

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

Erasmus the Exegete
MARVIN ANDERSON

Erasmus on the Study of Scriptures
CARL S. MEYER

Erasmus, Luther, and Aquinas
PHILIP WATSON

Forms of Church and Ministry
ERWIN L. LUEKER

Homiletics

Book Review

Vol. XL

December 1969

No. 11

Erasmus, Luther, and Aquinas

PHILIP WATSON

One of the most recent additions to the growing Roman Catholic literature on Luther is a study of his doctrine of the bondage of the will in the light—as the subtitle of the German edition says—of the Biblical and ecclesiastical tradition.¹ Its author, Harry J. McSorley, endorses Luther's own view of the outstanding importance of his *De servo arbitrio* as dealing with the most central issue of his reforming work. He also endorses Luther's claim that his primary concern was a reformation, not simply of practical abuses but of doctrine, and he fully agrees that no area of doctrine in Luther's time was more in need of reform than that of grace and free will. What is more, he argues that Luther's view on this subject is in intention, if not always in his way of expressing it, entirely in harmony with authentic Catholic teaching, of which in his time there was a widespread and disastrous ignorance.

In the light of this it may not be inappropriate in celebrating the 500th anniversary of the birth of Luther's distinguished opponent on this subject, Erasmus

¹ Harry J. McSorley, *Luthers Lehre vom unfreien Willen nach seiner Hauptschrift De Servo Arbitrio im Lichte der biblischen und kirchlichen Tradition* (Munich: Hüber, 1967); English trans., *Luther: Right or Wrong? An Ecumenical Theological Study of Luther's Major Work, The Bondage of the Will* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969).

The author is the Rall Professor of Systematic Theology at Garrett Theological Seminary in Evanston, Ill.

of Rotterdam, to take a fresh look at the controversy between these two men, with some assistance from Aquinas as a representative of authentic Catholic teaching.²

To begin with, we may recall Luther's statement in his *Assertio omnium articulorum*, published late in 1520, that

I was wrong in saying that free choice before grace is a reality only in name. I should have said "free choice is in reality a fiction, or a name without reality." For no one has it in his own power to think a good or bad thought, but everything (as Wycliff's article condemned at Constance rightly teaches) happens by absolute necessity.

It is with this statement that Erasmus essentially takes issue in his *De libero arbitrio*, written early in 1524 when he was at last persuaded to dissociate himself from Luther. Unfortunately, as McSorley points out, his argument concentrates on the last part of the statement (concerning "necessity"), and never really comes to grips with Luther's essential concern. The nature of that concern Luther explains in replying to Erasmus in the *De servo arbitrio*. It is the question "whether the will does anything or nothing in matters pertaining to

² Much of what follows is drawn from my Theological Introduction to *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* (Vol. XVII of the *Library of Christian Classics*, shortly to be published by the Westminster Press, Philadelphia, in which Erasmus' *On the Freedom of the Will* and Luther's *On the Bondage of the Will* are translated and edited respectively by E. G. Rupp in collaboration with N. Marlowe and P. S. Watson in collaboration with B. Drewery).

eternal salvation"; and Erasmus ought to be aware

that this is the cardinal issue between us, the point on which everything in this controversy turns. For what we are doing is to inquire what free choice can do, what it has done to it, and what is its relation to the grace of God.

On this subject, however, Erasmus is very far from clear, as we shall see.

For Erasmus the essential thing is that man should have freedom of choice. Without it there would be no sense in meting out praise or blame, since there could be no possibility of man's meriting either. Nor would there be any sense in God's law and commandments; for their imperative "Thou shalt" implies the indicative "Thou canst," and to deny the latter is to stultify the former. In practice, moreover, to teach men that they have no real choice can only foster irresponsibility and encourage antinomianism. But that is not the worst of it. If man acts solely from necessity, having no freedom, he cannot possibly deserve either reward or punishment; hence if God rewards and punishes He is manifestly unjust. Erasmus' concern for human freedom is thus also a concern for the character of God. Not that he is unmindful of God's grace, which transcends any strict legality, and without which man cannot possibly be saved. Yet men must have freedom to choose or refuse grace, so that if they are damned for the lack of it their damnation will at least have been justly deserved. At this Luther wryly observes that people seem more easily upset by the injustice of God's wrath in damning the undeserving than by the injustice of his grace in saving the undeserving!

Luther himself, of course, maintains that neither salvation nor damnation has anything to do with merit. In relation to God the thought of merit has no place, and to teach that it has can only lead to legalism and a vain striving for salvation by works. There is a reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked, but to seek the righteousness in order to merit the reward is the surest way to find neither. But that is not all. God, Luther insists, is not moved by the merits or demerits of men; He is not determined in what He does by what men do. This is essential to the freedom of God—whatever it does to His justice. And Luther is concerned for God's freedom, because to deny it is to undermine the Gospel and grace, indeed, it is to deny God Himself. For God's freedom is precisely the freedom of grace, that is, of the divine love revealed at its deepest in Christ, which startlingly ignores the calculated schemes of merit and reward which prevail among men. Not that this in the least makes God's law and commandments meaningless; on the contrary, it discloses their true meaning, which ultimately is a demand for just such love as is seen in Christ. So far, therefore, from showing man what he ought to do and can do, they show him what he ought but does not and cannot do unless he is radically transformed by grace.

Now in order to explain these contrary assertions of Erasmus and Luther, it is necessary to notice a certain difference in their approaches to the problem. I mean the fact that Erasmus thinks essentially along traditional Scholastic lines, while Luther does not. In particular, Erasmus presupposes the metaphysical dualism of "nature" and "supernature" on which all Scholastic

thinking basically rests, and in terms of which the relation between man and God, human nature and divine grace, is construed. Luther, on the other hand, takes much more seriously a quite different dualism, namely that of God and the devil. The significance of this can best be illustrated by contrasting his view of the basic human situation with that of the Schoolmen.

According to the latter, man before the Fall was endowed with certain natural powers (especially reason and free will), together with a supernatural gift of grace. This gift was necessary if man was to attain his true end, namely eternal life and blessedness, which was beyond the powers of mere nature. But since by these powers (aided by grace) man was able to know and to do the good, he could by doing it merit glory. He was, however, under no compulsion, but had freedom of choice between good and evil; he could obey or disobey God. At the Fall he chose to disobey, and in consequence lost his supernatural gift and was left in a state of mere nature.

What effect the Fall had on man's natural powers was a matter of debate, but most of the Schoolmen agreed that they were at least weakened, and some that they were considerably impaired — a view which Erasmus shares. Yet nature remains nature even in fallen man, and the light that is in him is not darkness, no matter how low it burns. His reason and will may be "wounded," even "corrupted," but they are not extinguished. His passions, the lower ingredients of his nature, may be deeply disordered, so that he is a constant prey to carnality, but he is not wholly carnal. His nature remains compounded as it al-

ways was of animal "flesh" and that rational "spirit" which is the distinguishing mark of humanity, with the "soul" in between and capable of leaning towards either.

Erasmus cannot agree with Luther's contention that fallen man is nothing but "flesh." He thinks Luther grossly exaggerates the natural man's sinfulness, doing injustice to nature in his desire to exalt grace. He himself would rather say that there is something good about nature even in an act of adultery, because there is something real about it. (Here Erasmus echoes the Augustinian-Thomistic equation of "being" and "goodness," an equation which Luther does not make.) But Erasmus fails to notice that when Luther speaks of fallen human nature as "flesh," he is using the word in a more comprehensive and more Pauline sense, which has to do far less with animality than with egocentricity.

For Erasmus therefore (as for the Schoolmen) fallen man still possesses some "goodness" and some capacity for the knowledge of and obedience to God. But there is certainly a question as to what this capacity is worth as regards the attaining of salvation. Can man do anything toward his salvation without the help of grace? If he can, how much can he do? If he cannot, what measure of grace is needed to enable him? On these questions there were widely divergent views, especially in late Scholasticism, and Erasmus reflects the prevailing uncertainty of his time. He himself inclines to the "probable opinion" (as he calls it) that man can take no steps whatsoever toward salvation without "peculiar" grace; yet he does not reject the opposing view as untenable. Indeed

he vacillates between them, and, as McSorley says, is evidently quite unaware that his "probable opinion" is the authentic teaching of the Catholic Church.

What Erasmus does reject is the idea that man has no active part to play in securing his own salvation. For at least man has freedom of choice. That is to say, he has in his will the power "to apply himself to those things which pertain to eternal salvation, or to turn away from them." It is true that, as Luther observes, Erasmus never quite specifies what "those things" are; but his general argument suggests that he has in mind obedience to God's commandments.

It is also true that in the course of the argument man's power to apply himself becomes subject to considerable qualification. Nevertheless, Erasmus continues to maintain that however little man can do, yet if he "does what in him lies" God will assist him with His grace, for "divine grace always accompanies human effort." Indeed, according to the "probable opinion" the very possibility of such effort depends on prevenient grace, without which the will of fallen man is "compelled to serve sin."

But it is up to man to respond to the divine initiative. Nature must cooperate with grace, the human will with the divine, and this is a matter for man's own choice, so that he is himself responsible for his own eventual salvation or perdition. Salvation is a cooperative enterprise (*synergismos*) of God and man, to which both partners make their contribution, even though man's share in it is so small that it is an excusable and even praiseworthy exaggeration when everything is attributed to God.

Turning now to Luther's view, we find

a situation that is both more complex and more dramatic. Before the Fall, as Luther sees it, man's relation to God was characterized by his total dependence on God, whose grace or unmerited love evoked in him the response of faith, that is, trust and obedience. This relationship was and is the truly natural relationship of man as creature to God as his Creator. In this situation man's reason was enlightened and his will directed by the Spirit of God, so that he knew God as his heavenly Father and obeyed His commandments with unquestioning filial devotion. He had, and could have, no desire but to obey. He *necessarily* did the will of God, for he had no "will of his own" independent of God's. Yet he acted *voluntarily* and was in no way coerced, for as inwardly moved by the Spirit he naturally wanted what God wanted. And since the Spirit of God is the Spirit of love, he also acted *freely*, that is, with the spontaneity of divine love.

Then came the Fall. Man fell into the clutches of Satan, who impelled him to make a declaration of independence over against God, persuading him that this meant freedom. How it was possible for the evil spirit to supplant the Holy Spirit in man, Luther does not explain, though he is quite clear that it was not because man had "free choice" between God and Satan. He therefore simply takes man's fallenness as fact, and understands it to mean that man is no longer moved by the Holy Spirit but by an entirely opposite spirit. Man has turned from faith in God to unbelief (distrust and disobedience), exchanging his right and natural relation to God for a thoroughly wrong and unnatural one. In Pauline terms, having begun in the Spirit he has ended in the "flesh,"

he is no longer spiritual but carnal; and this applies to the whole man, not just some part of him, so that it can be said that everything about him — body, soul, and spirit — is “flesh.”

Of course, fallen man remains man; he is not a mere animal, and still less a devil. He retains his powers of reason and will, and he still has some knowledge of God and His law. But both his reasoning and his willing are radically corrupt, being governed from the start by the false premises dictated by Satan. Satan is the antithesis of God, who is love, selfless and self-giving. Satan is the very spirit of egoism and self-love; and it is by this spirit that fallen man is moved and governed. In consequence, whatever man knows of God and His will is caricatured and falsified, seen as it were through a distorting mirror. When the will of God runs counter to his own, it seems to him arbitrary and tyrannical, and if he does not simply flout it in blind self-assertion, he complies with it in calculating self-interest, with an eye to escaping punishment or gaining reward. He acts thus of *necessity*, inasmuch as he has no “will of his own” over against the evil spirit by which he is inwardly moved; and just for that reason he also acts *voluntarily*, not under any coercion against his will. But he does *not* act *freely*, that is, with the spontaneity of genuine love; nor can he do so unless and until he is set free by divine grace.

Freedom, in the full and proper sense of the term, belongs in Luther’s view only to God. God is free as being subject to no other power whatsoever, and as acting therefore solely according to His own will. God’s will, however, is in no way capricious or arbitrary, but consistently right-

eous and good. For what God wills is consonant with His nature, which in Christ — and even in creation, for those who have eyes to see — is revealed as love. This it is that shows what real freedom means. It is the spontaneity of a love that is neither evoked by nor proportioned to the qualities of its objects — quite unlike fallen man’s loving, which is ordinarily both evoked and measured by what its objects are thought to deserve. God therefore acts with absolute freedom; He does not simply react, as men in their bondage to Satan do.

Luther admits, of course, that man has a sort of freedom in respect of what he calls “things beneath him.” That is, he has the ability to choose as he wishes between different possibilities presented to him amid the circumstances of his temporal life. He can even choose to behave or not behave in accordance with the precepts of God’s law. He can “do the works of the Law” — and he ought to do them, for they are “good works.” But “good works do not make a good man,” for good works can be done from a bad motive; and the motivation of fallen man is thoroughly bad. Hence the good works even of God’s law cannot contribute one iota toward his eternal salvation, for he sins in the very doing of them; and there is nothing he himself can do to alter this. If he is to be saved, the evil spirit that drives him must be driven out by the Holy Spirit of grace. Until this happens, he may “do the works of the Law,” but he can never “fulfil the Law,” for the fulfilling of the Law is love. In this regard he is not free, though he can be set free; hence what he calls his “free will” would more properly be called “self-will,” which means bondage to Satan.

There is, however, one respect in which

neither fallen nor unfallen man ever had or can have freedom; that is, in relation to "things above him," as Luther calls them, which pertain to eternal salvation or perdition. This means — to put it in its simplest terms — that whatever else man might be free to choose, he can never in the nature of the case choose the motivation of his choice. All choices are determined by some ultimate principle, and in the final analysis there are only two possibilities: man is governed either by the Spirit of God or by the evil spirit. There is no neutral ground on which he can stand between these while he makes up his mind to which he will submit. Man is not capable of freedom in this sense; he has no liberty of indifference. Hence, although his eternal destiny depends on whether he is ruled by Satan or God, yet between these he is not free to choose. He is always governed by one or the other — or buffeted between the two like a beast over which two would-be riders contend.

Luther's famous — or infamous! — simile of the beast and its riders was not of course his own invention. There was a long tradition of its use. Only, as McSorley points out, Luther breaks with the tradition in that he equates the beast simply with the will (not free will), makes the riders God and Satan instead of sin and grace, and gives the beast no option as to which rider it shall have. This undoubtedly raises difficulties, but in mitigation of them the following three points should be borne in mind: First, neither God nor Satan is conceived by Luther as acting exteriorly and coercively on man's will, but is thought of as a spiritual power operating from within, so that all man's action is quite voluntary and uncoerced. Second,

God and Satan as contenders for the control of man are far from contending on equal terms, as if man stood in the same relation to both. For God is the Creator, on whom both man and Satan are ultimately dependent. Third, God as the Creator is in Luther's thought the incessantly active source of all activity, and all of His activity is absolutely righteous and good. And yet the results of His activity are not invariably good. For when "by the general motion of his omnipotence" He activates the wills of sinful men and devils (including Satan himself), these act in accordance with their character, which is bad. Even God's omnipotence can only move evil wills to evil acts. But the evil of man's or Satan's will is not to be ascribed to God as its cause. Here Luther is entirely in accord with the traditional Scholastic teaching that God is the cause of sinful acts but not of their sinfulness. Yet he cannot agree with the Schoolmen in attributing this to man's free will or freedom of choice, for it is plain evidence that man is not free but in bondage to Satan.

It is, however, God's purpose to save man from this evil bondage, and to that end He works by means of His Word and His Spirit. That is how He contends with Satan for the control of man. By His Word He confronts men outwardly and by His Spirit inwardly, first in the form of Law, then of Gospel. I need not here elaborate on this aspect of Luther's thought, but will simply make two observations on it. First, it is the function of the Law, in what he calls its spiritual use, to bring home to men their sinful plight and their inability to save themselves from perdition. In this way men are made ready for the Gospel and its message of grace.

Although, therefore, Luther repudiates the Scholastic idea that man can prepare himself for grace by "doing what in him lies," he does not deny that there is a preparation for grace; he affirms it, only as God's doing, not man's. Second, it is the function of the Gospel, in what Luther calls its proper office, to bring home to man the grace and love of God and evoke in him the response of faith. Where and insofar as this happens, man is restored to his true and natural relationship to God and thereby enters into the fullest freedom of which he is capable. This is the liberty of the children of God, in which men can freely cooperate with God, not for the achieving of their own salvation but in the fulfilling of God's purposes in the world with respect both to its spiritual and temporal welfare.

For Luther, man's cooperation with God is not a precondition of salvation, as it is for Erasmus; it is rather a consequence of salvation. And salvation itself is differently understood. For Erasmus, salvation calls for a supernaturalizing of human nature by divine grace (which is generously given in response even to the feeblest of man's efforts) in order that man may become acceptable to God and a rightful claimant to the eternal life and blessedness of heaven. For Luther, it means the liberation of man by the gracious action of God from an unnatural bondage, so that he lives a truly natural life in trustful obedience to God and can look forward to the heavenly reward, not as in any sense his right but as the sure and certain promise of God's gracious Word.

Unfortunately, however, the effect of God's Word is not always salvific. It can in fact "increase sin," making bad men

worse by hardening them in their resistance to God. As spoken to Pharaoh through Moses, for example, it simply stiffened his self-will and provoked him to open defiance. It can also harden men in self-righteousness, as it hardened the Pharisees when they encountered it in Christ. Why should this be so? In wrestling with this question Luther is led to propound his distinction between the "hidden" and the "revealed" will of God and his doctrine of double predestination. Into this subject I cannot enter here beyond making the following comment. With this doctrine Luther is expressing on the one hand a very proper piece of Christian agnosticism, and on the other the very essence of Christian faith. He is saying in effect that while we do not and cannot know all the answers, we do know where the answers lie, namely with God, and we are utterly sure that God's answers are good. It is true that Luther does not always express himself as guardedly as he might in these matters, and he sometimes seems to know more than he should. But at least he is more modest than Erasmus, who has the answers pat. For Erasmus it is easy to explain the diverse effects of God's Word on men by referring them to human freedom of choice, and the problem of divine predestination is easily solved by reference to God's foreknowledge of men's merits.

Erasmus knows, of course, that his position is open to the objection (which Luther does not fail to bring) that divine foreknowledge imposes necessity on men, leaving no room for contingency or free choice. He tries to forestall this objection by referring to the Scholastic distinction between two kinds of necessity, absolute

and conditional, which he illustrates as follows: Although God undoubtedly foreknew that Judas would betray Christ, yet Judas was not forced (by absolute necessity) to do this, for he could have changed his mind; hence his action was only conditionally necessary, being conditional on his not changing his mind; though admittedly if he had been going to change his mind, God would have foreknown that as well. To which Luther makes the obvious reply that in that case the change of mind must also have been necessary — absolutely, and not just contingently or conditionally necessary. Luther dismisses the Scholastic distinction as a mere play on words and proposes an alternative of his own. He is not speaking, he says, of the necessity of coercion or force, but of immutability. Certainly Judas was not forced to betray Christ, he did it voluntarily; but his will being what it was he could not do otherwise, for the will cannot change itself; hence he acted as he did of necessity — the necessity of immutability; he certainly did not act freely, for he was under the control of Satan.

It is a pity that Erasmus was not familiar with Aquinas, who could have shown him that things are really not so simple, and might have provided him with a harder nut for Luther to crack. For St. Thomas it is as clear that man has free will and freedom of choice as that God's foreknowledge is immutable and His will infallible. It is indeed so clear that instead of raising the question whether God's foreknowledge imposes necessity on us, he asks rather whether the contingency of man's freedom to choose imposes limits on the foreknowledge of God. His answer is that it does not, and his argument is more or less as

follows: The will of God is the universal cause of all things, and whatever God wills necessarily comes to pass. But God is under no necessity to will anything but His own being and beatitude, so that all other necessity is conditional on His willing it. *If* God wills a thing, that thing necessarily happens. It also happens in the way He wills it to happen, which may be by absolute or by conditional necessity, or — as it can also be put — necessarily or contingently. We might perhaps illustrate this in the following way: Man's existence is a matter of conditional necessity, since God is under no necessity to will it; man's nature as an animate being possessed among other things of free will is a matter of absolute necessity, since that is how God wills it; and man's conduct as contingent on his freedom of choice is a matter of conditional necessity, since that also is how God wills it.

But the thought of man's freedom of choice gives rise to the question whether God can really have foreknowledge of man's actions. To this question St. Thomas' reply in very brief is this: If you consider an action as future, not yet having happened because a choice has not yet been made, then it is contingent and unknowable; but consider it as having been performed, the choice having been decisively made, and it is necessary and can plainly be known. Now for us it is impossible to adopt these two points of view simultaneously with regard to the same action; but not so for God. God sees the end from the beginning, and the whole range of events throughout the totality of time is simultaneously present to Him. Hence human freedom and the immutable foreknowledge of God are by no means incompatible. And

this does not mean that contingency or freedom is only a matter of the way things appear to us (as Luther, incidentally, suggests) but it is a reality also for God.

It is interesting, however, to notice that St. Thomas distinguishes, as Erasmus does not, between different sorts of freedom; and two of these are not altogether unlike Luther's distinction between man's freedom with respect to "things beneath him" and the freedom of a Christian man. There is, first, natural freedom, in which man's will has the ability to choose without any compulsion between objects as means to ends. It is not an unlimited freedom, inasmuch as man is not free to choose his ultimate end, which is beatitude. This he necessarily wills as his *summum bonum*, though he can freely choose between inferior ends. Yet he is under no necessity to think about and set his mind on his ultimate end, or to choose appropriate means for attaining it. This is contingent on his own free choice.

The second sort of freedom is freedom from guilt and misery. This man lost at the Fall, and he has no ability in himself to recover it. For at the Fall he became enslaved to sin and Satan, so that now he cannot help sinning; he cannot love God, his *summum bonum*, above all things, and he cannot perform any perfectly good act. His nature is too deeply wounded for that, and even such naturally good acts as he may perform must be attributed to healing grace. What is more, without God's prevenient grace man can in no way dispose or prepare himself for the justifying grace which will deliver him from his sinful plight.

In this connection St. Thomas suggests, as Luther does, that God in His law commands impossible things — not intrinsi-

cally impossible, but impossible to man without grace; though he qualifies this by saying they are not entirely (*omnino*) impossible. For men are capable of doing what God commands in the sense of moral behavior, though they cannot do it in the way God wants it done, namely out of pure love for God and the good. Here too there is a resemblance to Luther, in his distinction between "doing the works of the Law" and "fulfilling the Law." But we must not make Aquinas more Lutheran than he is, and there is one important point of difference that cannot be overlooked. It is that Aquinas speaks of man's *free* will as enslaved to sin and Satan, while Luther speaks only of the *will*, which he denies to be *free*. McSorley suggests (I think rightly) that St. Thomas could very well have used St. Augustine's phrase, *liberum arbitrium captivatum*, or "free will in captivity"; but he would undoubtedly have repudiated Luther's *servum arbitrium*.

For Aquinas, as for Erasmus, it is essential for man to have freedom of choice. Without it he could not be held responsible for obedience or disobedience to God's commandments; nor would God be just in meting out rewards and punishments to him, since he could not merit them. With this we come to the point of Luther's profoundest objection to the doctrine of free will, namely the idea of merit. As he sees it, the idea of man's merit is utterly incompatible with the grace by which God has freely created man out of nothing and redeemed him freely and for nothing through Christ. As Aquinas sees it, on the other hand, grace by no means excludes merit; although he is as sure as Luther or Augustine that grace is not grace unless it is *gratis*, and although in order

to keep it so he quite considerably modifies the meaning of merit.

Take first the common scholastic distinction between "congruous" and "condign" merit. In the Nominalist theology known to Erasmus and Luther, congruous merit is attributed to man's well-intentioned efforts when he "does what in him lies" to reach out after saving grace. Although these efforts are not strictly meritorious, it is congruous or fitting for God to reward them with a gift of grace. Condign merit, however, arising from works done with the aid of that grace, is strictly meritorious and a necessary passport to heaven. On this view, grace and free will are each a partial cause of salvation; for a certain initiative is reserved to man, which, however inconsiderable it may be as compared with grace, nevertheless makes salvation dependent on man's reaching out after it. This view McSorley describes, incidentally, as "Neosemipelagianism." By contrast with it, Aquinas holds that man can make no effort whatsoever toward salvation apart from grace. Even when he "does what in him lies" it is because God in His grace has touched and moved his free will to do so. Moreover, congruous and condign merit are not successive stages so much as different aspects of the work of grace; for one and the same act when considered as done by man's free will carries congruous merit, and when considered as done by divine grace carries condign merit. Here grace and free will acting conjointly are the whole cause of salvation, but in such a way that the initiative lies wholly with God. This involves the Augustinian paradox that man's free acceptance of saving grace depends on God's moving him to it by prevenient grace.

To remove any possible doubt on this subject, let us look finally at St. Thomas' doctrine of predestination. In expounding it in the *Summa* he begins by stating that no reason can be given why God elects some men to glory and reprobates others, except that God so wills. He maintains, however, that in both cases God manifests His goodness—in the form of mercy towards the elect, and in the form of justice towards the reprobate. Divine predestination, moreover, must not be thought to exclude human freedom; for God "pre-ordained to give glory on account of merit" and free will is the "meritorious cause" of glory. At the same time, "that which flows from free will is also of predestination," since God has "pre-ordained to give grace to merit glory." Predestination is thus the cause of both future glory and present grace. On the other hand, reprobation is not the cause of sin. It is the cause of abandonment by God and of eternal punishment; but guilt proceeds from the free will of the person who is "reprobated and deserted by grace." For although the reprobated cannot obtain grace, and therefore cannot do any good and acquire merit, yet he still has the freedom to choose between sins, and therefore his sinning is rightly imputed to him as guilt.

Which things being so, what advantage has Aquinas' "free will in captivity" over Luther's "will in bondage"? Does its merit, acquired by grace alone, really safeguard the justice of God in dealing with men? Does it even preserve man's responsibility? What, then, is there to be said for it? Not a great deal, I think, but perhaps just a little.

To begin with, Luther's insistence that freedom is properly predicated only of God

and the children of God is contrary to all normal usage and very confusing. And it is quite unnecessary, for we can very well distinguish between different sorts or levels of freedom. Aquinas therefore — and, we may add, Erasmus — cannot be faulted for equating a voluntary act with a free act and for regarding it not as a necessary but a contingent act. Unfortunately, Luther equates contingency with luck or chance, for which he can find no room in God's world; and freedom he equates with the liberty of indifference, which is meaningless except as it refers to the indifference of God's love to the merits of men. Men make voluntary choices, it is true, but not by happenstance; their choices are necessitated, in the sense of determined or motivated, and men do not choose their motivations.

McSorley takes strong exception to Luther's "necessitarianism" as he calls it, but acquits him of the charge of determinism. It is after all only in relation to "things above him" that Luther totally denies man's freedom. But McSorley feels that man must be allowed some freedom here too. Granted that man can do absolutely nothing to obtain for himself the saving grace of God, yet it must be possible for him to refuse or reject it. Otherwise, how do you explain Adam's fall without making God responsible for it? And how can the elect children of God be regarded as meriting their heavenly reward? It is true, McSorley admits, that Aquinas so modifies the meaning of merit that he might almost as well have dispensed with it; but he had to have some way of affirming man's responsibility and speaking meaningfully about reward. On this I will only comment that it is a pity Aquinas did not dispense with the

idea of merit. We might then have been spared the Neosemipelagianism that provoked Luther's wrath, and Luther himself might have been able to tolerate more ordinary notions of free will.

Be that as it may, it is interesting to notice that even in the *De servo arbitrio* Luther admits that man possesses a capacity for response to God's grace — a "dispositional quality" or "passive aptitude" he calls it — which animals and inanimate objects do not; and he repeatedly insists that the response man makes is in no way coerced but entirely voluntary. He also knows that the divine initiative can provoke a negative as well as a positive reaction, which also is voluntary. What is more, in the *Table Talk*, replying to the question why God elects this man and not that, he can reply:

This difference is to be ascribed to man, not to the will of God, for the promises of God are universal. He will have all men to be saved. Accordingly it is not the fault of our Lord God, who promises salvation, but it is our fault if we are unwilling to believe it.

By most ordinary standards it would not be unnatural to speak of a real element of freedom here: not the absolute freedom of God, and not the liberty of the children of God, nor yet simply freedom with regard to the things beneath man, but perhaps (so to put it) a freedom of responsible reaction to things above him.

Not that this explains anything. It leaves us with a paradox, which affirms both human responsibility and the sovereignty of divine grace — the same paradox with which Aquinas leaves us, despite all his ingenious attempts at explanation. It is a paradox that does justice to the

realities of Christian faith and experience, and it ought therefore to be maintained and preached and taught in all its paradoxicality. Erasmus with his attempts to rationalize it virtually eliminates it. Aquinas with his doctrine of merit and his desire to save the justice of God endangers the sovereignty of grace. Luther by his arguments for the sovereignty of grace undoubtedly imperils the responsibility of man. But Luther has one great advantage

over the Schoolmen: that he rather rejoices in paradoxes and is not unduly anxious to resolve them. He is at point after point content to say, We do not know the reason for this, but God knows, and we can be quite sure His reasons are good. It would be well if theologians more often exhibited such responsible faith in the absolute sovereignty of God and His grace.

Evanston, Ill.