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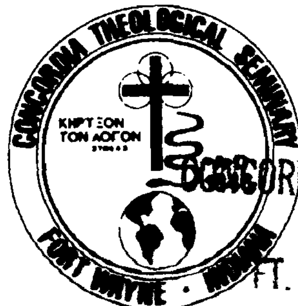

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Human Claims to Freedom and God's Judgment

Richard Klann

All forms of communication assume a doctrine of man, a knowledge of a man's qualities or conditions—about his past and what he may yet be able to do. The ancient insights, that man is the measure of things and that his character is his fate, so that man is of never-ending interest to himself, are so deeply imbedded in our modern tradition that few seem to question them. Rather than investigate the validity of those claims and their implications, modern writers seem to be content to repeat ancient views of man with fashionable modifications suitable to the particular topics of interest to students of the social sciences.

Christian theology is Christian communication. Ancient formulations tend to become so familiar that students may feel bored before the spiritual dynamics of those formulations have been thoroughly explored by them. This melancholy condition may be observed in the treatment scholars of various periods of the Christian church have given to the doctrine of man. The Augustinian interpretation of man, though it was meant originally to follow the model of St. Paul, achieved neither the apostle's depth of insight into the meaning of the fall of man nor the clarity of his distinction between the justification and the sanctification of the sinner by God. That achievement must be credited to the theologians of the Reformation.

That human claims to freedom and God's judgment remain perennial topics for the student of theology is not in dispute. Reflections on them usually begin during a student's initial studies of biblical doctrine. Since experienced Christian teachers are usually aware that students require an extensive doctrinal background to deal with such topics effectively, they are inclined to delay their examination until students are better prepared for it. But some theologians of the Christian church eventually do focus the attention of their students upon these topics. When they do so, they must lead their students to examine the issues raised by Luther and Erasmus in their debate regarding the nature and power (or capacity) of the human will with regard to a saving relationship with God—unless they arbitrarily excise this momentous dispute from the history of Christian doctrine. A brief essay on this topic, therefore, may help to stimulate the reader to inquire further

into that debate. We shall note some of its terms and a few aspects of its structure as well as some implications for Christian theology.

To understand Luther's debate with Erasmus more than four hundred and fifty years after the event requires of the reader an exact perception of the issues as Luther and Erasmus saw them in their day. It would be thoroughly erroneous for the modern reader to think of the issues in contemporary philosophical categories. Neither Luther nor Erasmus thought in the same terms as modern psychologists, sociologists, and others working in the "social sciences" today.

At stake for both Luther and Erasmus was the biblical interpretation of the nature of man in terms of his capacities in relation to God. Luther argued for the view that it is "essentially salutary and necessary for a Christian to find out whether the will does anything or nothing in matters pertaining to eternal salvation. . .this is the cardinal issue. . .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."[1]

Although Erasmus agreed in his *Diatribe* to base his arguments upon biblical sources in defending his position that man has the power of free choice, he also insisted that the traditions of the church, formulated by the recognized teachers of the church, were authoritative interpreters of biblical doctrine:

> And, in fact, so far am I from delighting in "assertions" that I would readily take refuge in the opinion of the skeptics, wherever this is allowed by the inviolable authority of the Holy Scriptures and by the decrees of the Church, to which I everywhere submit my personal feelings, whether I grasp what it prescribes or not. . .I admit that many different views. . .have been handed down from the ancients about which I have, as yet, no fixed conviction, except that I think there to be a certain power of free choice.[2]

Luther was clearly aware of the gravity of the issue Erasmus had raised, as he wrote at the end of his reply:

> . . .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. . .You, and you alone, have seen the question on which everything hinges, and have aimed at the vital spot.[3]

he original audience read Luther's *Bondage of the Will* in .atin, the theological language of the Christian West and, ıccording to the structure of the work, as a point by point reply to Erasmus' *Diatribe.* Such a format served the expectations of the educated general public, who were both spectators and partisans of the event.

Luther's theological assertions in this book, written in 1525, were not new. He had made similar theological statements against human claims to freedom in his Heidelberg Disputation in 1518, in his *Assertio Omnium Articulorum* of 1521, and in his lectures on St. Paul's Letter to the Romans in 1515-1516. In his lectures on Romans, long before he raised the issue publicly in specific theses, Luther had followed the understanding of St. Augustine regarding the question of "free choice" in a manner one might see as conventional:

> The power of free decision in so far as it is not under the sway of grace has no ability whatever to realize righteousness, but it is necessarily in sins. Hence, Blessed Augustine is right, when, in his book against Julian (*Contra Julianum,* II, 8, 23), he calls it "the enslaved, rather than free, will." But when it has received grace, the power of decision really becomes free, at all events in respect to salvation. To be sure, it is always free according to its nature, but only with respect to that which is in its power and is inferior to it, but not with respect to that which is superior to it, since it is held captive in sins and then cannot choose the good according to God.[4]

Luther's rejection of human claims to freedom emerged in various forms of discourse in his writings addressed to the Christian laity of his time. His tract *The Freedom of the Christian* offers this paradoxical formulation:

> A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.[5]

Then he presents his biblical or Christian teaching of the meaning of human freedom and sweeps away the claims to human freedom raised by the Renaissance in Italy, by the Christian humanists of northern Europe, and by the medieval church in its semi-pelagian teachings that man is able to make a limited claim to freedom because he must do "what is in him" (*quod in se est*) toward his salvation. Luther's point of departure was not man's freedom but his rebellion against God—man's sin and God's grace, demonstrated by His creative, redemptive, and sustaining work in the world.

Human claims to freedom begin as ethical assertions—as they must, if freedom is also a quality of autonomous man who asserts his moral integrity. Erasmus, the leading humanist of Luther's time, who strongly opposed the moral decay of the church and even more vigorously denounced the obfuscations of the schoolmen of his time, proved himself a most dangerous enemy of the gospel asserted by Martin Luther. The term "humanist" is appropriate here to one who not only devoted himself to the study of the "humanities" but also attributed autonomous powers to human nature.

Erasmus, to be sure, had no intention of exposing himself to possible "martyrdom" by opposing the official doctrine of the church. Moreover, he shared the logical position of humanism: freedom entails responsibility. Man cannot be held accountable for his actions, Erasmus argued, unless he is also free from any controls which inhibit or prevent his ability to make free decisions. He accepted the logic of those who argued from the command "thou shalt" to the fiction "therefore you can."

The humanist position shares with determinism an understanding about necessity. No one can accept responsibility for having been born. No one has had a choice in the matter. But humanists will subsequently argue for their view of the powers of the human being by claiming that the ability to make choices is inherent in a human being. The consistent determinist, whatever else he may be, will deny that man has genuine choices. Luther's doctrine of God had no room for the deterministic position as it has been known since the skeptic Carneades (d. 129 B.C.) argued thus: if God is good, He cannot be all-powerful; if He is omnipotent, He must be evil. If men act by necessity, they have no freedom; therefore God can

neither punish nor reward them. But since men are punished and rewarded, it follows either that God is not good or that He is not omnipotent. Crass determinism was shrugged off by Luther, mindful of Psalm 2:4-5. Philosophical notions of determinism did not change his biblical understanding that God is God unconditionally (Psalm 68:20).

It is necessary also to specify that Luther rejected humanist claims regarding human freedom which denied the redemptive monergism of God. As a cultural orientation, humanism acquired many different interpretations, some apparently contradictory. Understood as the "study of man," it would include all human knowledge and action. Interpreted as a program for learning designed to lead to the acquisition of forms and standards for life, humanism may be understood as a recollection and reinterpretation of the cultural achievements of the past.

Renaissance humanism, which began in Italy after the termination of the crusades, may be understood as an intellectual movement promoting the revival of the learning of classical antiquity for the purpose of providing literary and artistic forms and standards to be imitated and perhaps transcended by renaissance man.[6] If it were to be argued that humanism, understood according to the criteria of classical antiquity, did not exist during the Middle Ages, the validity of the argument would depend on the meaning assigned to "humanism." If, for example, the notion of humanism is associated with the preservation of classical literature and learning, modern scholars seem to agree that some study of the heritage of the classical past was always maintained in the West. Paul Joachimsen argues the thesis that the new city states of Italy from 1250 to 1350 led in the development of a type of "new *humanities* understood as a sense of life and a desire for learning."[7]

German humanism was an Italian import. When the territorial princes began to favor it because the humanists of the mid-fifteenth century gave much attention to the education of the princes, the new orientation also began to be represented, and tended to become influential, in the faculties of the newly founded universities. The "new learning" stimulated almost everywhere the study of the ancient languages, sciences, and literature, as well as offering some new directions to the Maximilian Age (1493-1519).

Far from being a man of action, Erasmus of Rotterdam had a dream of reorganizing the Western world into a *respublica christiana* which would also be a community of learning, led by a hierarchy who would "educate for Christ" and through the available sacramental means provide the dynamics for the social and ethical elements of a reformed culture. According to his vision, Christian antiquity from Origen to Jerome, known as "tradition," provided the contextual perspective for the understanding of the teachings of Christ. Beyond the centuries of these ancient church fathers was the circle of ancient pagan learning, regarded as sufficient for the needs of living in this world, which Erasmus understood to be revolving about Christ, the true center of history. A judgment on this phantasy must point to the superficiality of its picture of the history of Christian theology.

Nevertheless, Erasmus' publications exhibiting his "new Christian philosophy" were widely received and applauded. Undoubtedly, his writings appealed to people dissatisfied with the cultural temper of their times who thought Erasmus might prove helpful in realizing their particular programs. For example, Erasmus satisfied the mystical inclinations of some with his easy vision of the "art of piety." Those who had aesthetic needs were helped by his criticism of manners and literature. To these points must be added the paramount interest of the age in intensifying criticism of the medieval church, its structure and administration, and particularly its monastic orders, which were increasingly seen by people as making little or no contribution to the commonweal commensurate with the high cost of maintaining them. The low moral and cultural quality of the clergy and the superstitions of the laity, as Erasmus skillfully limned them in his writings, stimulated the laughter and scorn of both humanists and "those who mourned for Zion."

To criticize a culture for failing to live up to its proclaimed ideals is easy enough. The available literature regarding conditions in Europe before the Reformation attests to that failure. Similarly, recent publications, without adequate recognition of its positive elements, have severely criticized the Reformation for its deficiencies.[8] Actual changes in a culture are revolutionary in a true sense because genuine cultural change is always a change in the self-understanding of a

people. The Reformation brought such change about for Protestant Europe. One of the consequences of the Reformation was the recognition and rejection of the pagan ideology of humanism. Erasmus cannot be given credit for even a share of this achievement despite the vigorous defense of Erasmus' merits offered by E. Gordon Rupp.[9] After all, it is a recorded fact that Erasmus carefully and consistently distanced himself from Luther's reformatory activities.

The Reformation effected revolutionary changes in northwest Europe in the course of a century. There is no historical parallel to the tremendous intellectual and spiritual upheaval brought about by the sixteenth-century Reformation in Germany, Scandinavia, and Great Britain. A point which needs to be stressed is that Luther did not initially seek the reform of the church structure, but rather the renewal of faith by preaching and teaching the pure gospel.

Part of the cultural program of Erasmus was the humanizing of religion—that is, fitting the Christian faith into a general program for the improvement of mankind—not essentially different from the aims of some eighteenth-century leaders of the Enlightenment. The chosen means were a process of moral training and the assimilation of the literary and philosophical treasures bequeathed by antiquity. The Scriptures would be given a reinterpretation suitable for humanistic purposes through the use of hermeneutical devices dependent on rules of speech learned from classical literature.

Luther, trained as an Augustinian theologian, had become a *Doctor in Biblia*. During his early monastic years he had struggled with the meaning of sin and guilt and had experienced searing confrontations with the reality of an angry God who was also, as the fathers of the church had taught Luther, the *Deus tremendus et absconditus*. This early spiritual frustration and, indeed, agony grew from Luther's inability to account for himself to the Creator who had willed his existence, but who as his judge would necessarily damn Luther the sinner. The issue was the Creator's demand "thou shalt" and the sinner's reply "I cannot." Stated theologically, the issue was man's sin and God's justice and righteousness in the teaching of the medieval church.

It would be erroneous to suppose that Luther remained unaware of the wide chasm between himself and contemporary

religious humanists with regard to the nature of man. He had consistently rejected humanist assumptions of the perfectibility of the human mind and spirit and, therefore, the autonomous dignity of man.[10] Luther was clearly aware, as some humanists were not, that his faith and hope had dimensions and goals entirely different from theirs. Since the Reformer published so much, Erasmus was finally induced to write against him. It is astonishing that the humanists waited so long before making a doctrinal attack upon Luther. The explanations of this delay cited by some historians are not commensurate with the implications of the problems posed for humanism by Luther's understanding of the Christian faith as law and gospel, which he regarded as virtually identical with the doctrine of the justification of the sinner before God by grace, through faith, on account of the person and work of Christ.

It must be recognized, at the same time, that Luther had hoped that his whole-hearted endorsement of classical scholarship and the cultivation of Greek and Latin would incline leading humanists to support his work of biblical and theological scholarship.[11] An examination of the correspondence of Luther shows that his expectations of Erasmus' interest in evangelical reform were quite minimal.[12] A few months after Luther's attempt (presumably at the instigation of others) to persuade Erasmus to support the evangelical cause, the great humanist wrote a letter stating that he did not see Luther as a defender of the new learning, but understood him to be a disciple and defender of scholasticism.[13]

Human claims to freedom, so emphatically denied in Luther's *Assertio Omnium Articulorum M. Luther per Bullam Leonis X Novissimam Damnatorum*, specifically in Article 36, were the issue raised by Erasmus in his essay "On the Freedom of the Will."[14] He refers to the debate at Leipzig in 1519 between Eck and Carlstadt, in which Luther participated, as well as to Thesis 13 of Luther's Heidelberg Disputation in 1518.[15] In his *Assertio Omnium Articulorum* of 1521 Luther repeated with emphasis the same doctrine regarding the "bondage of the will." Erasmus also quotes these words from Luther's Latin version of the *Assertio*::

> I was wrong in saying that free choice before grace is a reality only in name. I should have said simply, "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 thought or a bad thought, but everything (as Wycliff's article condemned at Constance rightly teaches) happens by absolute necessity.[16]

In his comments on Article 36 Luther also mentions St. Augustine's phrase "a will in bondage" and summarizes its meaning thus:

> . . .it has been said repeatedly that godly and holy men who live out of the resources of God's powerful grace struggle against their own flesh with great pains and peril, and the flesh fights against grace with all its strength. It is a profound and blind error to teach that the will is by nature free and can, without grace, turn to the spirit, seek grace and desire it. Actually, the will tries to escape from grace and rages against it when it is present.[17]

Augustine's teaching regarding the human will in bondage will be misunderstood if the picture of "bondage" he uses is given an inexact context. The concept of liberty at issue here must be taken in the sense of the Pauline affirmation: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17). It is the same freedom Paul recommends to the Galatians: "For freedom Christ has made us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1).

Paul and Augustine understood this teaching to be intimately joined to the biblical doctrine of God, the Holy Trinity. In His creation of man God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). So Luther also understood this divine action as the act of conferring on newly created man finite aspects of the divine freedom, so that man's moral character was a created reflection of the moral nature of the Holy Trinity. But man was not created to be a puppet. Man could reject his Maker, and he did just that in the act of defiance or disobedience to the will of God which constituted man's fall from that state of freedom for which he had been created by God.

To continue in freedom man needed only to continue his life in the liberty of the Spirit of God by whose breath man had become a living being. In this sense, man's subsequent

decision to "be like God" (Genesis 3:8) was not a decision for freedom. According to the terms of his creation (Genesis 1:26), man already possessed a replicated measure of divine freedom. But he discarded it in favor of "autonomy."

Here the error of those sympathetic to the humanist interpretation of the Christian doctrine of man becomes painfully evident: man's free choice was indeed made while man enjoyed life in his spiritual freedom as God's creation. Man made that decision in the expectation that the serpent's promise, "You shall be like God," also included freedom from accountability to God. Humanist theologians failed to grasp the massive ambiguity, indeed error, inherent in the very concept of the promise to be like God by means of knowing good and evil.

Forgotten were the realities of created freedom: man already was like God, having been made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26). Besides, no rebellious action against God the Creator can eliminate the obligation of accountability. It must remain in force as long as God is God. A lie about God does not change that truth, a point made explicit by the account (Genesis 3:8).

Accountability to God and created freedom must also be considered in the context of this freedom. When God breathed His life into man, He gave man the freedom of His own Spirit, the source and dynamic of true liberty. This context makes it plain that the freedom of God's Spirit transcends accountability. In the liberty of the Spirit man is beyond and outside of God's judgment of sin and evil.

Such factors are part of the context of the divine judgment initially announced to man (Genesis 2:17). We observe the instant execution of this judgment when the spiritual liberty of man was supplanted by fear (Genesis 3:8). The Spirit of God was no longer the controlling breath of life for man and, without the Spirit of the Lord, there can be no liberty—no free choice.

The meaning of man's fall cannot be grasped without the prior confession of the authority of the biblical self-revelation of God in the variety of actions exhibited in the Bible. Essentially two themes emerge: God's judgment and God's mercy or grace. Both are unconditionally valid according to the monergism of God, who is always "all in all" because

"there is none beside God." When man rejected the freedom for which he had been made, his continuance on earth was made possible only on account of God's forbearance, mercy, and unmerited favor, by virtue of which God also clothed man (Genesis 3:21).

To appreciate the multiple dimensions of Luther's doctrine of man, the fallen creature of God, it is helpful to study such writings as his exposition of Psalm 90 (1534-1535) and his lectures on Genesis (1535-1545).[18] But the essence of his position is clearly set forth in his catechisms, the Smalcald Articles, and *The Bondage of the Will.* The latter work could have been given the subtitle "Man Before God According to the Scriptures." Perhaps it was for this reason that Werner Elert, citing the studies of Luther's understanding of God produced by Theodosius Harnack, C. Strange, Erich Seeberg, and others, makes the point that Luther appropriated the orthodox teaching of the Christian church by basing his interpretation of man upon "the unconditional validity" of the biblical teaching of God:

> Law and Gospel, which are appealed to as authoritative, have unconditional validity as the divine Word. But if they have validity even when man knows nothing about them, God is in any case independent of our consciousness. And if one investigates further, one finds as the beginning of everything from there on the knowledge that the consciousness of man as consciousness of himself is in original opposition to God whether one knows about this or not. No man is without sin. Nor is there any neutral ground between sin and righteousness. And there is no sin that would not be enmity against God.[19]

It is understandable that reading Erasmus and Luther on the topic of man (especially with regard to his powers and possibilities) will arouse in natural man immediate and deep feelings of assent to Erasmus' thesis and a prompt negative reaction to Luther's biblical teaching. Such a reader is likely to say, "Yes. Man must have a free will even after his fall; he must possess the power to choose between good and evil, or he cannot be held accountable. He must be able to make a decision for God. The alternative is to regard man as a non-accountable puppet, devoid of moral significance. Therefore, since God's justice and righteousness demand that we think of man as

being able to give an accounting, man must in fact be able to do so. If that were not so, God would appear to be unjust in His judgments."

For this kind of thinking, Erasmus' thesis that man possesses "a certain power of free choice" in spiritual matters exerts a powerful attraction. Such thinking makes a favorable response to the claims of freedom posited in the semi-pelagian image of man or in the sophistic theological-philosophical formulations of "Christian humanists." Like Erasmus' argument, the ultimate outcome must be a defense of work-righteousness as well as a claim to human autonomy in some marginal aspect of the relation between man and his God. It is also the essential position of all Christian rationalism, ancient or modern, whose representatives begin their work with the criticism or rejection of God's revelation regarding man, imposing their own "critical responsibility" between the word of God and man to whom this word is addressed. These actions are indebted to the ancient device exhibited in Genesis 3: "Yea, hath God said. . .?"

Modern man, like the intellectual establishment of ancient Athens, continues to assert his freedom to know meaning or truth beyond the capacity of his apperceptive equipment, insisting at the same time on his own terms for knowing. This demand must remain unmet in this aeon and produces great illustrations of fallen man because he wants what he is incapable of having. The ancient temptation of Genesis 3 continues in the lives of men, just as the humanist attitude regarding man's capacity continues to be reflected in Aristotle's description of the pursuit of knowledge by the philosophers of the fourth century B.C.:

> [men] philosophized in order to escape from ignorance; evidently they were pursuing science in order to know, and not for any utilitarian end. And this is confirmed by the facts; for it was when almost all the necessities of life and the things that make for comfort and recreation had been secured, that such knowledge began to be sought. Evidently then we do not seek it for the sake of any advantage; but as the man is free, we say, who exists for his own sake and not for another's, so we pursue this as the only free science, for it alone exists for its own sake.[20]

Even if some limitations are attributed to man's nature, it is argued, he must be free in some manner of speaking in order to think of freedom, to pursue it, and to claim it—potentially on any level of his capacity to perceive it. After all, as Aristotle suggests, the pursuit of knowledge by man has the objective of demonstrating his capacity to share in a small way the divine attribute of freedom.

The point is not whether Erasmus the humanist endorsed the position of Aristotle on the latter's terms. In any case, however, Erasmus did claim a certain autonomous power in man of free choice in spiritual matters. This autonomy is precisely what Luther denied in his writings, including a shattering statement found in the Smalcald Articles (Part III:I:3): "This hereditary sin is so deep a corruption of nature that reason cannot understand it. It must be believed because of the revelation in the Scriptures."

Luther's assertions of divine monergism in all points of the relationship between God and man shape his teaching regarding human claims to freedom and God's judgment. To understand Luther's sentence, ". . .whoever does not 'grasp' God never 'grasps' any part of His creation," we need to see it in connection with his damning statement regarding unbelief in any form: "Anathema be the Christian who is not certain and does not grasp what is prescribed for him."[21] It is on this account that Luther writes against Erasmus as follows:

> . . .it is essentially salutary and necessary for a Christian to find out whether the will does anything or nothing in matters pertaining to eternal salvation. Indeed, as you should know, 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. If we do not know these things, we shall know nothing at all of things Christian, and shall be worse than any heathen. Let anyone who does not feel this confess that he is no Christian, while anyone who disparages or scorns it should know that he is the greatest enemy of Christians. For if I am ignorant of what, how far, and how much I can and may do in relation to God, it will be equally uncertain and unknown to me, what, how far, and how much God can and may do in me, although it is God

> who works everything in everyone (1 Corinthians 12:6). But when the works and power of God are unknown, I do not know God Himself, and when God is unknown, I cannot worship, praise, thank, and serve God, since I do not know how much I ought to attribute to myself and how much to God. It therefore behooves us to be very certain about the distinction between God's power and our own, God's work and our own, if we want to live a godly life.[22]

The quotations cited assume Christian convictions regarding the biblical doctrine of God. Basic to Luther's interpretation is St. Paul's declaration that God works everything in everyone (1 Corinthians 12:6; similarly James 1:18). This divine monergism is further underlined by Luther's interpretation of passages speaking of the potter and the clay: Isaiah 45:9; Jeremiah 18:6; Romans 9:20-24. He shows that those passages likewise affirm that "God works everything in everyone."[23] "It is not for us to ask why He does so, but to stand in awe of God who both can do and wills to do such things."[24]

Such comprehensive affirmations regarding the being and work of God determine every aspect of Luther's theology. God alone can reveal Himself to man because He has made man for Himself; man has no ladder to ascend to God. God alone can preserve man; the alternative is futility for man. God alone can redeem man from sin; no one else has the power to do so. God alone can convert man to Himself and in Jesus Christ keep man in the true faith:

> As long as I. . .cannot pour faith into people's hearts, I neither am able nor ought to force or compel anyone to believe; for God alone does this, coming to dwell beforehand in the heart. That is why we should leave the Word free and not add our work to it: we possess the *jus verbi*, but not the *jus executionis*. We have to preach the Word, but the consequences should be left to God alone in His pleasure.[25]

The freedom man had been given in his creation was lost in his fall, but restored "in Christ." To claim freedom apart from Christ, or without Christ, is to deny that Christ is unconditionally necessary.[26] Thus, Luther comes to a radically different understanding of freedom: "This Christian freedom, liberty, and power must be understood in a purely spiritual sense. . .spiritual freedom exists where the conscience remains free."[27]

Man's creatureliness, therefore, is not man's bondage. To argue thus is to reject man's exalted status as a creature made in the image and likeness of God. This image was the basis of man's created freedom which he had lost in the fall. Here Luther is aware of a possible confusion in the minds of his readers. Clearly no one intends to deny that man has a measure of freedom on earth:

> What we are asking is whether he has free choice in relation to God, so that God obeys man and does what man wills, or rather whether God has free choice in relation to man, so that man wills and does what God wills and is not able to do anything but what God wills and does.[28]

Luther's affirmation of divine monergism ("God works everything in everyone," 1 Corinthians 12:6), when applied to the function of the will of man, confronts the theologian with the temptation of making inferences not taught by God's revelation of His mercy toward man on account of the person and work of Jesus Christ. When God's monergism is affirmed, such inferences can produce a theological version of philosophical determinism. This development was probably on Luther's mind when he wrote against such a solution of the problem. The revelation of God concerning His being limits our understanding as well as the possibilities of our inquiries regarding Him. The secrets of God's majesty have not been revealed, and mankind must therefore be content to "occupy itself instead with the God incarnate." Clearly, it is Luther's argument, no legitimacy can be attributed to theological or philosophical inferences which have no explicit support in Scripture:

> We say, as we have said before, that the secret will of the Divine Majesty is not a matter for debate, and the human temerity which with continual perversity is always neglecting necessary things in its eagerness to probe this one must be called off and restrained from busying itself with the investigations of these secrets of God's majesty, which is impossible to penetrate because He dwells in light inaccessible, as Paul testifies (1 Timothy 6:16). Let it occupy itself instead with God incarnate, or as Paul puts it, with Jesus crucified, in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, though in a hidden manner

> (Colossians 2:3); for through Him it is furnished abundantly with what it ought to know. It is God incarnate, moreover, who is speaking here: "I would. . .you would not"—God incarnate, I say, who has been sent into the world for the very purpose of willing, speaking, doing, suffering, and offering to all men everything necessary for salvation. Yet He offends very many, who being either abandoned or hardened by that secret will of the divine majesty do not receive Him as He wills, speaks, does, suffers, and offers, as John says: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not comprehend it" (John 1:5); and again: "He came to His own home, and His own people received Him not" (John 1:11). It is likewise the part of this incarnate God to weep, wail, and groan over the perdition of the ungodly, when the will of the Divine Majesty purposely abandons and reprobates some to perish. And it is not for us to ask why He does so, but to stand in awe of God who both can do and wills to do such things.[29]

Assertions of divine monergism, Luther knew, may lead to the question of how God's omnipotence can be said to work evil in men, such as hardening, giving men up to their lusts (Romans 1:24), and similar disasters:

> We ought, of course, to be content with the words of God and believe quite simply what they say, since the works of God are entirely beyond description. Yet in order to humor reason, which is to say human stupidity, I am willing to be. . .stupid and see whether with a bit of babbling we can in any way move her.[30]

This quotation is worth considering because Luther here reveals his dual attitude toward human understanding. His willingness to do "a bit of babbling" about the topic, despite his conviction that "the works of God are entirely beyond our description," may be understood as an indulgent concession to the craving of "reason" to know as well as to its pretensions. His "bit of babbling" here is to be understood as a form of apologetics, not as an interpretation of definitive revelation on the topic.

First, Luther offers the biblical teaching regarding the power of God "who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1:11). But Satan and man, having

rebelled against God, remain in the created world as hostile and perverse creatures of God, "no less subject to divine omnipotence and activity than all other creatures and works of God."[31] God works through His creatures as they are until the time of judgment. When they are perverse and hostile to Him, evil consequences will happen even though God is good:

> It is the fault, therefore, of the instruments, which God does not allow to be idle, that evil things are done, with God Himself setting them in motion. . .Hence it comes about that the ungodly man cannot but continually err and sin, because he is caught up in the movement of divine power and not allowed to be idle, but wills, desires, and acts according to the kind of person he himself is. . .The omnipotence of God makes it impossible for the ungodly to evade the motion and action of God, for he is necessarily subject to it and obeys it. But this corruption or aversion from God makes it impossible for him to be moved and carried along with good effect. God cannot lay aside His omnipotence on account of man's aversion, and ungodly man cannot alter his aversion. It thus comes about that man perpetually and necessarily sins and errs until he is put right by the Spirit of God.[32]

"Next, however, follows the business of hardening." When a man, imitating Satan, seeks his own desires (careless of God or hostile to Him and the things which belong to God, but intent upon enjoying his possessions, wisdom, power, and glory) and discovers someone interfering with his purposes, he will rage against such an adversary:

> This is the well-known fury of the world against the Gospel of God. For by means of the Gospel that Stronger One comes who is to overcome the peaceful keeper of the court, and He condemns those desires for glory, wealth, wisdom, and righteousness of one's own, and everything which he trusts. This provocation of the ungodly, when God says or does to them the opposite of what they wish, is itself their hardening or worsening. For not only are they in themselves averse through the very corruption of their nature, but they become all the more averse and are made much worse when their aversion is resisted or thwarted. . .

> Let no one suppose, therefore, when God is said to harden or to work evil in us (for to harden is to make evil), that He does so by creating evil in us from scratch. . .That is the way people seem to imagine that man in himself is good, or at least not evil, and that he suffers an evil work at God's hands, when they hear it said by us that God works in us good things and bad, and that we are subject by sheer passive necessity to God's working; for they do not sufficiently consider how unrestingly active God is in all His creatures, allowing none of them to take a holiday. But anyone who wishes to have any understanding of such matters should think as follows. God works evil in us, i.e., by means of us, not through any fault of His, but owing to our faultiness, since we are by nature evil and He is good; but as He carries us along by His own activity in accordance with the nature of His omnipotence, good as He is Himself He cannot help but do evil with an evil instrument, though He makes good use of the evil in accordance with His wisdom for His own glory and our salvation.[33]

Luther's explanation of divine monergism does not answer questions such as "why God does not cease from the very motion of omnipotence by which the will of the ungodly is moved to go on being evil and becoming worse," why He permitted Adam to fall, and "why He creates us all infected with the same sin."[34] Instead, Luther points to the nature of God: "He is God, and for His will there is no cause or reason that can be laid down as a rule or measure for it, since there is nothing equal or superior to it, but it is itself the rule of all things."[35] This divine monergism is also summed up in this sentence: "For God to will and to foreknow are the same thing."[36]

The relationship between divine monergism and freedom is expressed by St. Paul in this way: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:12). Moreover, we need to understand that divine freedom and divine power are facets of the nature of God; their purpose and character is rooted in divine love (Psalm 62:11, 12). What God foreknows, He will surely do; yet we must confess that His knowledge and will are always congruent with His nature. When the psalmist prays, "Thy power and

Thy righteousness, O God, reach the high heavens" (Psalm 71:18, 19), the Christian understanding of God immediately finds clarification in the incarnate God, Jesus Christ. In Him "God is love" (1 John 4:8). In this statement the term "love" is no mere abstraction; God is love according to the nature of His being—in His knowledge, His will, His works, and His communications of both judgment and mercy.

The "omnipotence and the foreknowledge of God," says Luther, "completely abolish the dogma of free choice."[37] No injustice is done to man by that fact, he argues. "God owes us nothing, has received nothing from us, and has promised us nothing but what suits His will and pleasure."[38] Thus, even Christians "are not led by free choice but by the Spirit of God, according to Romans 8:14."[39]

Obviously, the study of Luther's *De Servo Arbitrio* involves much more than a few hours of reading. *The Bondage of the Will* represents a critical study of classical literature, the ancient and medieval church fathers, and the *via moderna*. Above all else, this work exhibits Luther's marvelously comprehensive and profound understanding of Scripture—an understanding of Scripture such as the Christian church has not seen since the time of the apostles. The Reformer offers us a lifetime of studying a topic which is no less inexhaustible than the study of God and of the Christian *ordo salutis.*

ENDNOTES

1. *Luther's Works: American Edition* (henceforth *LW*), edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press; 1955 ff.), 33, p. 35.
2. *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, edited and translated by E. Gordon Rupp and Philip Watson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), p. 37.
3. *LW*, 33, p. 294.
4. *Luther's Lectures on Romans*, translated and edited by Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 252.
5. *LW*, 31, pp. 344-345.

6. For interpretations of classical humanism see the following: Moses Hadas, *Humanism: The Greek Ideal and Its Survival* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960). Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, translated by Gilbert Highet, 3 volumes, second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945). Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, two volumes (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958). Paul Oskar Kristeller, *The Moral Thought of Renaissance Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961). The relationship between Renaissance humanism and the ancient world is well drawn by R.R. Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage and Its Beneficiaries: From the Carolingian Age to the End of the Renaissance* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964).
7. Paul Joachimsen, "Humanism and the Development of the German Mind," in *Pre-Reformation Germany*, edited by Gerald Strauss (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 170.
8. Gerald Strauss, *Luther's House of Learning. Indoctrination of the Young in the German Reformation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1979), offers a long catalogue of the failures of the cultural program of the Reformation. The interpretation of Strauss has, however, been emphatically rejected as a socialist ideological distortion of the consequences of the Reformation. See Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *Die Wirkungen der Reformation* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1987). A broad perspective is offered by Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250-1550. An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980). A less demanding approach is used by John Tonkin, *The Church and the Secular Order in Reformation Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971).
9. *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), p. 1 ff.
10. Ludwig Enders, *Luthers Briefwechsel*, I, no. 28, has his letter of October 19, 1516, addressed to Spalatin. See also Luther's letters to Lang, October 5, 1516 (*WA, Briefwechsel*, I: 61) and October 26, 1516 (*WA, Briefwechsel*, I: 73). One may compare Luther's letter to Spalatin of October 5, 1516 (*WA, Briefwechsel*, I: 63-64) with the one written two years earlier (*WA, Briefwechsel*, I: 23).
11. Luther's letter to Erasmus of January 6, 1519 (*WA, Briefwechsel*, I: 470, no. 911). His attempt to imitate the deferential and flowery style used by humanists in their correspondence may raise questions of Melanchthon's influence upon Luther at this time.

12. *Luther's Sämmtliche Schriften* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), XVIII, col. 1582, offers a German translation of this letter to Erasmus. In columns 1668-1669 references are given to other correspondence of Luther regarding Erasmus. An appendix begins with column 1969. Originally published in 1534, Luther's answer to Nicholaus Amsdorf in Magdeburg regarding Erasmus undoubtedly represents Luther's judgment of Erasmus' work in retrospect. Erasmus' dishonesty, as Luther perceived it, was most offensive to him (paragraph 24):

    > So great a rhetorician and theologian [as Erasmus] ought not only to know, but to act according to, the teaching of Fabius: "An ambiguous word should be avoided as a reef." Where it happens now and then inadvertently, it may be pardoned; but where it is sought for designedly and purposely, it deserves no pardon, but justly merits the abhorrence of everyone.

    See also paragraphs 4-8 as well as the rest of Luther's letter to Amsdorf, dated February 1534, particularly paragraphs 37 and following.

13. Percy S. Allen, ed., *Opus Epistolarum Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami* (Oxford University Press, 1906), III, p. 544, no. 948, a letter from Erasmus to Moselanus, dated April 22, 1519, which leaves no doubt about Erasmus' judgment of Luther's work despite the cautious approval with which he treated Luther in his letter addressed a few months later to Albert of Brandenburg, archbishop of Mainz. Allen, *ibid.*, IV, pp. 99 ff., no. 1033.

14. *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, translated and edited by E. Gordon Rupp and Philip Watson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), p. 35. The careful student may wish to compare this translation of Erasmus' essay with the edition of the original text published by Johannes von Walter (Leipzig: A. Deichert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1910). A German translation of Erasmus' *Diatribe* by Otto Schumacher (Göttingen: Vanderhoeck und Ruprecht, 1956) is noteworthy not only for the high quality of its interpretation of Erasmus' Latin, but also for the abundant explanatory footnotes.

15. *WA*, 1: 354; *LW*, 31, p. 40.

16. This translation comes from Rupp and Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 64. Luther himself favored his own German version of the *Assertio*, published a few months after the Latin version under the title *Grund und Ursach aller Artikel*, according to his letter to Spalatin of January 16, 1521 (Enders, III, 73). The German version of Article 36 reads somewhat differently, omitting a

reference to "necessity": "Since the fall of Adam, or after actual sin, free will exists only in name and, when it does what it can, it commits sin." *LW*, 32, p. 92.

17. *LW*, 32, p. 93. The reference to St. Augustine's *Contra Julianum*, II, 8, 23, is found in Migne, 44, 689: "You call the will free, but in fact it is an enslaved will." Augustine's expression, *servum arbitrium*—"a will in bondage" or "a will enslaved"—became the title of Luther's essay against Erasmus. Thereby Erasmus was forced to confront nor merely Luther, but also the greatest theologian of the ancient Western Church. It is remarkable that Luther voiced this primary conviction in 1516 in his exposition of St. Paul's Letter to the Romans:

> So then the first objection, which is also the least weighty one, is this: Man has been given free will and thus he can earn merits or demerits. We answer. . .as follows: The power of free decision in so far as it is not under the sway of grace has no ability whatever to realize righteousness, but it is necessarily in sins. Hence, Blessed Augustine is right, when, in his book against Julian, he calls it "the enslaved, rather than free will." But when it has received grace, the power of decision really becomes free, according to its nature, but only with respect to that which is in its power and is inferior, since it is held captive in sins and then cannot choose the good according to God.

Luther's Lectures on Romans, translated and edited by Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 252.

18. *LW*, 13, pp. 75-141; volumes 1-8 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956-1966).

19. Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), pp. 17-18.

20. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, translated by Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 982 b.

21. *LW*, 33, p. 23; *WA*, 18: 605. Here we should add that Erasmus' choice of the Latin term *assequi* (literally, "to follow," used by Cicero in the sense of "to arrive at, comprehend, understand") gave Luther an opportunity to stress the mandatory force of the Scriptures for the believer: "What Christian would so throw the injunctions of Scripture and the church to the winds as to say, 'whether I grasp it or not'?"

22. *LW*, 33, p. 35; *WA*, 18: 614.

23. *LW*, 33, pp. 203-205; *WA*, 18: 727-730.

24. *LW*, 33, p. 146; *WA*, 18: 690.
25. *WA*, 39, I: 521-522.
26. *LW*, 33, p. 282; *WA*, 18: 780.
27. *WA*, I: 252, 8-12.
28. *LW*, 33, p. 285; *WA*, 18: 782.
29. *LW*, 33, pp. 145-146; *WA*, 18: 689-690.
30. *LW*, 33, p. 175; *WA*, 18: 709.
31. *LW*, 33, p. 176; *WA*, 18: 709.
32. *LW*, 33, pp. 176-177; *WA*, 18: 709-710.
33. *LW*, 33, pp. 177-178; *WA*, 18: 710-711.
34. *LW*, 33, pp. 180-181; *WA*, 18: 712.
35. *LW*, 33, p. 181; *WA*, 18: 712.
36. *LW*, 33, p. 186; *WA*, 18: 716.
37. *LW*, 33, p. 189; *WA*, 18: 718.
38. *LW*, 33, p. 188; *WA*, 18: 717.
39. *LW*, 33, p. 160; *WA*, 18: 699.