitrio*, in answer to the Dutch humanist, Desiderius Erasmus [c1466-1536]. And while it is seemingly a well-known fact that Luther considered his riposte to Erasmus together with his catechisms as the sole works from his pen he considered worth saving, the whole Luther-Erasmus "showdown" remains rather a backwater in Reformation studies and interest.²

Luther's own assessment of the matter is cause enough for interest. But lest it be considered only as interesting to those with a liking for Luther studies and history, it bears pointing out that the confrontation between Luther and Erasmus is still being played out today: the "vital spot" of theology is still challenged and attacked along the lines first drawn by Erasmus's *De Libero Arbitrio*. As a result, an understanding and appreciation of Luther's response is both important and relevant to confessional Lutheranism. Previous offerings in our district have dipped into this area of the Reformation; the intent of this paper is to trace the significant history leading up to the debate, to offer an analysis of the debate, and to show its continuing impact.

The Prelude to the Debate

The relationship and eventual conflict between Luther and Erasmus can be easily misrepresented, over-simplified and over-dramatized. Because it involved two influential and interesting personalities (Erasmus, like Luther, remains a potent force today, even if his spiritual "fatherhood" is not acknowledged by his offspring in the same way Lutherans acknowledge Luther), and because their eventual debate involved such a central and controversial subject, the historical characters of Luther and Erasmus are often dropped in favor of two contrasting figures epitomizing Faith and Reason.³ Such a view is inaccurate, oversimplified and unfair. To be sure, Luther was a man of faith, but as his writing against Erasmus shows, it was faith in the Word, not the hazy, subjective "faith" of such characterizations. Similarly, Erasmus is--to use Bainton's depiction--not so much the apostle of Reason, as that of reasonableness.

Equally as bad are the prosy evaluations of historians such as Stefan Zweig. He turns Luther into a caricature, a "stout, thickset, hard-boned, full-blooded clod of clay" in "perfect health." (This is all despite the fact that the corpulent Luther painted by Cranach didn't see the light of day until Katie had had him for a few years in her kitchen. Even then, Luther was constantly beset by illness.) And Erasmus? He (the underdog in all

¹ Quotations from *De Servo Arbitrio* are from *Luther's Works*, vol. 33. They will be noted by the abbreviation "AE" (American Edition) and the page number. This quote contains the Latin phrase Dr. Becker made frequent reference to, namely, "Iugulam petisti!" (you've struck the jugular).

² cf. AE, 50:172-173 for this appraisal of Luther to Wolfgang Capito.

³ Cf., for example, Will Durant's treatment in vol. 5 of his *The Story of Civilization*, pp415-437.

this) wields his "all-embracing intellect" encased in its "sluggish and anemic frame" in a battle that pits the "conciliatory temperament as opposed to the fanatical, cosmopolitanism against nationalism, evolution versus revolution."⁴

Fortunately, the record of the whole affair is quite comprehensive, and allows for a more balanced understanding of both men, and their relationship.

Luther first became known to Erasmus through Spalatin. A man with a prodigious number of correspondents throughout Europe, Erasmus received a letter from Spalatin in December, 1516, in which the chaplain transmitted Luther's criticism of Erasmus's interpretation of Romans 9 and 10 regarding the abrogation of the Mosaic law, a point over which they would still disagree eight years later.⁵ Luther had asked Spalatin to relay his criticism to Erasmus, which he did although he referred to Luther only as "a certain Augustinian." Erasmus did not respond even though Spalatin wrote a reminder in November, 1517. By that time, of course, the "certain Augustinian" was known by name by Erasmus for another reason.

How and when Luther's *95 Theses Regarding Indulgences* became known to Erasmus is not clear. In March, 1518, however, Erasmus sent copies to John Colet and Thomas More in England. It would seem he did so out of a sense of approval. John Lang of Erfurt was told by Erasmus:

I hear that Eleutherius is approved by all good men, but it is said that his writings are unequal. I think his theses will please all, except a few about purgatory, which they who make their living from it don't want it taken from them. I have seen Prierias's bungling answer.⁶ I see that the monarchy of the Roman high priest (as that now is) is the plague of Christendom, though it is praised through thick and thin by shameless preachers. Yet I hardly know whether it is expedient to touch this open sore, for that is the duty of princes. But I fear they conspire with the pontiff for part of the spoils. I wonder what has come over Eck⁷ to begin a battle with Eleutherius.⁸

This letter to Lang also reveals from the start the Erasmian approach to the entire "Luther affair." His approbation of Luther is guarded and cautious: the theses will "please all," but does Erasmus include himself? Certainly up to this point both men were on common ground in regard to the indulgence question: "What filthy traffic this is," declared Erasmus, "designed to fill coffers rather than stimulate piety!"⁹ Even so, Erasmus's characteristic aloofness shows itself, something that would become an irritant to the Lutherans as time wore on.

In March, 1519, Luther made his first direct approach to Erasmus, then in residence at Louvain. Despite his early misgivings about Erasmus's understanding of Paul, Luther's letter was an attempt to establish friendship and win approval from the scholar. The letter is interesting in the way it contrasts with Luther's usual directness and force of expression. For he adopted the manner used by the humanists of the day in addressing Erasmus:

Jesus. Greetings. I speak so often to you and you to me, my Erasmus--our glory and our hope--and yet we do not know each other personally. Is that not most peculiar? Actually this is not strange at all, but something that happens every day. Where is there someone whose heart Erasmus does not occupy, whom Erasmus does not teach, over whom Erasmus does not hold sway? I speak of course of those who truly love learning. I am very glad that you displease many, since this, among other things, is also to be counted among the gifts of Christ. By this I usually differentiate between the gifts of the merciful and of the wrathful God. As a result I

⁴ Stefan Zweig, *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1934) p132.

⁵ See AE:48:23-26, Luther's letter of October 11, 1516 to Spalatin. Luther criticizes Erasmus especially for following Jerome instead of Augustine, something that also surfaces again in their debate.

⁶ Erasmus is referring to Prierias's "Dialogue" of 1518.

⁷ Eck had attacked the "95 Theses" in a writing called "Obelisks."

⁸ *Opus epistolarum D. Erasmi Roterdami* (EE, hereafter), P.S. Allen, ad. (Oxford: 1906ff).

⁹ Roland Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom*, (New York: Scribners, 1969) p155.

congratulate you that while you delight all good people tremendously, you no less vex those who want to be alone on top and want to be the most popular.

Yet I am foolish that I, with unwashed hands and without a reverential and honorific introduction, address you, such a great man, in the most familiar tone ...Now I have heard from the excellent Fabricius Capito that you are acquainted with my name through those trivial writings on the indulgences [!]...As a result, my Erasmus, amiable man, if it seems acceptable to you, acknowledge also this little brother in Christ. He is certainly most devoted to you, and has the greatest affection for you.¹⁰

Luther would soon drop this "Eras-mush" and characterize him as a "croaking toad."

The scholar was slow in responding. He was not anxious to have closer ties with Luther because he already had enemies at Louvain who were stating that he had "laid the egg that Luther hatched." He preferred the part of a referee in the struggle, not that of an actual participant. Already, of course, many were charging him with timidity and fence-sitting on the issues raised by and against Luther, but Erasmus was most concerned with the threat the Luther affair posed to *bonae litterae*, the humanistic-patristic studies so dear to Erasmus's heart. Inasmuch as Luther was being associated with "good letters," he, like Reuchlin earlier, deserved defense. If the cause of good letters was in danger of being stigmatized by Luther's enemies, then Erasmus would urge his protection. Accordingly, letters went out from Louvain to various influential personages in which Erasmus maintained that Luther was "unknown" to him personally, but which urged protection for Luther because of the Augustinian's fine reputation and for the sake of *bonae litterae*. Frederick the Wise received one such letter in April, 1519, in which Erasmus admonished:

...I am not involved in Luther's cause. [But] as it is your responsibility to protect the Christian religion through your own piety, you must be concerned not to deliver an innocent man who is under your protection to impious men on the pretext of piety.¹¹

This letter was construed by friends and foes alike of Erasmus that he approved Luther's writings and actions. Luther himself remarked to Spalatin that Erasmus's letter to the prince was pleasing.¹² And Philip Melancthon, who kept a relationship with Erasmus long after the debate over free will, received a letter commending Luther's character.

The "other side" also received overtures from Louvain. Albert of Mainz, whose indulgence had sparked the whole conflagration, received a lengthy *apologia* from Erasmus in October, 1519. In it Erasmus again defends Luther's character. He is solicitous for Luther's safety and right to be corrected charitably, but he is careful to put distance between himself and Luther:

I am not accusing Luther nor am I defending him nor am I responsible for him. I would not dare judge his motives... I would not want him to be crushed by the factions of the wicked if he is innocent; if he is in error, I would want him cured, not destroyed.¹³

Erasmus's mode of dealing with the controversy is again apparent. He would defend the man, but not judge his cause; he would referee, but not become involved. "I favor Luther as much as I can, even if my cause is everywhere linked with his. Those who favor him wish he would be more civil and less mordant. But to demonstrate is now too late. I see sedition under way. I hope it will turn out to the glory of Christ. Perhaps scandals have to come, but I don't want to be their author."¹⁴

¹⁰ AE: 48: 117-119.

¹¹ EE: III: 933.

¹² AE: 48: 122.

¹³ EE: IV: 1033.

¹⁴ EE: IV: 1113.

All in all, 1519 was to prove to be the high-water mark in the relationship between Wittenberg and Louvain. Erasmus had written directly to Luther in June, 1519, in a friendly and paternal tone that urged him to temper his attacks and to pursue piety. Praise was given for Luther's commentary on the Psalms. An Erasman benediction was pronounced. But in it, all the same, the impression of a man attempting to maintain a difficult equilibrium is apparent.

While Erasmus pursued his balancing act, Luther for his part seems to have had few if any false hopes about the true nature of their relationship. Many had made an early association between the Reformer and Erasmus, but it was an association which Luther, despite the earlier letter of praise for Erasmus, saw in its true light. He would have welcomed open friendship in warm appreciation of Erasmus's many talents and contributions (e.g., Erasmus's edition of the Greek New Testament), but dreams of it belonged more to Luther's supporters than to Luther himself.

Some people have in hand a magnificent letter of Erasmus to the Cardinal of Mainz. Erasmus is quite concerned about me in his letter (perhaps it will be published sometime) and protects me quite nobly, yet in his usual skillful way, which is to defend me strongly while seeming not to defend me at all!¹⁵

Luther recognized all too well that Erasmus was not so concerned over him and the evangelical cause of the Reformation as for *bonae litterae*.

Throughout the year 1520 the two continued to drift farther apart. Battle lines had long been drawn between Wittenberg and Rome, but now the fray escalated. In June, the sluggish Leo X roused himself to call upon all the Saints to root out the wild boar from the vineyard. The papal bull, *Exsurge Domine*, was given reply in Luther's major Reformation writings, *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation* (August, 1520), *De captivitate babilonica ecclesiae* (October, 1520), and, once the bull had actually reached Luther, *Adversus execrabilem Antichristi bullam*, and *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* (November, 1520). Erasmus pronounced deprecations against both Rome and Wittenberg. "This bull is appalling, breathing the savagery of the mendicants rather than the spirit of the gentle Leo."¹⁶ "This tragedy has sprung from the hatred of good letters and the stupidity of the monks."¹⁷ Spalatin received this assessment of Luther's part in the worsening affair:

I pray that the supreme and wonderful Christ will so temper Luther's pen and spirit that he can be of very great profit to evangelical piety...He is encumbering good learning with an ill will that is disastrous to us and of no profit to himself.¹⁸

Leo's bull had the immediate effect of emboldening the enemies of both Luther and Erasmus. An *auto de fe*, the burning of Luther's books, took place in Louvain in October where Erasmus was in residence. Erasmus himself was attacked from the pulpit as being a Lutheran. The preacher on this occasion, a Carmelite named Egmondanus (the "Camel") also screamed at Erasmus, "You wrote for Luther, now write against him!"¹⁹ It was a "suggestion" that was starting to be heard from many corners. From Rome came the news--discreetly leaked--that a bishopric would be Erasmus's would he but take up the pen and write against Luther. Erasmus tactfully declined, stating he had not the talent. While he had no intention at this point in attacking Luther, at the same time he was not about to irritate the pope. A letter written late in 1520 to Cardinal Campeggio, the papal nuncio to the Imperial court, reveals his stance.²⁰

¹⁵ AE: 48: 150.

¹⁶ EE: IV: 1102.

¹⁷ Margaret Mann Phillips, *Erasmus and the Northern Renaissance*. (London: English University Press, LTD, 1949) p174.

¹⁸ EE: IV: 1167.

¹⁹ Phillips, op cit, p176.

²⁰ EE: IV: 986.

He wrote the cardinal that he found Luther's good points laudable; "actually, I favored not him, but the glory of Christ." He defends himself to Campeggio stating that he had maintained good relations with Luther in order to better advise and direct him: "My purpose was that, once his natural qualities were corrected and purified, he might with rich results and also with great glory and profit for Christ restore for us the philosophy of the gospel which had almost become cold from neglect." His concern was that Luther be treated fairly and given a just hearing; nowhere had he ever given approval of Luther's writings. Rather, he continued to claim that he had only dabbled in Luther's books, "Of all Luther's books I have read less than a dozen pages, and those here and there..." He concluded by saying:

I have never been and shall never be a willful teacher of error, nor shall I ever be a leader or an accomplice in any turmoil. Others may desire martyrdom; I do not consider myself worthy of that honor. I realize I am hateful to some--not for being a follower of Luther; in fact, they are angry because I am not. I am hateful to persons who are pleasing only to silly women and to illiterate and superstitious folk. Only those are really displeased with Erasmus who are not pleased with good learning and the evangelical truth, namely, men who are nurtured and enriched by the folly of the mob.

By the time this letter was on its way to Rome, Luther had burned the papal bull.

1521 dawned as a fateful and dramatic year. In January, the diet called by the newly elected emperor, Charles V, opened in Worms. Among its points of business was a promised hearing of Luther brought about by the intercession (under the influence of Erasmus?) of Frederick the Wise the previous November.²¹

Luther made his courageous and defiant stand on the Word of God before Charles in April and was promptly declared outlaw. Spirited away for his own protection to the seclusion of the Wartburg, Luther dropped out of sight, but not out of mind. News of his disappearance spread quickly together with vague and confused reports about his fate. Kidnapped, imprisoned, murdered--all these possibilities were successively proposed. The artist Albrecht Durer wrote in his diary:

I know not whether he lives or is murdered, but in any case he has suffered for the Christian truth. O God, if Luther is dead, who will henceforth explain to us the gospel?

Casting about for Luther's successor, he injected:

O Erasmus of Rotterdam, where are you staying? Ride forth, you knight of Christ. Defend the truth and win the martyr's crown!²²

As for Erasmus, he reacted to the news of Luther's apparent demise not with exuberance, or by taking up the fallen's sword, but by wearily climbing down from his horse to comment: "The Lutheran drama is over; would that it had never been brought on the stage,"²³ and that, "Luther has willfully provoked his fate."²⁴

But soon letters from "my Patmos" and "the Wilderness" to Luther's friends in Wittenberg appeared proving that the rumors of Luther's death were, indeed, "greatly exaggerated." Nor had the conflagration stopped on the side of the Catholics in the meantime. Luther's books were the fuel lighting the night skies in public burnings all over the Low Countries. (Someone suggested wryly that the books might better have been

²¹ It was in November, 1520, that Frederick had asked Erasmus--who was part of Charles's entourage--for his judgment of Luther. The latter responded with his now-famous quip: "Luther has committed two errors: he has struck at the tiara of the pope, and poked the bellies of the monks." Frederick received a more serious answer in Erasmus's *Axiomata* to Spalatin, 1520, by which it may be argued Frederick was convinced to seek a hearing for Luther from Charles.

²² Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950) p192.

²³ James A. Froude, *Life and Letters of Erasmus*. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1894) p285.

²⁴ *ibid*, p284. This is from a letter to Justas Jonas in which Erasmus advises Jonas to disassociate himself from a lost cause. Although he admits Luther was unduly provoked by events, the chief blame for "this tragedy" rested on Luther.

sold and the money sent to Rome to burn the pederasts). But with Luther apparently disposed of attention was now turned to Erasmus who had hoped matters could now be composed. "My position here is odious," he confided to a correspondent, and when a preacher cried out in regard to Erasmus's supposed Luther sympathies, "If I could bury my teeth in Luther's gullet I would not hesitate to go with bloody mouth and receive the body of Christ," it was simply too much. Declaring it to be the "worst century" since the days of Christ, Erasmus left Louvain to return to Basel.²⁵

Early in March, 1522, Luther left the Wartburg and returned to Wittenberg to quash the disturbances caused there by Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt and the Zwickau prophets. Once re-established, the Reformer turned to the more general situation. By this time, Erasmus's unclear and equivocating position was galling to one who was literally risking his life. In Luther's mind and in the minds of his followers a middle position was no longer tenable. The lines between evangelicalism and the papacy were fixed: one was either a citizen of Rome or Wittenberg.

Of course, Erasmus had gone to Basel to avoid this very thing. Reproached and courted at the same time by Adrian VI (1459-1523), the newly elected successor to the papacy, Erasmus sought to remain uncommitted:²⁶

I trust you will permit your little lamb to speak freely to its shepherd. Is it your thought that I should come to Rome in order not to be corrupted by the Lutherans? I assure you I am far enough away to obviate that danger. As for curing them, more can be done at close range. How can a patient be healed by a doctor who is not there? Besides, if I come to Rome the Lutherans will cry that I have been suborned and will refuse to read me.

Erasmus's attempts to remain aloof were stunned even while this exchange with Adrian was going on by the arrival in Basel of Ulrich von Hutten. Posting from von Sickingen's quixotic attempt to restore the power of the failing *Junker* class, he attempted to see Erasmus. To be caught or even suspected of dealings with Hutten would have been a death knell to Erasmus's goal: the man was simply anathema to Rome. Hutten's persistence and subsequent rebuff by Erasmus (the latter unwisely stating the real reason for his refusal in a letter that Hutten was shown) led to Hutten's scathing *Expostulatio*. In it, the one-time admirer denounced Erasmus as a lying hypocrite who had abandoned the truth and was now attempting to curry Roman favor in the most spaniel-like terms. "I would never have thought this of you. I would have sworn that you would stand to your post. I believed you would be unshakable for the truth. I grieve over your defection."²⁷

Unknown to Erasmus, Hutten had died in Zurich where Zwingli had given him sanctuary. His *Expostulatio* fairly reeked of a martyr's blood to the enemies of Rome so that Erasmus's stinging reply was doubly damning. Published under the title of *Spongia*, Erasmus sought to sponge away Hutten's aspersions with an acid bath of his own eloquent Latin. However, moving beyond Hutten, Erasmus went on to address the Lutherans as well.

He [Hutten] says one should be ready to die for the gospel. I would not refuse if the case called for it, but I am of no mind to die for the paradoxes of LutherI am not willing to be a martyr for Luther.

Let us not devour each other like fish. Why upset the whole world over paradoxes, some unintelligible, some debatable, some unprofitable? The world is full of rage, hate, and wars. What will the end be if we employ only bulls and the stake? It is no great feat to burn a little man. It is a great achievement to persuade him.²⁸

²⁵ Roland Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom*, p168.

²⁶ EE: V: 1352.

²⁷ Bainton, op cit, p177.

²⁸ ibid, p178.

One could hardly contrive a more goading message to Luther, but Rome was not mollified by Erasmus's reply either. As a result, Erasmus was urged on all sides to issue a real sponge to wipe away his suspected heretical leanings: he must write against Luther.

And Luther? In a letter to a mysterious unnamed person, Luther issued a warning to Erasmus not to take up the pen against him.

I knew before that Mosellanus agreed with Erasmus on predestination, for he is altogether an Erasmian. I, on the contrary, think that Erasmus knows less, or seems to know less, about predestination than the schools of the sophists have known ...Erasmus is not to be feared either in this or in almost any other really important subject that pertains to Christian doctrine.

I shall not challenge Erasmus; if challenged myself once or twice, I shall not hurry to strike back. I think it unwise, however, for him to array the power of his eloquence against me, for I am afraid he will not find in Luther another Lefevre. If he casts the die, he will see that Christ fears neither the gates of hell nor the powers of the air. Poor stammerer that I am, I shall parry the eloquent Erasmus with all confidence, caring nothing for his authority, reputation or good will. I know what is in this man just as I know the plots of Satan; but I expect him to reveal more clearly from day to day what grudge he nurses against me.²⁹

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Erasmus still hoped to avoid a clash and protested against Luther's letter to Spalatin. The reason was not because of a lack of *fortitudo*, but for the sake of *concordia*. Despite his bravado, Luther was desirous that Erasmus stay out of the fray. Both men realized the gulf separating them. Neither held out much hope of winning the other over. Such dreams were rapidly evaporating among the most ardent of Erasmus's admirers among the Lutherans, most notably Melanchthon. But in a sense, Luther's letter to his anonymous correspondent had actually cast the die. Erasmus could not remain out of it. He would not leave the Roman church; he did not want to attack Luther; but the Lutherans demanded one, the pope, Erasmus's Roman friends and detractors, the other. The position was worse than embarrassing. On the one hand were all the abuses of the church which Erasmus had abhorred. The hatefulness of the anti-Lutherans was equally obnoxious. But on the other hand was the growing fury of Luther and his followers. "I am a heretic to both sides," he complained.

Pleas, offers and threats were now pouring in to Erasmus to take up his pen and write. Erasmus responded to one of his former English colleagues:

You, too, tell me I am suspected of favoring Luther, and that I must prove my innocence by writing against him. You say I can settle it all. Would that I could! It is easy to call Luther a fungus; it is not as easy to answer him. I might try, if I was sure that those at the head of things would use my victory to honest purpose. I do not see what business it is of mine. However, I will think of it.³⁰

Replying to all with the utmost care (Adrian VI had again renewed the offer of a red hat), Erasmus continued to make excuses. "I don't have learning enough," he responded to the pope. But at last, bowing to pressure, he agreed and began to cast about for a suitable subject that would allow him to dispel the heresy charges from the one side without unduly aggravating the other. Henry VIII had suggested a topic some time ago: the freedom of the will.

In the opening sentences of what became *De Libero Arbitrio, Diatribo seu Collatio*, Erasmus lightly raises the subject as merely something he differed from Luther, and that he saw their discussion as an engaging

²⁹ AE: 49: 6. Mosellanus is identified as one Peter Schade, an Erasmian friend. LeFevre d'Etaples (Faber Stapulensis) had engaged in a sharp debate with Erasmus and was considered the loser.

³⁰ James A. Froude, op cit, p295.

disputation over a highly debatable point of doctrine. Luther's answer gave a vastly different assessment of the topic's importance. Erasmus had previously written a colloquy, *Inquisitio de fide*, in which a Lutheran is queried about the truths of the Apostles' Creed only to answer with a firm and faithful subscription to every article. Erasmus's intent was to show that Lutherans could hardly be called heretics since the fundamentals of the faith were held by them in the same sense as the one, Catholic church. To him, the matter of the freedom of the will was a nonessential of the faith.

Erasmus's *Diatribes* was published in September, 1524. Copies were sent to Wittenberg to Melanchthon together with a cover letter in which Erasmus declared he had written the thing "for the sake of my many enemies." Melanchthon wrote back in his usual balanced manner stating that the writing had been received with calmness in Wittenberg and promising that Luther would be responding "with the same moderation" Erasmus had shown.

As events turned out, Luther's answer was delayed for over a year. He was embroiled in his dispute with Karlstadt & Co., and then the Peasant's Revolt occurred.. These may have not been the main reason for the delay. Luther told Spalatin in November, 1524:

It is unbelievable how much the book about the freedom of the will nauseates me; I have not yet read more than two pages. It is irksome for me to have to reply to such an educated man about such an uneducated book.³¹

Despite this, Melanchthon noted that Luther--to his friends' great relief--had begun his response to Erasmus in April, 1525.³² But then the Peasants' War intervened making late summer, 1525, the real starting date. By September, 1525, Luther was absorbed in his writing. In mid-November he finished and the work was published in December, 1525, under the title, *De Servo Arbitrio*. Melanchthonian hopes that the courtesy of Erasmus would make it difficult for Luther to be angry proved false: Luther quickly surmounted the difficulty.

The rest of the history can be given in brief. Erasmus was stung by the vehemence of *De Servo Arbitrio* and made reply in the writings *Hyperapistes I & II*. For Luther, he had given his final word and felt no need to make any further answer to Erasmus. He had, however, included a cover letter with the copy of *De Servo Arbitrio* that was sent directly to Erasmus. Although the letter has not survived, from Erasmus's reply--the last personal exchange between the two--it would seem Luther had affirmed his confidence in his thinking on the bondage of the will, but that he also acknowledged some truth to an anticipated cry of "foul!" from Erasmus. From Basel came this retort:

The whole world knows your nature, according to which you have guided your pen against no one more bitterly and, what is more detestable, more maliciously than against meThe same admirable ferocity which you formerly used against Cochlaeus and against Fisher, who provoked you to it by reviling, you now use against my book in spite of its courtesy. How do your scurrilous charges that I am an atheist, an Epicurean, and a skeptic help the argument?... It terribly pains me, as it must all good men, that your arrogant, insolent, rebellious nature has set the world in armsYou treat the Evangelic cause so as to confound together all things sacred and profane as if it were your chief aim to prevent the tempest from ever becoming calm, while it is my greatest desire that it should die down I should wish you a better disposition were you not so marvelously satisfied with the one you have. Wish me any curse you will except your temper, unless the Lord change it for you.³³

³¹ WA Br 6:368 29

³² EE: V: 1500

³³ Preserved Smith, *Erasmus*, (New York: Dover, 1962) pp354-355.

And with that it was over. Erasmus continued to nurse his injured ego to the end of his life and felt that his "lamps had been blown out by the Lutheran gust."³⁴ Luther continued to war against Erasmus in private with great gusto: the *Table-talk* is littered with vituperative remarks and sneers. Erasmus's death in July, 1536, elicited the final assessment of Luther that he died, "*sine lux et crux*."³⁵

The Debate on Free Will: Synopsis and Analysis

Turning to the actual debate, the historical prelude helps assess both Erasmus's *Diatribes* and Luther's counter-thrust. Certainly the purposes of each are seen to be vastly different. The cool diffidence with which Erasmus writes is seen in its real light: the result of a fervent desire to vindicate himself before his Roman detractors while hoping to avoid a serious clash with Luther. And beyond this obvious motivation, it may fairly be said that Erasmus was intent also in providing a demonstration of how concord could (and should) be pursued through calm, polite discussion. The *Diatribes* (the word not connoting in Erasmus's usage anything negative, but simply meaning a serious study) was meant, therefore, to mollify Erasmus's Roman critics (see, I am not aligned with Luther), while demonstrating the way of dialogue as the way to peace.

It is highly ironic that the topic of free will, chosen by Erasmus to be his vehicle for accomplishing these purposes, chosen moreover because he viewed it as a peripheral point of doctrine that would lend itself to "detached discussion," turned out to be what Luther called "my jugular." And while Luther was thankful that Erasmus had gone to the vital spot, it did mean that the debate could never be for him a "detached discussion." One does not calmly discuss one's own murder, after all. There was a uneven assessment of the other's point of beginning at the very outset by both men.

Erasmus begins the *Diatribes* with some "prefatory observations"³⁶ about the "tangled labyrinth" of free will stating that what had been a "fairly moderate debate" had been "more violently stirred up by Martin Luther."³⁷ Erasmus's reference was to statements made by Luther in his *Assertio omnium articulorum* [1520]³⁸ in which Luther denied free will as a power in man, but that everything he does is done by sheer necessity.

Erasmus will have nothing to do with such assertions. "In fact, so far am I from delighting in 'assertions' that I would readily take refuge in the opinion of the Sceptics, wherever this is allowed by the inviolable authority of the Holy Scriptures..."³⁹ Better to play the role of the inquirer in such matters than the dogmatist.

And Scripture itself is not clear on this matter. Free will belongs to those "secret places in the Holy Scriptures into which God has not wished us to penetrate more deeply."⁴⁰ Moreover, some matters, even if they can be rightly discerned, are not appropriate for "common ears." To assert as Luther does that man does everything by sheer necessity before the "untutored multitude" would be an invitation for "great scandal." "There are some bodily diseases that are less evil to bear than their removal."⁴¹ This is a major concern to Erasmus. Primarily concerned with morals, the *imitatio Christi*, Erasmus views Luther's assertions as highly dangerous:

Suppose for a moment that it were true in a certain sense, as Augustine says somewhere, that 'God works in us good and evil, and rewards his own good works in us, and punishes his evil works in us'; what a window to impiety would the public avowal of such an opinion open to countless mortals! Especially in view of the slowness of mind of mortal men, their sloth, their

³⁴ Bainton, op cit, p277.

³⁵ Smith, op cit, p367 (cf. WA, *Tischreden*, V, Nr 5670).

³⁶ see the English edition of the *Diatribes* in the *Library of Christian Classics*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), vol 17. All references are from this edition abbreviated 'LCC' hereafter.

³⁷ LCC: 35.

³⁸ WA 7: 91ff.

³⁹ LCC: 37.

⁴⁰ LCC: 38.

⁴¹ LCC: 40.

malice, and their incurable propensity toward all manner of evil. What weakling will be able to bear the endless and wearisome warfare against his flesh? What evildoer will take pains to correct his life? Who will be able to bring himself to love God with all his heart when He created hell seething with eternal torments in order to punish his own misdeeds in his victims as though he took delight in human torments?⁴²

St. Paul preferred to only set before others what charity allowed as edifying; "the same prudence I consider befits those who undertake the task of interpreting the Divine Word."⁴³

Before progressing to the first major part of his presentation, Erasmus pauses to point out that Luther is opposed by the authority of the church fathers. He does so knowing that "Luther does not acknowledge the authority of any writer,... but only listens to the canonical Scriptures."⁴⁴ But the matter of free will revolves around not the authority of Scripture, but its interpretation. Again, he knows Luther will assert that the Scriptures are clear, but "if it is so clear, why have so many outstanding men in so many centuries been blind, and in a matter of such importance?"⁴⁵ Luther will claim that the proper interpretation is a gift of the Spirit. Erasmus counters, "And how shall we prove the Spirit?" If it is not invested in those whose prudence and wisdom are well-attested, but may be given to any "Tom, Dick or Harry," there must be evidence of it.⁴⁶ Again Erasmus calls out the "choir of saints" as witnesses with the needed credentials.

I hear you say, 'What has a multitude to do with the meaning of the Spirit?' I reply, 'What have a handful?' You say, 'What has a miter to do with the understanding of Holy Scripture?' I reply, 'What has sackcloth or a cowl?' You say, 'What has the knowledge of philosophy to do with the knowledge of sacred letters?' I reply, 'What has ignorance?' You say, 'What has an assembled synod to do with the understanding of Scripture, in which it may be that there is nobody who has the Spirit?' I reply, 'What, then, of private conventicles of the few, of whom it is much more likely that none has the Spirit?'⁴⁷

Finally, "how can it be believed that for more than thirteen hundred years [the Spirit of Christ] would have concealed this error in his Church and not have found anybody among so many saintly men worthy to be inspired with the knowledge of what these people claim to be the chief doctrine of the whole gospel?"⁴⁸

The *Diatribes* now proceeds to its first major part, an examination of Scripture passages that support free will. Erasmus offers a definition: "By free choice (*arbitrium*) in this place we mean a power of the human will (*voluntatis*) by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from them."⁴⁹

In positing this definition Erasmus was quick to avoid the extreme of Pelagianism. While "a few things" could be attributable to free will, most went to grace. "In the beginning and at the end of the process of salvation stood God's action, but in between human beings also contributed something."⁵⁰ How Erasmus viewed the matter is perhaps most vividly stated in a "parable" he offers in the closing section of the *Diatribes*.

Take another illustration: A father lifts up a child who has fallen and has not yet strength to walk, however much it tries, and shows it an apple which lies over against it; the child longs to run, but

⁴² LCC: 41.

⁴³ LCC: 41.

⁴⁴ LCC: 42.

⁴⁵ LCC: 44.

⁴⁶ LCC: 44.

⁴⁷ LCC: 45.

⁴⁸ LCC: 46.

⁴⁹ LCC: 47.

⁵⁰ Walther von Loewenich, *Martin Luther: the Man and His Work*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) p268. Among newer Luther biographies, this contains one of the more insightful chapters on the Luther Erasmus debate. However, see Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career 1521-1530* for perhaps the most comprehensive treatment by a Lutheran scholar.

on account of the weakness of its limbs it would have fallen had not its father held its hand and steadied its footsteps, so that led by the father it obtains the apple which the father willingly puts in its hand as a reward for running. The child could not have stood up if the father had not lifted it, could not have seen the apple had the father not shown it, could not advance unless the father had all the time assisted its feeble steps, could not grasp the apple had the father not put it into his hand. What, then, can the infant claim for itself? And yet it does something. But it has nothing to glory about in its own powers, for it owes its very self to God . . .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.⁵¹

This is the "more accommodating view" between the extremes of Pelagianism on the one hand and absolute determinism on the other. The will of man plays a small role, albeit "exceedingly trivial."⁵² To agree with Luther would make God resemble "a master cruel and unjust who flogged his slave to death because his body was too short or his nose too long (Erasmus had a long nose) or because of some other inelegance in his form."⁵³ Where Luther says, "Let God be God," Erasmus says, "Let God be good."

Erasmus's concern that the goodness and justness of God be manifest in his judgment of men is proven, he states, through the manifold imperatives of both Old and New Testaments. He argues that a just and good God can only command that which is possible. To argue otherwise is to make a mockery of God's goodness.

Are not the gospels and epistles full of exhortations?...Are they not intended to incite us to striving, to endeavoring, to industry, lest we perish by neglecting the grace of God? These seem empty and vain if they all refer to necessity. The same is true of the threats in the gospels . . .And these reproaches also lose their meaning: 'O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you.' 'You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape the damnation of hell?' 'You will know them by their fruits,' says the Lord. What he means by fruits are works, and he calls them ours. But they are not ours if they all happen by necessity. He prays on the cross: 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.' How much more justly should he have excused them, since their will was not free, nor could they do otherwise!⁵⁴

Part II of the *Diatribes* took up passages "that seem to oppose free will." Discussing such matters as the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, Judas's betrayal of Christ, and Jacob and Esau, Erasmus offers alternative exegeses to suggest that although these passages do pose a problem, the very fact that their interpretation is open to reasonable alternatives negates their strong witness against free will.

Erasmus follows the same plan of attack in Part III as he examines the arguments raised by Luther in the *Assertio* to deny the freedom of the will. After offering alternative interpretations for the various passages adduced by Luther, Erasmus moves on to a reasoned argument that again establishes his "mediating view" of man's power and co-operation in salvation. He concludes the *Diatribes* by preaching against the extremes on both sides:

...in these matters it is moderation which pleases me at any rate. Pelagius has no doubt attributed too much to free choice, and Scotus quite enough, but Luther first mutilated it by cutting off its right arm; then not content with this he thoroughly cut the throat of free choice and dispatched it. I prefer the view of those who do attribute much to free choice, but most to grace.⁵⁵

⁵¹ LM 91.

⁵² LM 90.

⁵³ LM 88.

⁵⁴ LM 60.

⁵⁵ LCC: 96.

The last words of the *Diatribē* are an appeal to the reader to make his own judgment, and a profession by Erasmus of willingness to be instructed "with evangelical courtesy" in these matters. He closes by stating,

*CONTULI,
penes alios esto iudicium.*⁵⁶

As it turned out, "others" were very ready to pass such judgment.

Luther's response to the *Diatribē* is a titanic effort that remains explosive down to the present. Once he began working on his response he became completely absorbed in it. "I'm completely in orbit around Erasmus and the free will, and will take pains not to concede any point where he has said something correctly; in fact, he has said hardly anything correctly!" he wrote Spalatin in September, 1525.⁵⁷ In terms of sheer size, *De Servo Arbitrio* out-bulked Erasmus's *Diatribē* three-to-one. But more importantly, "it was a book pulsating with excitement...It breathed the air of being free again to address central issues in theology. The reader can sense this in the passion and forcefulness of Luther's formulations."⁵⁸

Luther chose to answer Erasmus in the classic manner of polemical debate: point-by-point. Thus, *De Servo Arbitrio* follows the same outline Erasmus used in his writing. Luther begins with a response to Erasmus's introduction, then he turns to the Scripture proofs, refuting the passages offered in support of free will, then defending those passages he had adduced against free will. Next, he offers new passages (primarily from Paul and John) against free will, then he closes with some concluding remarks.

Luther begins with some self-deprecating remarks about his dalliance in replying.

There will perhaps be some surprise at this new and unwonted forbearance --or fear!--in Luther, who has not been roused even by all the speeches and letters his adversaries have flung about, congratulating Erasmus on his victory and chanting in triumph, "Ho, ho! Has that Maccabee, that most obstinate Assertor, at last met his match, and dares not open his mouth against him?" Yet not only do I not blame them, but of myself I yield you a palm such as I have never yielded anyone before; for I confess not only that you are far superior to me in powers of eloquence and native genius (which we all must admit, all the more as I am an uncultivated fellow who has always moved in uncultivated circles), but you have quite damped my spirit and eagerness, and left me exhausted before I could strike a blow.⁵⁹

But he follows this up by stating, "although I am unskilled in speech, I am not unskilled in knowledge, by the grace of God." He then plunges into Erasmus's preface.

As one might expect, Luther regards Erasmus's preference of finding refuge among the Skeptics when facing assertions on the faith contemptible. "It is not the mark of a Christian mind to take no delight in assertions: on the contrary, a man must delight in assertions or he will be no Christian."⁶⁰ Christians must assert the truth of Scripture; if one takes away assertions, Christianity is taken away.

Luther is further shocked by Erasmus's willingness to submit himself to the decrees of the church "whether I grasp what it prescribes or not."⁶¹ "What new religion, what new humility is this, that you would deprive us by your own example of the power of judging the decrees--of men, and subject us in uncritical submission--to men? Where does the Scripture of God impose this on us?⁶² Faith involves grasping the truths of God from the Scriptures, being convinced of them, and boldly asserting them before the world. Remember, Luther warns Erasmus, "the Holy Spirit is no Skeptic."⁶³

⁵⁶ LCC: 97. "I have discoursed (or, made comparisons), let others judge."

⁵⁷ WA Br 3:583.

⁵⁸ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) p418.

⁵⁹ AE: 33: 15-16.

⁶⁰ AE: 33: 19-20.

⁶¹ AE: 33: 19; cf. LCC: 37; also f.n. 39.

⁶² AE: 33: 23.

⁶³ AE: 33: 24.

Luther's contention is for Christian certainty in the Word--"For what is more miserable than uncertainty?"--; even well-meant concerns for outward peace and concord cannot be allowed to alter or halt this. Moreover, Christian certainty demands knowing the facts about free will. To this end, Luther contends, the Word is "crystal clear."

Thus the debate became focused on the first major difference between Luther and Erasmus: the clarity of Scripture. Erasmus claimed that the Scriptures presented some matters that are obscure, while others are quite plain: In the former category he would include such things as the Day of Judgment, the distinction between the Persons of the Trinity, the hypostatic union and the unforgivable sin.⁶⁴ Among the latter he adduces as "most plainly evident ...the precepts for a good life."⁶⁵ Luther is forced to digress in responding by setting forth his hermeneutics. The first is that a distinction must be made between God and the Scriptures.

That in God there are many things hidden, of which we are ignorant, no one doubts ...But that in Scripture there are some things abstruse, and everything is not plain--this is an idea put about by the ungodly Sophists, with whose lips you also speak here, Erasmus; but they have never produced, nor can they produce a single article to prove this mad notion of theirs ...

I admit, of course, that there are many texts in the Scriptures that are obscure and abstruse, **not because of the majesty of their subject matter, but because of our ignorance** of their vocabulary and grammar; but these texts in no way hinder a knowledge of all the subject matter of Scripture.⁶⁶

The "accessibility" of Scripture is assured because Christ, the center of the Scripture, has been revealed. Only if Christ is not known or removed can the subject matter of Scripture be considered obscure.⁶⁷

This leads to positing two kinds of clarity in regard to the Scripture. There is an external clarity that Christ, the center of Scripture brings, so that "nothing is left obscure or ambiguous," and an internal clarity "located in the understanding of the heart." Of this kind it must be said "no man perceives one iota of what is in the Scriptures unless he has the Spirit of God."⁶⁸ Luther's second hermeneutic principle flows from this: the Spirit himself sheds light on the darkened understanding of man, using clear (i.e., from the standpoint of language and grammar) passages to shed light on those obscured to the intellect of fallen man.

Luther now goes after Erasmus's contention that free will is to be counted "among the things that are useless and unnecessary."⁶⁹ Quite the opposite, what is more useful or more important than knowing whether or not our will accomplishes anything in things pertaining to salvation? Slipping into German for the only time in the book, Luther ejaculates, "*Erasme, das ist zu viel!*"⁷⁰ This problem is one half of the whole sum of things Christian; "it behooves us to be very certain about the distinction between God's power and our own, God's work and our own."⁷¹

And the other half? It "is something fundamentally necessary and salutary for a Christian to know that God foreknows nothing contingently, but that he foresees and purposes and does all things by his immutable, eternal, and infallible will."⁷² This is the "thunderbolt by which free choice is completely prostrated and shattered" because the immutable will of God forces us to acknowledge "that everything we do, everything that happens, even if it seems to us to happen mutably and contingently, happens in fact nevertheless necessarily and

⁶⁴ AE: 33: 27-28; cf. *LM* 39.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ AE: 33: 25.

⁶⁷ AE: 33: 26.

⁶⁸ AE: 33: 28.

⁶⁹ AE: 33: 29; *LM* 39.

⁷⁰ *WA*: 18: 610; cf. AE: 33: 29, fn 24.

⁷¹ AE: 33: 35.

⁷² AE: 33: 37.

immutably, if you have regard to the will of God."⁷³ Luther is quick to add that we are not to understand that everything that happens is necessary per se--"the subject under discussion implies no such thing"--; this pertains to God alone. But it is necessary from the side of God, through his will and decision. And this is essential for faith "for if you doubt or disdain that God foreknows all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutably, how can you believe his promises and place a sure trust and reliance on them?"⁷⁴

It is this concern that leads Luther to press home a counter-attack against the Erasmian claim that "some things are of such a kind that even if they were true and might be known, it would not be proper to prostitute them before common ears."⁷⁵ The truth of God, however offensive, however open to ridicule, regardless of what tumults it creates must be faithfully proclaimed. Warning to this theme, Luther writes,

For even I, by the grace of God, am not such a fool or so mad as to have been willing to maintain and defend this cause for so long, with so much zeal and constancy (which you call obstinacy), amid so many dangers to life, so much hatred, so many treacheries, in short, amid the fury of men and demons, simply for the sake of money (which I neither possess nor desire), or popularity (which I could not obtain if I wished, in a world so incensed against me), or physical safety (of which I cannot for a moment be certain). Do you think that you alone have a heart that is moved by these tumults? Even we are not made of stone, or born of the Marpesian rocks; but when nothing else can be done, we prefer to be battered by temporal tumult, rejoicing in the grace of God, for the sake of the Word of God, which must be asserted with an invincible and incorruptable mind, rather than to be shattered by eternal tumult under the wrath of God, with intolerable torment. May Christ grant, as I hope and pray, that your mind may not come to that, although your words certainly sound as if you thought, like Epicurus, that the Word of God and a future life were fables; for you seek with your magisterial advice to persuade us that, as a favor to pontiffs and princes or for the sake of peace, we ought if occasion arises, to give way and set aside the most sure Word of God. But if we do that, we set aside God, faith, salvation and everything Christian. How much better is the admonition of Christ, that we should rather spurn the whole world!⁷⁶

Luther turns specifically to the matter of free will. Here a fear of moral consequences led Erasmus to prefer silence before "common ears." "What a window to impiety would the public avowal of such an opinion open to countless mortals!" Who would strive against the flesh? he asks. "No one!" Luther retorts. And who will believe that God loves him? "No one!" Luther responds. So "what is the utility or necessity of publishing such things"? Luther's answer is tri-fold: First, God has willed they be published when he gave his Word. With this answer the "godly will be content." Secondly, these things serve to humble the pride of man with the knowledge that "his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, devices, endeavors, will and works," since it is dependent entirely on the will and work of God. Thirdly, it is in the essence of faith itself:

Hence in order that there may be room for faith, it is necessary that everything which is believed should be hidden. It cannot, however, be more deeply hidden than under an object, perception, or experience which is contrary to it. Thus, when God makes alive he does it by killing, when he justifies he does it by making men guilty, when he exalts to heaven he does it by bringing down to hell... Thus God hides his eternal goodness and mercy under eternal wrath, his righteousness under iniquity. This is the highest degree of faith, to believe him merciful when he saves so few

⁷³ AE: 33: 37-38.

⁷⁴ AE: 33: 42.

⁷⁵ AE: 33: 45; cf. LCC: 40.

⁷⁶ AE: 33: 51-52.

and damns so many, and to believe him righteous when by his own will he makes us necessarily damnable.⁷⁷

What Erasmus viewed as a debatable issue fraught with unsavory consequences, Luther saw as the supreme issue, "an entrance to heaven and a way to God for the godly and the elect."⁷⁸

The battleground moved to the relationship between divine necessity and the human will. Far from being free, the human will is in bondage to either the Spirit or Satan. It is powerless to choose between the two, but "is placed between the two like a beast of burden."⁷⁹ This inability to choose is the consequence of the immutable will of God; when Luther states we "necessarily" follow the Spirit's guidance or Satan's direction, we do not do so *coacte* "as if taken by the scruff of the neck and forced to it," but of our own accord and with a ready will (*voluntate*).⁸⁰

Luther's simile of man as beast ridden now by Satan, now by God, is easily misunderstood if divorced from the context. "Luther did not wish to abolish personhood by means of this illustration. He spoke from experience, for he was filled with the awareness of the hidden powers that seek to control our wills. But our wills do not cease to exist under their influence."⁸¹ The point is that of the defenselessness of the human will in the face of a superior spiritual power, whether that be an idea, grace or evil. Nor is the simile original. The picture was one (wrongly attributed to Augustine) that scholasticism had long used and which Scripture itself suggests in Psalm 73:22ff. Bornkamm warns against "pushing the parable beyond [Luther's] immediate point."⁸²

Neither Erasmus or Luther in speaking about free will meant anything but the ability (or lack) for man to apply himself to salvation. Certainly man is able to choose in regard to things on a psychological or formal basis. However, in regard to man's freedom in matters of salvation, Erasmus stated that the power of the will in the unregenerate "was rendered ineffective as regards the good."⁸³ Yet he maintained it was nonetheless a power man possessed. Luther chortles in reply, "What is 'ineffective power' but simply no power at all?"⁸⁴ Would Erasmus care to call it a "disposing quality" or a "passive aptitude" by which man is "capable of being taken hold of by the Spirit and imbued with the grace of God," then Luther could agree. It is this that sets man apart in creation; "for heaven, as the saying is, was not made for geese."⁸⁵ But to call this "free will" is "too imposing, too wide and full," a "misuse of language," a "danger to salvation and a thoroughly injurious illusion."⁸⁶

Before moving into the Scripture proofs, Luther addressed himself to the questions raised in Erasmus's introduction regarding Luther's isolation from the church fathers on this question. Although "Luther does not acknowledge the authority of any writer," it is plain Erasmus does. For that matter, Luther himself had "found it incredible that this Troy of ours [i.e., the Roman Church], which for so long a time and through so many wars had proved invincible, could ever be taken." Indeed, "I should have continued so... but for the pressure of my conscience and the evidence of the facts."⁸⁷

Erasmus's point in showing Luther's isolation from the church fathers was an appeal to the collective credibility of the fathers on the basis of their sanctity, miracles and manifesting of the Spirit. In contrast, Erasmus gibed, Luther's followers couldn't cure a lame horse. Luther retorted by waving aside all this as irrelevant. Rather, he asked, since free will is the issue, and all of these fathers support Erasmus's contention

⁷⁷ AE: 33: 62.

⁷⁸ AE: 33: 61.

⁷⁹ AE: 33: 65.

⁸⁰ AE: 33: 64. Luther's use of the significant Latin words **arbitrio** (choice) and **voluntas** (will) needs to be noted. There is no small confusion caused by the traditional translation of both treatise's titles "The Freedom/Bondage of the Will". cf. WA: 18: 634 for original of this.

⁸¹ Loewenich, op cit, p274.

⁸² Bornkamm, op cit, p432.

⁸³ AE: 33: 66.

⁸⁴ AE: 33: 67.

⁸⁵ AE: 33: 67.

⁸⁶ AE: 33: 69.

⁸⁷ AE: 33: 73. Bornkamm comments on these words: "Conscientia et evidentia rerum, again one of those revealing formulations for the forces that propelled [Luther] on the road to reformation." (Bornkamm, op cit, p434.).

that it is a real power in man, had any of them done a miracle--even curing a lame horse--on the basis of their free will? Would any of them claim sanctity apart from God as their own free choice? Was the Spirit theirs because they so chose? It was not Luther, but Erasmus who would stand alone with such assertions.

Likewise, Erasmus's skepticism that God would have allowed his church to conceal error for so many years is waved aside by Luther as equally untrue. Briefly setting out his concept of the church, Luther pointed out that the true church is hidden: *abscondita est ecclesia, latent sancti*.⁸⁸ As a result, "the Church of God is not as commonplace a thing, my dear Erasmus, as the phrase 'the Church of God.'"⁸⁹ One may only speak of the visible church as such "by the rule of love, not the rule of faith." Both Old and New Testaments prove this: the true Church is always a remnant. And this is the Church God preserves.

Luther now asks:

What, then, are we to do? The Church is hidden, the saints are unknown. What and whom are we to believe? Or, as you very pointedly argue, who gives us certainty? How shall we prove the Spirit? If you look for learning, on both sides there are scholars; if for quality of life, on both sides are sinners; if for Scripture, both sides acknowledge it.⁹⁰

The answer lies in the internal and external clarity of the Scriptures as he has previously stated. Even Erasmus demonstrates he relies on this even though he denies the clarity of the Scriptures! "Why do you yourself, Erasmus, set out the nature of Christianity for us if the Scriptures are obscure to you?" Erasmus is on the horns of a dilemma: on the one hand he desires the support of his many witnesses who claim the Scriptures clearly set forth free will; on the other, he wants to squelch the debate on free will as a matter God has not clearly set before us. "There he is, with his private opinion on the obscurity of Scripture, caught between two fronts: his serene supporters on the one, and Luther on the other. And both fronts, although with opposite effect, consider Scripture clear on this question."⁹¹ The preliminaries now over, Luther concludes, "In this way I also might have put an end to this whole question about free choice ...there can be no stronger proof than the personal confession and testimony of a defendant against himself."⁹²

Luther's contention is quite valid: the debate was essentially over at this point. "In their respective preliminaries both men had played all their essential cards."⁹³ From this point on, the exegetical proofs offered in support of their positions and the ones they gave in refutation of the other did little to define the debate or expand it further. The differences between them were profound. Behind Erasmus's attempts to place Luther in a corner were his deep-rooted concerns over morality. Bornkamm offers this insightful assessment of the debate to this point:

Erasmus feared for the moral nurture and self-directed endeavors of man, lest some doctrine of unfree will place a tempting excuse in man's hand. So he conceived of God as the Great Pedagogue who wisely had locked up a number of mysteries. For us, as human beings, there is no use brooding over them or talking about them; all it takes is humbly to await their disclosureAs Erasmus placed free will on the inventory of 'superfluous questions,' he took it out of the context of problems basic to Christian existence: grace, bondage in sin, human co-operation in salvation--all of them realities which to Luther were inseparable from the question of willOn the basis of reason, Erasmus intended no more than to set forth a morally rewarding statement of the problem [on the will] and thereby to regain as much as possible from hard-and-fast

⁸⁸ AE: 33: 89.

⁸⁹ AE: 33: 88.

⁹⁰ AE: 33: 89.

⁹¹ Bornkamm, op cit, p436.

⁹² AE: 33: 102.

⁹³ Bornkamm, op cit, p437.

assertions. In the process, however, he had already lay bare his most profound views of God and man, of the Bible and the church, of the meaning and limits of theological pronouncements.

Luther was thus forced to anticipate and to disclose the entire root system of his thought on the question of the will ...Luther's reply yields a rapid succession of solid comments on cardinal questions of theology. Many of the most famous sentences in this book--indeed, in all his writings--are present in the introduction. Because he followed Erasmus move by move, Luther was prevented from setting forth his own train of thought. The result, however, enhanced the character of the discussion as the opponents met eye-to-eye. Everything between them was controversial, even to the deepest points they touched--honoring the majesty of God. Wherever reason failed to cope with the mysteries of Scripture, Erasmus saw it as a bid for silence, Luther as a bid for speech, qualifying it by saying, 'God has willed these mysteries to be published, and we must not ask the reason for the divine will, but simply adore it.' Shunning the dark, Erasmus hankered for a brightness to God's ways that would make them understandable, as well as for a clear concept of man, of the sort who knows God's commandments and has confidence that with God's help he can follow them. Luther, to the contrary, contended that man is indeed lost if he does not know that God is present also in the dark, that God leads through dying to living, through agonizing to redemption. Therefore Luther relies entirely on faith and solid certitude, while Erasmus evades the dark and treats the hard questions with a shot of skepticism. He operates with the artificial light of authority, using it to get his bearings. Therefore he is reluctant to criticize the church, the fathers, or the councils too openly. Not so Luther. For him the church is hidden, just as God's dealing in history and with human beings is hidden. The church is hidden by what calls itself church; only by faith can one see it and belong to it. Precisely because reason views these hidden things as areas of darkness of which it cannot conceive unaided, Luther is passionately confident that the only view we have of them is the Word of God--and this Word is clear.⁹⁴

To briefly synopsize the balance of Luther's writing to Erasmus, Luther now begins his three-part presentation of Scripture proofs. For nearly 200 pages in the American Edition Luther bombards Erasmus with proofs; the sheer bulk is overwhelming. Throughout, one gets a front-row view of Luther's hermeneutics in action as he interprets Old and New Testaments in the light of the *Hauptartikel*, justification by grace through faith. His heaviest points are made in refuting the *Diatribes's* proofs.

Erasmus had wanted to cite the many imperatives in the Scriptures as tacit admission of man's freedom of choice. Luther retorts that Erasmus misinterprets the significance of the imperative mood: "This is something that 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."⁹⁵ The import of this is bound up in the mirror function of the law. "The whole meaning and purpose of the law is simply to furnish knowledge, and that of nothing but sin; it does not reveal or confer any power."⁹⁶

Erasmus had cited Ezekiel 18:32 (For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!) in support of free will. Luther responds that Erasmus was not observing the distinction between law and gospel. Moreover, he was not distinguishing between *Deus revelatus et Deus absconditus in majesta*. "God does many things that he does not disclose to us in his word; he also wills many things which he does not disclose himself as willing in his word. Thus he does not will the death of a sinner, according to his word; but he wills it according to that inscrutable will of his."⁹⁷ Thus, "God must be left to himself in his own

⁹⁴ Bornkamm, op cit, pp437-438.

⁹⁵ AE: 33: 127.

⁹⁶ AE: 33: 127.

⁹⁷ AE: 33: 140.

majesty, for in this regard we have nothing to do with him, nor has he willed that we should have anything to do with him. But we have something to do with him insofar as he is clothed and set forth in his Word..."⁹⁸

In the next portion of his Scripture proofs, Luther examined the hardening of Pharaoh's heart and Malachi 1:2-3: "I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated." Erasmus, as noted earlier, advanced alternate exegeses to undermine the credibility of these verses as witnesses against free will. At stake for Erasmus was the goodness of God. Luther remorselessly presses home the implications of God's omnipotence: "Since, then, God moves and actuates all in all, he necessarily moves and acts also in Satan and ungodly man."⁹⁹ This does not make God the author of evil; rather, just as a carpenter using a "chipped or jagged axe" would obtain bad results, so God working through "evil instruments" obtains only evil. The fault lies with the instrument.¹⁰⁰

When it is asked "why God does not cease from the very motion of omnipotence" because in the ungodly this results in evil, the answer must be given that God cannot "cease to be God on account of the ungodly." And if it is asked, "Why does he not change the evil wills that he moves?", Luther answers: "This belongs to the secrets of his majesty, where his judgments are incomprehensible. It is not our business to ask this question, but to adore these mysteries."¹⁰¹ Luther is not a stone as he says these things. His forcefulness reveals the depths of his faith:

Admittedly, it gives the greatest possible offense to common sense or natural reason that God by his own sheer will should abandon, harden, and damn men ...when he is preached as a God of such great mercy and goodness, etc ...I myself was offended more than once, and brought to the very depth and abyss of despair, so that I wished I had never been created a man, before I realized how salutary that despair was, and how near to grace.¹⁰²

Under the simile of a conquering general, Luther begins his third and final section of Scripture proofs, "and out of our numerous armies we will bring forward two high commanders with a few of their battalions, namely Paul and John the Evangelist."¹⁰³ Here Luther reveals his intimate understanding of Paul; here, too, he reveals his own deep personal interest in the question of free will.

For my own part, I frankly confess that even if it were possible, I should not wish to have free choice given to me, or to have anything left in my own hands by which I might strive toward salvation ...But now, since God has taken my salvation out of my hands into his, making it depend on his choice and not mine, and has promised to save me, not by my own work or exertion but by his grace and mercy, I am assured and certain both that he is faithful and will not lie to me, and also that he is too great and powerful for any demons or any adversities to be able to break him or to snatch me from him.¹⁰⁴

Luther concludes his writing by admitting that even after all is said and done, there still remain hard questions regarding grace. He offers in answer that the faithful remember the "three lights" of nature, grace, and glory. To the first, many things will remain an "insoluble problem"--Job's question of why "good men suffer and bad men prosper" is just such a one. But "this problem is solved by the light of grace." By that same light, however, it is an insoluble problem "how God can damn one who is unable by his own power to do anything but sin and be guilty." It would seem God is unjust. "But the light of glory tells us differently, and it will show us hereafter that the God whose judgment here is one of incomprehensible righteousness is a God of most

⁹⁸ AE: 33: 139.

⁹⁹ AE: 33: 176.

¹⁰⁰ AE: 33: 176.

¹⁰¹ AE: 33: 180.

¹⁰² AE: 33: 190. This is one of the most famous sections of Luther's writings regarding *Anfechtung*.

¹⁰³ AE: 33: 247.

¹⁰⁴ AE: 33: 288,289.

perfect and manifest righteousness. In the meantime, we can only *believe* this, being admonished and confirmed by the example of the light of grace, which performs a similar miracle in relation to the light of nature."¹⁰⁵

In contrast to Erasmus who closed essentially saying, "I've said my piece; you have my opinion," Luther closes stating that he has not sought to merely discourse, but to proclaim truth. *NON CONTULI, SED ASSERUI ET ASSERO*.¹⁰⁶ It would remain his last word on the matter.

For this writer, several items remain before a last word. The most important may be the question of whether Luther can be used in support of "double predestination" as propounded by Calvin because of statements made in *De Servo Arbitrio*. It is no secret that this writing of Luther's continues to delight strict Calvinists, not only because of Luther's unequivocal teaching of man's total spiritual depravity (the "T" of TULIP), but because they think he teaches the "U" of an "unconditional election" to grace or damnation. The translator of *De Servo Arbitrio*, for the American Edition of Luther's Works, Philip S. Watson, writes in an introduction for the Library of Christian Classics edition (Watson's translation was made for this series), that Luther "was led to propound... his doctrine of double predestination" as a result of wrestling with the matter of Pharaoh's hardening.¹⁰⁷ Philip Schaff in his *History of the Christian Church* makes a similar claim that Luther taught a double predestination.¹⁰⁸ (Schaff claims, by-the-by, that "the Lutheran Church followed him only half way" in this.) And Calvin himself is claimed to have found *De Servo Arbitrio* "the chief fountain and source" of his formulation of the doctrine.¹⁰⁹

Luther certainly affirmed that the omnipotence of God implies that God's activity in the world is unlimited, independent and wholly effective. And while these implications are based in part on reason, "for Luther, it was also based on both terrifying and uplifting experience. Luther was conscious of the living reality of God in a way few others have been. It was not his Occamist tradition which led Luther to assert the inaccessibility and incomprehensibility of God's will, but rather his own religious experience."¹¹⁰ Compelled by Scripture and his intense need for certitude, Luther affirmed in the clearest terms since Paul that our salvation is the result of God's election to grace. Only when God is seen as the sole author and finisher of salvation can there be certainty. And how he rejoiced in it! This is the freedom of the gospel.

But Luther stopped there. The logical conclusion which Calvin propounded as the "horrible decree" of eternal election to damnation was an abyss which Luther, and the Lutheran Church after him, refused to plumb. Schaff calls this refusal as expressed in the *Formula of Concord*, "a logical inconsistency."¹¹¹ We would call it being true to Scripture. This is perhaps one of the greatest aspects of Luther's theological greatness. He recognized and operated entirely within the authority of Scripture, the proper use of reason, and a sense of worshipful silence before God's majesty. In short, this was Luther's child-like faith.

As far as the strong statements which Calvin and those following after him found so pleasing and a "fountain" or "source" for the development of double predestination, it must be remembered that Luther was not writing in a vacuum, but against the semi-Pelagian viewpoint of Erasmus and the Roman Church. Had Luther lived to hear the "horrible decree" of Calvin, one can well imagine the kind of writing it would have sparked from his pen. But one aberration at a time! Far from retreating to a "half-way point" from Luther, the *Formula of Concord* very fittingly gives expression to what Luther would have said to John Calvin, although undoubtedly in politer tones.

Luther did not live to deal with Arminianism on a first-name basis, either. But *De Servo Arbitrio* deals with Arminian "decision theology" in the same way as Roman semi-Pelagianism. Luther's bold, strong, and supremely Scriptural stance on the absolute will and work of God by grace in salvation is a continuing answer

¹⁰⁵ AE: 33: 292.

¹⁰⁶ WA: 18: 787.

¹⁰⁷ LM 20. See also pp23ff.

¹⁰⁸ Philip Schaff, *The History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), vol VIII, p547.

¹⁰⁹ Smith, op cit, p354.

¹¹⁰ von Loewenich, op cit, p276.

¹¹¹ Schaff, op cit, p548.

to any theological system that tries to answer the old question, "Why some and not others?" in any way than to affirm grace as the sole cause of salvation, and man's sin as the cause of damnation.

The Continuing Impact

Mark Twain is said to have quipped regarding "classics," that they are the books everybody admires, but nobody reads. Hopefully, Luther's classic will not be allowed to fit that definition. The continuing impact of the debate depends on its being read and appreciated for more than mere historical interest or acclaim. How can the Luther-Erasmus "showdown" continue to have its due effect?

Certainly the subject matter--the bondage of the human will--continues to be a primary subject for Lutheran, biblical theology: it is still "the jugular" Luther declared it to be. To be sure, it does not make for light reading, and Luther's methodology of doggedly pursuing Erasmus's argument point-by-point, and his penchant for "overkill" (slam-dunking?) results in tedious reading, particularly in the long exegetical portions. But there is hardly a better selection of Luther's works in which to invest time and effort. In view of popular notions regarding "free will" and the spread of Evangelicalism, Lutherans should see this work of Luther's as timely and pertinent. So, the most immediate impact is that it should be read!

As one reads *De Servo Arbitrio* an appreciation of those things that are distinctively Lutheran in theology beyond the matter of the will is also furthered: here is a treasury of statements on Law and Gospel, grace, the nature of God, his characteristics, and so forth. Equally valuable is the example of Luther's hermeneutics in action, his "ministerial" use of reason in opposition to the "magisterial" use by Erasmus, and a sense of the awe and majesty of God. In many ways one could describe the work as "devotional literature."

Perhaps that is the greatest impact the work can continue to have. Yes, it provides clear, biblical theology in answer to the false claims of semi-Pelagianism, Arminianism, and less directly, Calvinism on the doctrine of conversion. But to imbibe Luther's spirit is, for the most part, as important as obtaining information. Theology is not merely a technical skill, but a true *habitus* of the spirit.

Away from the arena of polemics, Luther's writing will serve to help savor the depth of the simple truths of the other "classic"--in Luther's eyes--that he wrote, namely, the Small Catechism. How much care and precision of theological insight went in to the explanation to the Third Article, written four years after his debate with Erasmus:

I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Ghost has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith...

From the standpoint of the need for depth on the part of Christian teachers, and those who would train Christian teachers, Luther's writing on the will should be standard and required reading.

At the beginning of this paper it was noted that the Luther-Erasmus debate could easily become oversimplified. Just that would happen were we to simply write off Erasmus and his book as merely a foil by which to extol Luther's part in the debate. Judged solely by theological evaluations, Erasmus is clearly the "loser." But perhaps Erasmus contributes in another less important way, and should be allowed--even courted for--influence. Despite a justified dislike for his argument, one is left liking the man; in regard to his manner, "one cannot scoff at the *humanitas Erasmi*."¹¹² It is tragic that Erasmus's scholarly caution led him into weakness toward the truth, but objectivity, a willingness to view matters somewhat dispassionately, does not point necessarily to weakness of character. "There is such a thing as the neutrality of greater insight." And after reading the *Diatriba*, one is impressed with a personal piety that cannot accept Luther's judgment of the man as a "mocking Lucian." The general tenor of most theological debate (or even disputes between church people) begs that we learn some of this from Erasmus, just as we desire to hear the truths of the faith from Luther.

¹¹² von Loewenich, op cit, p269

SCRIPSI
Veritatem autem faciamus in caritate
et
crescamus in illo per omnia
qui est caput Christus

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