

Luther And The Ministry

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Luther: Right or Wrong

EUGENE F. KLUG

A Response To The Leuenberg Concord

TRANSLATED BY JOHN DRICKAMER

The Outside Limits Of Lutheran  
Confessionalism In Contemporary  
Biblical Interpretation

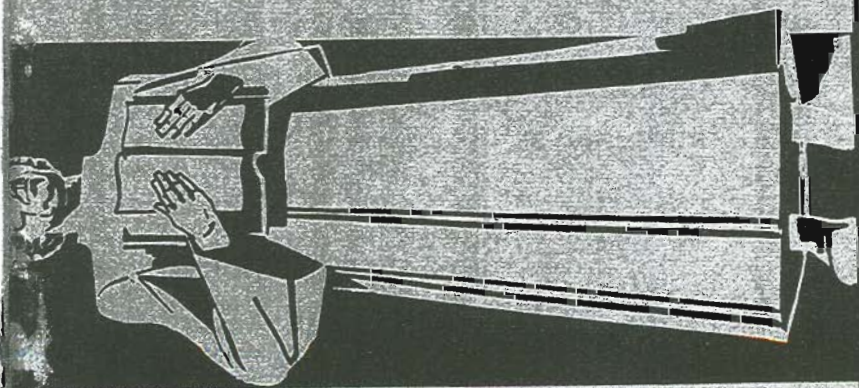
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# Luther: Right or Wrong?

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HARRY J. MCSORLEY'S *Luther: Right or Wrong*,<sup>1</sup> has again focused attention on Luther's controversy with Erasmus.

## THE ISSUE

Luther himself thanked Erasmus for avoiding "those extraneous issues about the Papacy, purgatory, indulgences, and such like," and for hitting at "the essential issue" of the *human will before and under God*, especially as it involved *conversion*. What role did the human will play, if any at all, was the question. There were three options: as free decision; a non-resisting will; or entirely passive, and therefore no factor at all. "This is the hinge," said Luther, "on which our discussion turns, . . . how it (the human will) stands related to the grace of God."<sup>2</sup>

Luther thought that with a wrong answer, "we shall know nothing whatsoever of Christianity."<sup>3</sup> Though respecting Erasmus greatly for his linguistic contributions, Luther held that Erasmus had so botched up things in his *De Libero Arbitrio* that "like the woman in the Gospel, the more the doctors treat the case, the worse it gets."<sup>4</sup>

## MCSORLEY'S THESIS

Generally McSorley agrees with Luther against Erasmus. Following the lead of current Catholic scholarship, he is kind and respectful to Luther, his scholarship, and the *De Servo Arbitrio* in particular. Above all else, he recognizes that Luther is indeed at the vital nerve of Christianity in dealing with the will in bondage, the "reverse side of the doctrine of justification," to use Preserved Smith's term.<sup>5</sup>

But now a new question crops up: —Is McSorley right or wrong in affirming that Luther's concept of the *unfree will* is no longer an issue to separate Catholics and Protestants?<sup>6</sup> He hopes to show that Luther's supposed "necessitarian argument is based on speculative theological reasoning," and charges that "Luther, very uncharacteristically, makes no effort to give support for this argument."<sup>7</sup> I will show that such charges are without foundation. What McSorley apparently hopes to achieve meanwhile by discrediting Luther's position is fresh support for the notion that the Catholic position is the true and "deeply biblical understanding of 'servum arbitrium'" and that it "is not only Johannine and Pauline, but also Augustinian, Thomistic, Lutheran and Tridentine," in other words, "both Evangelical and Catholic."<sup>8</sup>

That is a grand goal and quite a big mouthful to swallow all at once! Here is McSorley's verdict:

The fact Luther excludes man's free cooperation in saving faith makes his teaching on this point unacceptable not only to Trent, but also to the Lutheran confessional statements, as well as to the overwhelming majority of modern Protestant theologians, Lutherans included."

Either Luther was right in his repudiation of "man's free cooperation," or McSorley, Trent, and traditional Catholic theology and a lot of Protestants and Lutherans, too, get the nod. Luther's answer is, as he reminds Erasmus: if we give or choose the wrong answer, then "Christian faith is utterly destroyed."<sup>10</sup>

## PART I

McSorley blames a "lack of conceptual clarity and an inadequate definition of terms" for the failure of Erasmus and Luther to effect "a true meeting of the minds."<sup>11</sup> True, there was no meeting of minds, but Luther's reply to Erasmus in the *De Servo Arbitrio* scored a direct hit and by no means "shot past" Erasmus. Current Roman Catholic theology talks in terms of *sola gratia* in the matter of man's conversion. Hans Küng and others use it to describe the doctrine of justification. But the "free decision of faith" or "free cooperation" which inevitably clings to their interpretations indicates that the scale is still tipped in favor and support of the position which Erasmus was trying to defend and which Luther on good Scriptural grounds repudiated. McSorley throughout reiterates Roman Catholic doctrine of "*sanctifying grace*," as basic for man's salvation. It is "justification" by the process of *gradual renewal* of the sinner.

Treating briefly the pre-Augustinian fathers McSorley shows that they tended unwittingly, and perhaps somewhat unwillingly, to lay a greater stress on the capacity of the human will than they should have. To interpret their views "as mere moralism," however, "or as an assertion of autonomous humanism," would be to misjudge them in simplistic way.<sup>12</sup>

## AUGUSTINE

McSorley traces Augustine's change of mind from "the error of Semipelagianism, which attributed the beginning of salvation . . . to man's free will."<sup>13</sup> He goes to great pains to show that *servum arbitrium*, the enslaved will, "occurs only once in his writings." Therefore, "any supposition that Augustine intends to deny the existence of *liberum arbitrium*, . . . the truth that fallen man indeed has free will (and can choose even ethically good acts)" is "incorrect" in McSorley's judgment.<sup>14</sup> This will help him in his argument against Luther later. McSorley gives Augustine's position as follows:

The initiative in man's liberation from sin and his movement toward justification, faith, and salvation, is always taken by God. His grace prepares the will of man for faith and justification, but never excludes the operation of free will.<sup>15</sup>

## AQUINAS

A "big" chapter in McSorley's book deals with Aquinas and the early Scholastics anent free will. McSorley argues that "the early Scholastics were . . . faithful to the heritage of Augustine." Aquinas "embraced it in its entirety, making only minor modifications."<sup>16</sup> "It is clear," he says, "that for Thomas . . . man's natural free will—healed and aided by grace—is involved in the transition 'from sin to grace, . . . from slavery to liberty' which we call justification."<sup>17</sup>

Justification by infused grace and man's free participation were never more clearly stated! McSorley's defense of Aquinas' position indicates his own bias and conclusions. The language of Aquinas can often be shown to be similar to that of Luther and of St. Paul, but his theology corresponds to neither—in spite of McSorley's attempts to the contrary!

The monastic system was a prime example of how deeply work-righteous theology had penetrated, whether expressed in the terms of Lombard, Aquinas, or even Augustine. The latter, Luther realized, was being used—though perhaps unfairly on many counts—to justify the *theologia gloriæ* over against *theologia crucis*. For Luther this was the confusion of Law and Gospel. Erasmus was a classic example of the condition into which the church had come with its theology, the theology which Luther came to call the "theology of glory," since it elevated man, not God.<sup>18</sup>

## EXSURGE DOMINE

McSorley tries to soften his criticism of Luther by claiming that the *Bull Exsurge Domine* (1520) forced Luther into "the radicality of the *Assertio*"<sup>19</sup> and a denial of *liberum arbitrium*. True, in the *Assertio*, Luther says: "For I have wrongly said that free will before grace exists in name only. I should have said frankly: 'free will is a fiction, a name without correspondence in reality.'<sup>20</sup> But the fact is that *already at Heidelberg* he had expressed the same truth just as flatly and forcefully in spring 1518: "'Free Will' after the fall is nothing but a word" (Thesis 13). Luther is clearly referring to the capacity of the human will in spiritual matters.

Without warrant, McSorley concludes that with his views on divine providence, Luther "finds himself in the company of the fatalists."<sup>21</sup> An incredible conclusion for anyone who claims expertise on Luther's *Bondage of the Will*! Again and again Luther reminds Erasmus that while the sovereign majesty, omnipotence, omniscience, etc., of God take all events of history, as well as every human act, out of the realm of the contingent and accidental, nevertheless, the necessity of events under the sovereignty of God must be seen, says Luther *not as coercive or compelled* against man's will. For Luther, responsibility for his actions is never removed from man. Pharaoh and Judas are responsible! But the events of history happen, as McSorley must also admit, completely in line with the foreknowledge and purpose of the Almighty, *because God is God*.



In the things that are "below him," i.e., "in regard to his money and possessions,"<sup>22</sup> etc., Luther *never* denied that man exercises his will. This could be called "free-will," but this was not the chief issue. In the same context Luther points to that issue: "With regard to God, and in all that bears on salvation or damnation, he has no 'free-will,' but is captive, prisoner and bondsman, either to the will of God, or to the will of Satan."<sup>23</sup> Luther persisted in this concept for the rest of his life. "What is *ineffective* power," he said, "but (in plain language) *no* power?"<sup>24</sup> His considered judgment is eloquently summarized:

"Free-will" is *obviously* a term applicable only to the Divine Majesty; for only He can do, and does (as the Psalmist sings) "whatever He wills in heaven and earth" (Ps. 135, 6). If "free-will" is ascribed to men, it is ascribed with no more propriety than divinity itself would be—and no blasphemy could exceed that! So it *befits* theologians to refrain from using the term when they want to speak of human ability, and to leave it to be applied to God only . . . If they must at all hazards assign some power to men, let them teach that it must be denoted by some other term than "free-will"; especially since we know from our own observation that the mass of men are sadly deceived and misled by this phrase.<sup>25</sup>

## PART II<sup>26</sup>

With his own commitment to the will's freedom as a natural endowment, McSorley questions whether Luther's teaching of the Free Will as an attribute of God only is actually Biblical. He claims that Luther's teaching is philosophical, not Biblical. Actually, the reverse is true. Bente states properly that "the bent of Luther's mind was not speculative, but truly evangelical and Scriptural."<sup>27</sup> McSorley could not agree with this. He contends that "Luther is clearly not arguing for the unfree will because of man's sinfulness, but because of his creatureliness!"<sup>28</sup> At first, for his own purposes, McSorley goes to great lengths to try to defend the early Luther against a necessitarian viewpoint, hoping to make him talk more like Augustine, Aquinas, Boethius, Anselm, etc.<sup>29</sup> But right here he fails to understand Luther.

Offering Biblical evidence, Luther held that man, *even in his pristine purity* was not free, but the dutiful servant of his Creator, Who alone was free and Whom he served in all purity and holy obedience with joy, and willingly. In spite of what McSorley claims, Luther held this position from the time of Heidelberg in early 1518, to his death. He had stated unequivocally in Heidelberg Thesis 15: "Nor was free will able to remain as a realizable potentiality in the state of innocence. Even there it was an unrealizable possibility, not to speak of making any progress toward the good." Luther's great *Genesis Commentary* is evidence that Luther held this position to the end of his life. *Fallen man*, of course, was in a desperate condition, because now with all his God-given powers he was turned against God. His will was in a bondage so total that Scripture

describes him as dead, blind, and an enemy of God. Already at Heidelberg, Luther had stated very plainly that "Free-will" after the fall is nothing but a word, and as long as it is doing what is within it, it is committing deadly sin" (Thesis 13).

### NECESSITY UNDER GOD

Luther, justifiably, had no use for the Scholastic distinction between "necessity of consequence" and "necessity of the thing consequent," of which McSorley makes so much.<sup>30</sup> Somewhat condescendingly he notes in regard to Luther that "the distinction is admittedly not an easy one to grasp."<sup>31</sup> This distinction Luther knew perfectly well.<sup>32</sup> Luther was deliberately refusing to ascribe any positive power in man for the so-called "free decision of faith." McSorley has no intention of acknowledging this. Luther refused, on good Scriptural grounds, to solve the mystery of why some are saved and others lost.

For Luther, the matter was very basic, affecting the very nature of God. "The omnipotence and foreknowledge of God . . . utterly destroy the doctrine of 'free-will.'"<sup>33</sup> "If you hesitate to believe, or are too proud to acknowledge, that God foreknows and wills all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutably, how can you believe, trust and rely on His promises?"<sup>34</sup>, prods Luther. He goes so far as to assert that, if God can be thwarted in anything that He foreknows and there is no necessity of events from God's side, then "Christian faith is utterly destroyed."<sup>35</sup> This, along with the fact that men are guilty also of "insulting and dishonoring Scripture and God!"<sup>36</sup>

Even McSorley concedes that "it is never a sound principle of interpretation to suppose that a thinker of Luther's caliber *truly* contradicts himself in such an obvious way."<sup>37</sup> He leaves the paradox stand, willing to remain silent, until glory reveals more. The same patience cannot be noted in McSorley, Aquinas, Trent, etc. By choosing to uphold free will for man and the sovereign providence of God at one and the same time, they are the ones who end up with a real problem. Luther chastises Erasmus for doing just this: "It would certainly be a hard question, I allow—indeed, an insoluble one—if you sought to establish *both* the foreknowledge of God *and* the freedom of man together."<sup>38</sup> This can only be done "by doing violence to the text,"<sup>39</sup> as Luther charges.

At the same time that Luther refuses to sit in judgment on the Almighty, as he regards those who are saved (here Luther bespeak holy awe for the unspeakable mercy of God!), or those who are finally lost (where he asks for a finger on the mouth and silence, for we know only that unbelief condemns and are unable to answer why God's grace was ineffectual in them to whom the same means of grace were extended!), Luther refuses resolutely to take the synergist way out and find the explanation in "the free decision" of man under the grace of God, as does McSorley!

Luther sweeps all of reason's objections aside which insist that God "transgresses the bounds of equity in man's sight." God remains "just and true in His own sight," even though to us "*HOW* it is ju

for Him to crown the unworthy is incomprehensible now."<sup>40</sup> We dare not try to peer beyond what God has actually revealed. Especially must *we* avoid judging *Him*! When human reason objects that then "there is no God, or that God is unjust," Luther parries:

The light of glory insists otherwise, and will one day reveal God, to whom alone belongs a judgment whose justice is incomprehensible, as a God whose justice is most righteous and evident—*provided only that in the meanwhile we believe it*, as we are instructed and encouraged to do by the example of the light of grace explaining what was a puzzle of the same order to the light of nature.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps this does not answer and satisfy man's speculation. Still it teaches one important lesson, taught by Paul and repeated by Luther: Who are we to challenge God at this point, or at any point for that matter? His ways are right and true altogether and always. He does us no harm, since He owes us nothing, and has received nothing from us. Man can do nothing to alter the situation of his unrighteousness before Him. Thus we are utterly dependent upon whatever He promises in His grace, and can only thankfully receive it. Our question of whether God deals unfairly with some as over against others, must be silenced.

"It is not lawful to ask" further, or probe deeper, into these questions, cautions Luther.<sup>42</sup> Speculation here will always lead in the end to tragic, not to say insolent, conclusions. "Whatever is above us does not concern us," is Luther's way of finally silencing wrongful inquisitiveness.<sup>43</sup>

#### FOUR CRITICISMS ANSWERED

McSorley's hand is clearly shown in this evaluation of Luther's position:

When Luther says that the change of our wills from sin to justice depends solely on the overcoming and the defeat of Satan by someone stronger—Christ—and neglects entirely to mention that the personal, free decision of the sinner—made possible, to be sure, only by the healing and liberating grace of God—is essential to justification, then he is no longer on biblical or Catholic ground . . . The call to justification and salvation is addressed to the sinner from whom the response of free obedience to Christ and to justice is required . . . How can Luther explain the warnings of the New Testament against possible loss of salvation and the fact that in the New Testament the Christian is called to do battle against sin if the Christian man has "no free will to turn elsewhere?" Luther further overlooks the fact that it is man—not God—who is responsible for allowing Satan to dominate him.<sup>44</sup>

McSorley has misread Luther completely. Meanwhile he evinces presuppositions to which he is committed as Romanist theologian. In answer to his charges: —

1. Luther at no time denies that man is fully accountable and "responsible for allowing Satan to dominate him." As "Judas acted



willingly," even though God foreknew and foretold his act of treason the same is true of each sinner.<sup>45</sup> "The ungodly man," avers Luther "like Satan his prince, is *wholly turned to self* and to his own" and "his corruption, his turning of himself from God, makes it impossible for him to be moved and made to act well" by any power that is in him.<sup>46</sup> Luther never lost sight of nor denied man's own accountability

2. Luther reckons the warnings in Scripture against possible loss of salvation as threats of the Law, spoken against the pretensions of the old man or the old sinful nature, always with us. These commands of the Law say nothing about man's capacity spiritually to change himself. McSorley, against Luther, contends that they constitute the universally accepted argument "for the existence of a power of free decision in man."<sup>47</sup> Noting that "we have encountered this argument for free will in authors from the time of Augustine through Thomas Aquinas," McSorley states that "commands, laws, prohibitions, invitations, admonitions and promises to which a condition is attached all presuppose or imply that the person receiving these commands etc., has free will."<sup>48</sup> Then he adds the capstone: "It is also used by Erasmus."

*This is precisely why* Luther opposed even Augustine on this point, as well as Aquinas, and Aristotle, from whom much was borrowed. All of them left too much room for the capacity of human will in healing man's problem. The fault of Erasmus' *Diatribes* was, as Luther states, that "it makes no distinction at all between the word of promise and of law; with supreme foolishness, it establishes 'free will' from words of law, and confirms it, far more ludicrously still by words of promise."<sup>49</sup>

God's commands today for sinful man have another function. They are given, says Luther, "that through them proud, blind man may learn the plague of his own impotence."<sup>50</sup> They press upon man what he indeed *ought to do* but now is *unable to do*. This inability man must see clearly. "God can cure this pride and ignorance by a readier remedy than the publication of His law."<sup>51</sup> The Law must smash all pretension within man, if he is to be open to and approachable by the mysteries of God's wondrous justice in Christ, given to faith in the broken and contrite heart.

3. McSorley only repeats Erasmus in describing justification and salvation as something "required" of the sinner in his "response of free obedience to Christ and to justice." Again McSorley follows Erasmus by rejecting Luther's contention that the Law teaches sinful man not what he *can* do but what he *ought* to do. Absurdly he states that "Luther lays down a principle which forces him to stand alone in the history of Christian Biblical interpretation."<sup>52</sup> With the totality of the Biblical revelation, Luther showed that "Scripture sets before us a man who is not only bound, wretched, captive, sick and dead but who, through the operation of Satan his Lord, *adds to his other miseries* that of blindness, so that he believes himself to be free, happy, possessed of liberty, ability, whole and alive."<sup>53</sup> Therefore, the "word of Moses the lawgiver is the opposite of this"—that is, of building man up with confidence in his own powers rather than "breaking his



down"—in order that the Law, "may make him ready for grace, and send him to Christ to be saved."<sup>51</sup>

4. McSorley stands with Catholic and not Biblical teaching by including the "personal, free decision of the sinner" along with the work of Christ as the triumph over sin and Satan. In spite of his disclaimer of Semi-pelagianism, his equation of faith with obedience is synergistic! For Luther and Scripture, obedience is only the fruit of faith. McSorley's position is very plain: "Whereas the Pelagians affirmed free will alone—or that free will is grace—and whereas Luther affirms grace alone, Augustine and Erasmus, and the Catholic tradition with them, *affirm both grace and free will.*"<sup>55</sup> Here it is plainly. **LUTHER WAS RIGHT ALL ALONG!**

Rome knows only two choices, Semipelagianism or synergism. McSorley calls it a "paradox" that Luther charged Erasmus with opening the door to Pelagianism because he had argued "from the fact of the law to the existence of free will," and then in the same breath allowed that this same tendency should "apply equally to Augustine, the greatest of all anti-Pelagians."<sup>55a</sup> That Augustine was, indeed, Christianity's great champion against the Pelagian heresy, Luther would have been the last to deny. But that this is not to say that the redoubtable bishop of Hippo was not prone to synergism, and a confusion of justification and sanctification, this Luther also alertly discerned. It revolved around the term *caritas* (charity, or love) and *fides* (faith). Which came first? Augustine said *caritas*; Luther held that it was *fides*, and that it was not charity or works which "form nor adorn my faith," but just the reverse: "my faith formeth and adorneth charity."<sup>56</sup> It was hardly a small difference. The whole Reformation cause rode on it!<sup>57</sup>

#### GOD AND EVIL

Luther plainly abjurs the thought of God acting evilly Himself or being the prompter or originator of fresh evil in any way, in man or in Satan. Still he can say, "God moves and works all in all . . . , even in Satan and the ungodly."<sup>58</sup> McSorley, however, persists in saying that "Luther seems to make God the actual originator of sin."<sup>59</sup> Luther fully anticipated such accusation, stating in direct reference to the problem of evil: "It now remains for someone to ask: Why then does God not cease from that movement of omnipotence by which the will of the ungodly is moved to go on being evil, and to grow worse?" Though Luther in no way implied that he could peer through the opaque cloud of evil which hangs heavily upon the world and human history, he gave the only answer possible to that question: "This is to desire that for the sake of the ungodly God should cease to be God!"<sup>60</sup> Fearing always "to make excuses for God," or "to accuse him of unrighteousness," Luther discretely put the damper on every presumptuous demand that God ought to "alter those evil wills which he moves." He stated flatly: "This question touches on the secrets of His Majesty, where 'His judgments are past finding out' (Rom. 11, 33)."<sup>61</sup> Beyond this point Luther simply refused to venture.

Luther resolutely rejected denying the omnipotent sovereignty of God for the sake of elevating man as a free agent alongside the Al-

mighty. It was the old dualistic heresy of gnosticism and of an assorted host of other philosophies and theologies. Luther recognized it for what it was. God is no mere spectator in a world of free agents which He cannot control. Nor did God exercise limited control. Rather, we see how God continues to support the world which He created, giving it life. At the same time He interposes force and power when, where, and in whatever manner He wills, to thwart Satan's evil sway and men's evil doings. The point is that evil as little as anything else can cause God to cease to exist or to rule.

### LUTHER — ST. PAUL — ST. JOHN

McSorley chooses not to go into detail on Luther's fine exposition of Paul's and John's teaching concerning the human will on the grounds that "we have already seen so much of the same material in our biblical chapter and in our investigations of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas."<sup>62</sup> Yet he admits, as every objective reader must, that "never have we seen the doctrine unfolded with such concentration and power!"<sup>63</sup> Small comfort, or hollow praise, after first denying the very thing which St. Paul, St. John, and Luther all contend for! Here is the very section, where McSorley should have taken his lesson! Luther throws out the challenge, that "the entire Scripture, every jot and tittle of it, stands on my side." By the time he is finished, the arguments for free will lie smashed to smithereens under the bombardment of his skillful unfolding of Scripture's truth.<sup>64</sup>

A thinker of Luther's caliber (McSorley's own phrase) is simply not that ambivalent or confused in his thinking. Have I ever denied, shouts Luther or been unaware "that an ungodly will is a *something*, and not a mere non-entity?"<sup>65</sup> But the point is that the so-called "free-will" can do *nothing* at all, not even "a little imperfect something"<sup>66</sup> in the matter of the sinner's righteousness before God (*coram Deo*), but is unrighteous, blind to the knowledge of God and good, completely lacking in power for good and able only to do evil, and is set to despising God with all its faculties.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, those who support free will as a little something, if no more than to speak of the free decision of faith cooperating with the grace of God, are worse than the Pelagians in Luther's book; in blunt terms, "double-dyed Pelagians" who try to cover up their tracks but are not as honest as the Pelagians who "confess and assert condign merit straightforwardly, candidly, and honestly, calling a spade a spade, and teaching what they really hold."<sup>68</sup> However, "both errors," says Luther, the Apostle Paul "pounds . . . to a single pulp with one word," when in connection with the righteousness of sinners before God he says, "that all are justified freely, without the law."<sup>69</sup> This teaching we subvert when "we try to give ourselves some tiny little credit,"<sup>70</sup> adds Luther. And the tragedy is that "the guardians of free-will" fail "to recognize that when they assert 'free-will' they are denying Christ."<sup>71</sup>

The issue for Luther is that by "setting up 'free-will,' you set aside Christ, and make havoc of the entire Scripture."<sup>72</sup> Luther is quite right—and no theologian has ever been able to break the challenge thrown squarely into the face of Erasmus:



If, therefore, we conduct our argument with Scripture as judge, the victory in every respect belongs to me; for there is not one jot or tittle of Scripture left that does not condemn the doctrine of 'free-will.'<sup>73</sup>

### THE WILL AND COOPERATION

The same kind of rebuff must be given McSorley's contention that Luther at given places speaks of "cooperation" with God in the matter of justification. Luther *never* confused this matter, once the clarity of the Apostle Paul's argument had dawned on him in 1518. Luther spoke of "cooperation" only in three ways: (1) in connection with man's acting under the sovereign will of the Creator, as a secondary cause under "the motion of His omnipotence";<sup>74</sup> (2) in the sense that we human beings "are fit subjects" for the Spirit's action of grace, for "God did not make heaven for geese";<sup>75</sup> (3) especially as regards man's powers of holiness after his conversion, his "renewed creation," when it can properly be said that "God does not work in us without us."<sup>76</sup> But, "what is hereby attributed to 'free-will'?"<sup>77</sup> Conversion or the "new creation" is something that lies entirely out of the power of man and entirely within the gracious working of the Holy Spirit alone.<sup>78</sup> "Thus will the Scriptures be free from contradictions"<sup>79</sup> adds Luther. McSorley makes a poor case trying to show that Luther contradicts himself.

### LUTHER AND THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

In many ways the most significant, as well as the most damaging, section of McSorley's work comes in his treatment of the Lutheran Confessions. It is an exceedingly deft ploy, to set Luther on one side over against the combined forces of the Lutheran Confessions and the so-called "Catholic" position, the position of Aquinas, Augustine, etc. The question is, however, whether the strategy is valid or demonstrable. If McSorley is right in claiming a kind of "harmony" between the Lutheran Confessions, particularly the *Formula of Concord* and the "Catholic" position of free will, then he has achieved the intended goal of removing a very basic roadblock to reunification of the Roman and Lutheran communions. An amazing ecumenical coup! But if he is wrong, then what he has perpetrated is either diversionary tactics of the most subtle kind, or scholarship of questionable intent, or both.

McSorley begins with a reference to Luther's *Smalcald Articles* of 1537. Noting that they were written simultaneously with the Reformer's lectures on *Genesis*, he acknowledges that Luther is quite consistent with his earlier position in the *De Servo Arbitrio*. In other words, "Luther still held it to be 'nothing but error and stupidity' when 'scholastic theologians' taught that after the fall of Adam 'man has a free will, either to do good and refrain from evil or to refrain from good and do evil.'"<sup>80</sup> But after this citation, with which McSorley quite agrees, since he has repudiated the extreme Pelagian view (as have most Catholic theologians), he very systematically begins to take Luther apart.

First of all, he baldly claims that "it is striking how few of the

elements of Luther's doctrine of the unfree will which we have had to criticize are found in the Lutheran Confessional writings."<sup>81</sup> Unquestionably he has the so-called "necessitarian" viewpoint of Luther in mind, though as we have shown above his argument against Luther cannot be upheld. Luther very carefully distinguished between necessity of coercion and necessity of immutability of events under the sovereign action of God. The latter he upheld, as have most Christian theologians; the former he plainly disavowed.

In the same vein McSorley again raises the old canard that Luther by his teaching on divine omnipotence made God the source of evil, while "the Confessions," so McSorley argues, "make it perfectly clear that the cause of sin is not in God, but the perverted will of the devil and of man."<sup>82</sup> The Confessors of 1577, to say the least, would have been totally dumbfounded at this charge, for they were of the opinion that they were merely reproducing the views of Luther exactly. So McSorley's implication is a monkeywrench thrown deliberately to strip the meshing gears of Luther and the Confessors. Any objective reader of both cannot possibly draw the conclusion McSorley has.

But McSorley, finally, is not so much concerned with this question. The really key issue—and the reason why McSorley, like Erasmus, wants to knock Luther down on the question of God's total sovereignty in all happenings and events and actions of men and things—is that synergism must have just a little elbow room—infinitesimal though it be—for the human will, and the part that the human will plays in conversion. "Decision of free will"—this is the issue, along with the enabling grace of God! If McSorley can claim the Lutheran Confessions for his side here, and repudiate Luther, then indeed he has won a major theological victory in a battle that has been raging for four and a half centuries. So, he ventures this judgment, fully aware of what is involved for Lutheran theologians if he is right:

Finally, in the Confessions—especially in the *Formula of Concord*—one encounters an element which was totally lacking in DSA—the element of a personal involvement or decision of free will in man's rebirth in Christ. In none of the confessional statements is there any suggestion that man is so totally passive in justification that he makes no free decision in determining whether God or Satan will 'ride' him.<sup>83</sup>

Curiously, but understandably, McSorley omits chapter and verse for his claim that the *Formula of Concord* teaches the "decision of free will" in the matter of justification and rebirth in Christ. Any one who knows these articles is aware that he will never find one. Lamely he admits that the *Formula of Concord* states that "there is . . . no cooperation on the part of our will in man's conversion," but then blithely goes on to read his synergistic presuppositions into the *Formula's* teaching by claiming that "free will" is *subsumed* "under the action of grace in conversion."<sup>84</sup>

He is still talking of the free decision of faith in the sinner's rebirth when he says that "the Holy Spirit *begins* the work of conver-



sion in us" and enables us "to cooperate with him because of the new powers and the gifts he gives us."<sup>85</sup> Identifying this as the "biblical-Catholic doctrine," McSorley claims that this is also the teaching of the *Formula of Concord*, thus setting it over against Luther. *What he fails to note is that both Luther and the Confessions* speak of the renewed will in man *after* conversion, a new spirit and will to holiness which cooperates with the indwelling Spirit. But on justification!—the Confessions, like Luther, absolutely rule out *any* power of will, *any* free decision of faith which has its source in man.

There is no other conclusion than that McSorley has "used" the Lutheran Confessions to his own end. This is inexcusable. They are public documents and have been so for 400 years, clearly and unambiguously stating the Lutheran position. They can as little be turned to support synergism, subtle or gross, as can the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent be made to read like an exposition of Luther's *Commentary on Galatians*! The *Formula of Concord*, in its *Epitome*, Article II, on Free Will, cites the words of Jesus, "Without Me ye can do nothing" (John 15, 5), and then avers that "with these brief words He (Christ) denies to the free will its powers, and ascribes everything to God's grace, in order that no one may boast before God."<sup>86</sup> And after laying flat the Pelagian and Semipelagian heresies, the *Epitome* smashes completely the synergistic notion that "the will of man from its own natural powers can add something, though little and feebly . . . and cooperate, qualify, and prepare itself for grace, and embrace and accept it, and believe the Gospel."<sup>87</sup> Only the Holy Ghost and the Word are recognized by the *Epitome* as efficient causes in man's conversion, expressly ruling out anything like the free decision of faith by disclaiming that man can "by his own power" . . . yield faith to it (the Word) and accept it."<sup>88</sup>

The *Solid Declaration* of the *Formula* is even more explicit. On the same subject of the human will, the *Formula*, (Art. II), in agreement with Luther, absolutely and unequivocally *excludes* "the human powers of the natural free will." It asserts that "neither entirely, nor half, nor in any, even the least or most inconsiderable part" are "conversion, faith in Christ, regeneration, renewal, and all that belongs to their efficacious beginning and completion" to be ascribed to the human will, "but *in solidum*, that is, entirely, solely, to the divine working and the Holy Ghost."<sup>89</sup> Thereupon the *Formula* underscores its position by appropriate references to the *Augsburg Confession*, the *Apology* ("which ascribes no ability to the will of man, either for beginning good or for cooperating of itself"<sup>90</sup>), the Large Catechism, and the Small Catechism. Then, with the same intent, it quotes significant passages from Luther's influential *Large Confession Concerning the Lord's Supper* of 1528 and the *De Servo Arbitrio*, noting of the latter that after Luther had "elucidated and supported this position well and thoroughly" against Erasmus, he afterward "repeated and explained it in his glorious exposition of the Book of Genesis, especially of chapter 26."<sup>91</sup>

Therefore, it is not only unconscionable that McSorley should distort the relation between Luther and the Confessions, but he also fails to note the judgment which the *Formula* places upon him and

all, who like him, support the "free decision of faith": "*Therefore it is teaching incorrectly to assert that unregenerate man has still so much power as to desire to receive the Gospel and to be comforted by it, and that thus the natural human will cooperates somewhat in conversion.*"<sup>92</sup> Rather than allow a wedge to be driven between itself and the other Confessions, as well as the "other writings of this excellent, highly enlightened theologian" (Luther), the *Formula* brands a notion like that of McSorley for what it is, *subtle, but undisguised, synergism!*

Of course, once the will of man is renewed in conversion, the Confessions speak of the Christian as willing that which is good, of "cooperating," not "from our carnal natural powers, but from the new powers and gifts which the Holy Ghost has begun in us in conversion."<sup>93</sup>

But McSorley does not give up easily. There is always the recourse of the *ad hominem* argument, in this case showing that the so-called friends of Luther have turned against him, too. Strangely missing are the names of the stalwarts who fashioned the historic *Formula of Concord*, the men who unmasked the synergistic Philippists (whom McSorley finds congenial, as did Catholics in the 16th century), and saved the day for evangelical Christianity and genuinely Lutheran theology: — Chemnitz, Andreae, Selnecker, Musculus, Koerner, Chytraeus. Instead, McSorley refers to Melanchthon as rejecting Luther's "concept of the unfree will" and notes how his break "on this decisive point gave rise after Luther's death to a fierce struggle within Lutheranism: the Synergistic controversy."<sup>94</sup> How true! But it was not Melanchthon's position which the Confessors of 1577 espoused, but Luther's! Melanchthon and his view of man's cooperating will in conversion were sharply refuted in the *Formula of Concord* in no uncertain terms. McSorley should have stated this frankly.

#### LUTHER AND HIS "LUTHERAN" OPPONENTS

It matters little that McSorley can claim that "the mainstream of Lutheran theology . . . has consistently affirmed, along with the Catholic tradition, that faith involves a free decision on the part of man."<sup>95</sup> As in Luther's day there was a Melanchthon, and in Chemnitz's the Philippists, so in every age since then Lutheran theology has been plagued with synergistic advocates. The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod has for over a century, chiefly through C. F. W. Walther's influence, been a bulwark against synergistic forces appearing within American Lutheranism. It is never an easy matter to wipe out man's built-in synergistic or Semipelagian tendencies, as McSorley himself has aptly stated.

Quite a roster of notables stand against Luther in our day. Pannenberg faults Luther for not allowing "a place for a decision of faith" in his *De Servo Arbitrio*.<sup>96</sup> Pinomaa, the Finnish Lutheran historian judges Luther's *magnum opus* very severely, claiming that it "has never found a place in the system of the majority of Lutheran theologians and even today does not find a place."<sup>97</sup> He then charges that the question of the freedom of the will is the place where there



is need to distinguish the "true Luther and the Luther who has been distorted by the Lutheran tradition."<sup>98</sup> No doubt he has the Confessors of 1577 and the orthodox theologians in mind. But neither he, nor any recent protagonist for the same stance, has been able to prove his case!

The facts are rather that the hue and cry is going up from the side of those who are more "Philippist" than Lutheran. It really makes little difference that McSorley has a front line like Pannenberg, Gogarten, Bultmann, Brunner, Althaus, Barth, and Pinomaa. Luther, quarterbacking the opposition, has an equally good team, and *above all he has Scriptures on his side!* So, he could not have cared less who opposed him, even if he stood alone, not as long as Holy Scripture made the answer so clear. Neither ought we. In his unexcelled introduction to the *Triglot Concordia Bente* has summed up very well the question of dispute on whether or not Luther and the *Formula of Concord* agree or not. He states:

*The Formula of Concord*, therefore, endorsed Luther's *De Servo Arbitrio* without expressing any strictures or reservations whatever, and particularly in Articles I, II, and XI, also embodied its essential thoughts, though not all of its phrases, statements, and arguments . . . In its doctrine of predestination as well as of free will, therefore, the *Formula of Concord* is not a compromise between synergism and monergism, but signifies a victory of Luther over the later Melancthon.<sup>99</sup>

That is an excellent statement by a scholar without peer on the Lutheran Confessions, as well as by a man who was *actually committed* to them with *unequivocal allegiance*. The question, in other words, finally boils down to whether McSorley is quoting gnesio-Lutherans or merely reasonable facsimiles thereof. Should the words of the "Lutheran" H. Mulert, really "provoke deep reflection," as McSorley urges, when Mulert asks: "Which Protestant Christians, moreover, which Lutheran Churches, take seriously the content of Luther's main systematic work, 'On the Enslaved Will'?"<sup>100</sup> Which Lutherans, may we ask? Those who view the Confessions as historical antiques? Those who stand on them and still know what the article on justification means; who understand how the enslaved will of man is hopeless and helpless *entirely* on matters that pertain to man's spiritual relation with God; and who believe that conversion is wrought solely (*solidum*) by the grace of God without the deeds of the law, without, in other words, the assenting, cooperating will of man, or the *free decision* of faith, without a combination of the grace of God and the free will of man?

#### A FINAL WORD AND JUDGMENT

McSorley makes the final "pitch" for his and the Thomistic-Catholic position and Vatican II's appeal for "the restoration of unity among all Christians" by laying down the following proposition. Again it is in the words of Mulert: "If we do not follow the Reformer in his central ideas, then it is natural for our Catholic brothers to

ask whether the separation of the Church was necessary at all or whether it was even justifiable."<sup>101</sup>

It was not necessary, nor was it justifiable, if Luther and the Lutheran Confessions were wrong on the doctrine of man, on the total depravity of the sinner, on the enslaved condition of the human will, on the doctrine of salvation *sola gratia* according to the Reformation's *theology of the cross* and not according to Aquinas' (and Augustine's) *theology of glory*. In Catholic theology there was room for "the free decision of faith." In Luther's theology, *theologia crucis*, it is absolutely and irrevocably excluded, just as surely as St. St. Paul puts it in Romans 11, 6: "If it is a matter of the grace of God, it cannot be a question of their actions especially deserving God's favour, for that would make grace meaningless." (Phillips' translation)

So, the question, "Luther: Right or Wrong?" is settled finally on Scripture's own verdict. McSorley makes a valiant attempt, but he cannot make the Thomistic-Catholic position look any better, nor can he finally aid the ecumenical movement of our day by repudiating Luther on human freedom. Ecumenical hope rises only if the extreme position of the Council of Trent were to be retracted, or at least radically reshaped, so that the pure Gospel which Luther preached to the world in his day might once again get full hearing. But this carries quite a price. It involves not only the admission that *not Luther, but McSorley is wrong*, and also the repudiation of the theology of glory which trails back through Vatican II to Trent to Aquinas and beyond.

Luther was the one who put his finger on the church's sorest spot in his day; and we must see it for our day. "Theology of glory," in which *gratia infusa* plays the key role, must be repudiated as the plague on Christian theology; and in its place, for the sake of men's souls, and so also for reunion of the church (if there is to be any genuine return) we must take Luther seriously: *Unum praedica, sapientia crucis!* (One thing preach, the wisdom of the cross!) This is the article on which the church stands or falls, the teaching on the justification of the sinner *sola gratia/sola fide*; and no amount of scholarship can rectify the wrong that is done when this article is compromised in any way.

The vote goes to Luther against McSorley. Unfortunately! Unfortunately, we say, because if there is one document in the history of Christian theology which could set Rome and the Protestant world straight *and together in a God-pleasing unity* it would be acceptance of Luther's great contribution to clear teaching on the Gospel as set forth in the *De Servo Arbitrio*.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Culminating five years of doctoral studies at the University of Munich under the sponsorship of the Paulist Fathers, McSorley's book was chosen as the first volume in a new series on "Contributions to Ecumenical Theology," by the Ecumenical Institute of the University of Munich, and published in German, 1967. It has achieved a kind of "first" in the American translation in English, by its publication under



- the joint acgis of Newman Press (Catholic) and Augsburg Publishing House (American Lutheran Church), in 1969.
2. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*. Translated by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston. Revell, Westwood, N.J., 1957, p. 78. (Hereafter referred to as DSA). Corresponding references in the Weimar edition, vol. XVIII, will hereafter be noted as WA. The above citation occurs in that volume on p. 614.—“The true scope of *De Servo Arbitrio*,” says Bente in his introduction to *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 211, “is to prove that man is saved, not by any ability or efforts of his own, but solely by grace.”
  3. *Ibid.*
  4. DSA 65. WA 602.
  5. Quoted in Harry J. McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong?* Newman Press, N.Y., and Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, 1969, p. 11. (Hereafter referred to as McS.).
  6. McS 14.
  7. *Ibid.*, 21.
  8. *Ibid.*
  9. *Ibid.*
  10. DSA 84. WA 619.
  11. McS 29.
  12. *Ibid.*, 61.
  13. *Ibid.*, 73.
  14. *Ibid.*, 110.
  15. *Ibid.*
  16. *Ibid.*
  17. *Ibid.*
  18. As an Augustinian the young Luther held views reflecting his medieval training, as evidenced by the 95 Theses. None knew this better than Luther himself! He himself corrects his own misconceptions, shortly after the posting of the theses, in his *Explanations to the Theses*. But the fateful spiral on which Luther had been weaned theologically—the more grace, the more works; the more works, the more grace—was not merely an Occam-Biel syndrome, but the very fabric of Catholicism, which included the theology of that church’s greatest teacher, Aquinas. McSorley blames chiefly the Nominalists for over-playing the powers of the unaided human will and claims they influenced the early Luther considerably on this matter.
  19. McS 254.
  20. Quoted in McSorley, 255.
  21. McS 256.
  22. DSA 107.
  23. *Ibid.*
  24. *Ibid.*, 104. WA 636.
  25. DSA 105. Emphasis added. WA 636f.
  26. After almost 300 pages of text, McSorley finally turns full attention to Luther and his DSA.
  27. *Concordia Triglotta*, introduction p. 225.
  28. McS 309.
  29. *Ibid.*, 313ff.
  30. *Ibid.*
  31. *Ibid.*
  32. The “necessity of consequence” turns on the cause and effect principle; the question concerning “the thing consequent” involves a great philosophical problem—but precisely the one Luther was addressing: Do things happen by a certain necessity under God, or by contingency, as it were, to God’s surprise, as spectator-God? Luther’s answer is obvious.
  33. DSA 217. WA 718.
  34. *Ibid.*, 83f. WA 619.
  35. *Ibid.*, 84. WA 619.
  36. *Ibid.*, 86. WA 621.
  37. McS 328.
  38. DSA 215. WA 717.

39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, 234. WA 731.
41. *Ibid.*, 317. (cf. also p. 315). Emphasis added.
42. *Ibid.*, 171. WA 686.
43. *Ibid.*, 170. WA 685.
44. McS 334f.
45. DSA 213. WA 715.
46. *Ibid.*, 205. Emphasis added. WA 710.
47. McS 349.
48. *Ibid.*
49. DSA 188. WA 698.
50. *Ibid.*, 160. WA 678.
51. *Ibid.*, 153. WA 674.
52. McS 350.
53. DSA 162. Emphasis added. WA 679.
54. *Ibid.*
55. McS 352.
- 55a. *Ibid.*
56. From Luther's Commentary on Galatians. LW 26, 161; WA 40, 275. In this context, on the basis of Gal. 2,19 Luther sharply distinguishes righteousness by the law or works from justification by faith alone.
57. Perhaps it was the weakness of those who followed Augustine that they did not provide the church with strongly evangelical theologians who understood the right relation between *fides* and *caritas*, the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, the difference between *theologia crucis* and *theologia gloriae*; but the end result was the same: *gratia infusa* had been inserted into the doctrine on justification.
58. DSA 204. WA 709.
59. McS 343. Cf. also p. 369 where McSorley repeats the same charge in his concluding arguments against Luther. (No. 18)
60. DSA 208.
61. *Ibid.*
62. McSorley, 354.
63. *Ibid.*
64. DSA 273ff. WA 757ff.
65. *Ibid.*, 265. DA 751.
66. *Ibid.*, 261. DA 749.
67. *Ibid.*, 280. WA 762.
68. *Ibid.*, 293. WA 770.
69. *Ibid.*, 294. WA 770.
70. *Ibid.*, 295. WA 771.
71. *Ibid.*, 305. WA 777.
72. *Ibid.*, 307. WA 779.
73. *Ibid.*, 312. WA 782.
74. *Ibid.*, 267. WA 753.
75. *Ibid.*, 105. WA 636.
76. *Ibid.*, 268. WA 754.
77. *Ibid.*
78. *Ibid.*, 267f. WA 753f.
79. *Ibid.*, 271. WA 755.
80. McSorley, 357. (Quoted from *Smalcald Articles III, I, E.*)
81. *Ibid.*, 359.
82. *Ibid.*
83. *Ibid.*, 361.
84. *Ibid.*
85. *Ibid.*, 362.
86. FC (Epit.), II, 6.
87. *Ibid.*, II, 11.
88. *Ibid.*, II, 19.
89. FC (SD) II, 25.
90. *Ibid.*, 33.
91. *Ibid.*, 44.
92. *Ibid.*, 45.
93. *Ibid.*, 65.
94. McS 363.
95. *Ibid.*, 364.
96. Quoted in McSorley, 356.
97. *Ibid.*, 363.
98. *Ibid.*
99. F. Bente, *Concordia Triglotta*. Concordia, St. Louis, 1921, p. 226. Articles I, II, and XI are on Original Sin, Free Will, and Predestination in that order.
100. Quoted in McSorley, 366.
101. McS 366.