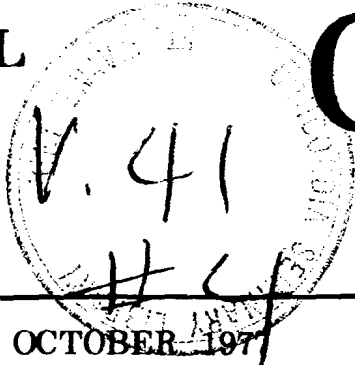


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Was Erasmus Responsible for Luther? A Study of the Relationship of the Two Reformers and Their Clash Over the Question of the Will

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In the early years of the Reformation, it was often charged by the monks that Erasmus had prepared the way and was responsible for Martin Luther. Erasmus, they said, had laid the egg, and Luther had hatched it.¹ Erasmus wittily dismissed the charge, claiming that Luther had hatched a different bird entirely. Yet, despite Erasmus' protests to the contrary, his part in the development of the Reformation did more to promote Luther's spirit than even Erasmus himself was able to realize. The spirit of reform drove Erasmus years before the Ninety-Five Theses were posted at Wittenberg; in his early writings, Erasmus clearly denounced clerical abuses and called for change, thereby putting himself in the forefront of the Reformation. However, with the dramatic rise of Luther there came charges from both sides; Erasmus was declared a Lutheran, or else he was said to be a Papist. Pressure from his Catholic acquaintances and the violent turn of the Reformation finally forced Erasmus to take up his pen against Luther, an action which enabled the key theological issue to be brought into the open. Erasmus' *Diatribes on the Freedom of the Will* sparked Luther to heights of violent clarity in his reply, *The Bondage of the Will*. Therein, Luther explored in depth the fundamental dogmatic stumbling-block to a peaceful settlement with Rome. Unwittingly, then, Erasmus had ripped away the last vestige of hope for rapprochement and truly paved the way for the Lutheran Reformation. It will be the purpose of this paper to examine briefly the early reforming activities of Erasmus, and the pressures which were brought upon him to write against Martin Luther. Then we shall discuss the issues involved in *The Bondage of the Will*, showing that Erasmus, although not consciously, to a large extent was responsible for the rise of Luther and the subsequent success of the Reformation.

To attempt to trace the early life of Erasmus would require far greater length than would suit the purpose of this discussion. However, certain aspects of his life are worthy of note. An

illegitimate son of a priest and a physician's daughter² born around 1466, Erasmus was housed and educated by the Brethren of the Common Life, and experience which was to have an enormous impact on his life.³ The monks whom he met while in residence had a twofold effect: on the one hand, they discouraged worldly learning (for which they were later called "barbarous" by Erasmus),⁴ yet they also deeply instilled in him a passion for the *Via Moderna*,⁵ and sparked his constant quest for Christian piety. It would be too simple to say that the Brethren of the Common Life were responsible for the development of such a giant as Erasmus, but their great influence, both positively and negatively, is simply too significant to be overlooked.

After leaving the monastery, he took great pains to educate himself in the humanities and classics, precisely those things which were denied him by the monks. By the time he felt compelled to take up his pen against the abuses in the Roman Church, he had established a firm reputation as one of the most learned men in all of Europe.⁶ It followed, therefore, that when Erasmus eloquently expressed his concerns about the Church, he was read and digested by all the leaders of the day.

In short, the purpose of Erasmus' reforming activities was to overthrow the obscurantism, superstition, corruption, and moral laxity in the Church, and to return to the "Christian philosophy" of the Scriptures.⁷ In 1504 *The Enchiridion* was published. In it Erasmus rejected the invocation of the saints, fasting, and indulgences,⁸ and added some particularly biting words for the monks: "Monasticism is not godliness, but a kind of life, either useful or useless to anyone depending on one's habit of body and of temperament."⁹ More importantly, however, Erasmus went to great lengths to outline the Christian life.

As one reviews this early work, it is hardly difficult to understand why the freedom of the will was to erupt as a major issue some twenty years later. Throughout *The Enchiridion*, Erasmus exhorts the reader to use the weapons of Christian warfare, prayer and knowledge,¹⁰ as he fights the evil foe and strives for piety and salvation. As he explains it, the Divine Spirit "lowers herself to your humility, yet you on the other hand are to rise up to her sublimity."¹¹ Among the Rules for True Christianity which follow, are advice to undertake the way of salvation, to love Christ and aspire heavenward, to remember the rewards offered by God and Satan for one's life, and to always fear impenitence.¹² Clearly, the spirit of Erasmus, even as early as 1504, was not in harmony with the chief tenets of the upcoming Martin Luther.

In some of his later works, Erasmus is equally as harsh. *The*

Praise of Folly (1509) and his *Colloquies* (1518) repeated and increased the attacks found in *The Enchiridion*, and also levelled some sharp criticism at the scholastic theologians, labelling them as "intellectual monsters." He went on to condemn the luxury of the successors of the Apostles, auricular confession, trust in the Virgin Mary, and the worship of relics.¹³ In fact, his criticisms were so powerful that Jose Chapiro, an Erasmus scholar, speaks of them in the following manner:

He attacked all the orders so effectively that it took a long period of counter-reform for them to rehabilitate themselves . . . From top to bottom of the ecclesiastical ladder, from the pope to the humblest priest, he stung them with his sarcasm and his criticism . . .¹⁴

The more one reads in Erasmus, the more one is struck by his sharp wit and genuine desire to reform his Church. An initial reaction would be great surprise and wonder that two men such as Luther and Erasmus, both filled with Christian piety and a reforming spirit could set upon one another and become bitter foes. Yet the nature of the men themselves and the nature of the times was such that a confrontation became inevitable. It could be said that their confrontation was a result of the Reformation, and also that it resulted in the Reformation. For the spirit of the day forced their dialogue, and their dialogue, in turn, prompted further controversy.

Erasmus' introduction to Luther came in a letter from Spalatin, a mutual friend, in 1516. Spalatin mentioned to Erasmus that a local monk named Luther had questioned Erasmus' understanding of the fifth chapter of Romans, and suggested that he read St. Augustine more carefully on the matter. This seemingly unimportant letter takes on great significance when one realizes that Romans 5 deals with justification, and it was over the will, so closely tied in with justification, that the two later clashed. It has been suggested that Luther already sensed the depth and meaning of the disagreement.¹⁵

After 1517 and the posting of the Ninety-Five Theses, Erasmus heard a great deal more of Luther and was favorably impressed. In a letter of 1518 Erasmus noted that he had heard good reports of Luther, adding that most of his theses were approved by all.¹⁶ In 1519 he wrote to Albert, the Archbishop of Mainz: "The impression of Luther one gets . . . is that of a man who was culpably rash, but who had been provoked beyond endurance."¹⁷

Basically, Erasmus was in favor of seeing to it that Luther received a fair hearing, and that his justifiable complaints would be dealt with properly. Yet the Church reacted almost hysterically

to Luther's writings, and did everything within its power to silence him. This offended Erasmus' sense of propriety, and in a letter to Frederick the Wise in 1519, he lamented the situation:

I cannot pass on his opinions because I have barely leafed through his books. I know of no one who does not commend his life. He is free from avarice and ambition . . . Yet no one admonishes him, no one instructs, no one corrects. They simply cry heresy.¹⁸

Finally, in 1520, the Church issued the bull of excommunication to Luther, a gesture which Erasmus angrily described as "appalling, breathing rather the savagery of the Mendicants than the spirit of the gentle Pope Leo."¹⁹

Despite his apparent sympathies, it would be a distortion to portray Erasmus as a staunch supporter of Luther from 1517 to 1520. All along Erasmus had reservations about Luther that became increasingly strong as the struggle progressed. Throughout these years, many hoped that the two vanguards of reform, that of peaceful, non-doctrinal Humanism and that of assertive Augustinianism, could join forces, but this was never to be.²⁰ Erasmus could never find it in himself to accede to the wishes of other reformers and throw his complete support behind Luther.²¹ For one thing, Erasmus was never very fond of Luther's language, thinking it to be too vehement in tone, and such that it often rendered reconciliation difficult, if not impossible.²² In December of 1520 Luther publicly burned the bull of excommunication, thereby upsetting Erasmus immensely. To his mind such an act was totally unnecessary and dreadfully theatrical.²³ When he read the *Babylonian Captivity* and *The Address to the German Nobility*, which both appeared in the same year, Erasmus saw his worst fears realized and commented, "The malady is incurable."²⁴

The year 1520 was a decisive one. In the *Babylonian Captivity* and *The Address to the Christian Nobility*, Luther had attacked the very heart of the papal system. Writing to a friend, Erasmus anxiously said,

If only Luther had taken my advice . . . I shall not become mixed up in this tragic affair. . .²⁵ I would be happy to be a martyr for Christ, but I cannot be a martyr for Luther.²⁶

Unfortunately, events from 1520 to 1524 would not allow Erasmus to remain uninvolved. With Luther having officially been declared a heretic, tremendous pressure was brought to bear upon Erasmus by the adherents of Rome to refute him publicly. In fact, at least one scholar has suggested that the history of Erasmus' involvement in the Lutheran troubles from the beginning of 1520 to September of 1524 could be written in terms of this demand and his reactions to it.²⁷

In the course of those years Erasmus was attacked violently from both sides. From the Lutheran quarter came a bitter denunciation from Ulrich Von Hutten, an emotional German knight. He accused Erasmus of cowardice, asserting that Erasmus was a Lutheran at heart, but was too timid to admit it.²⁸ From the Roman side the words were no less cutting. Aleander, a Papal envoy and sworn enemy of Erasmus, called him "the great cornerstone of the Lutheran heresy."²⁹ Duke George of Southern Saxony was incensed at Luther's endorsement of Huss, and accused Erasmus of not writing against Luther because he agreed with him.³⁰ Tunstall, the Bishop of London, urged Erasmus to write, and Henry VIII himself pressed him to repudiate Luther, even suggesting the question of the will as a suitable theme for his essay.³¹ To add insult to injury, the poor humanist was accused of writing the *Babylonian Captivity*.³² "I am a heretic to both sides," he is said to have complained.³³

Finally, in January of 1523, Erasmus received a crucial letter from Pope Adrian VI. In what amounted to a polite ultimatum, the Pope praised Erasmus as "the one to refute the heresies of Martin Luther by which innumerable souls are being taken to damnation."³⁴ He made it clear in his letter that the way for Erasmus to justify the Papal confidence and also demonstrate his oft-professed loyalty was to write against Luther.³⁵ It is a tribute to the strength of the man that he politely refused the Pope, but the pressures had become nearly unbearable. Clearly, if Erasmus hoped to remain in the Roman Church, he would have to write something against Luther; so he chose as his theme that which had been suggested by the King of England, the freedom of the will.

Before beginning work on the *Diatribes*, however, Erasmus published two tracts, *On the Immense Mercy of God* and *Inquisitio de Fide*, which were designed to explain the difference between fundamental and non-essential doctrines.³⁶ With an eye ever open for reconciliation and peace, Erasmus hoped that these tracts would serve to point out the fundamental agreement of Lutherans and Roman Catholics. In *Inquisitio de Fide*, which appeared only six months before the *Diatribes*, Aulus (a Roman Catholic) questions Barbatius (a Lutheran) on his understanding of the articles of the Apostles' Creed. Barbatius and Aulus agree wholeheartedly on the meaning of the Creed, and Aulus is prompted to ask him, "How comes it about, then, that there is so great a war between you and the orthodox?" Barbatius answers, "Why, indeed?"³⁷ This was the question asked by Erasmus as he prepared to discuss a "non-essential" matter in his *Diatribes*.

The attitudes of the two men on the brink of this dialogue

could hardly have been more dissimilar. Erasmus had been pressured and was not anxious to write. He still respected Luther, and did not want to harm his efforts too seriously. He expressed this feeling in a letter to Spalatin in 1523: “. . . should Luther go under, neither God nor man could longer endure the monks; nor can Luther perish without jeopardizing a great part of the whole truth.”³⁸ Erasmus was also wise enough to sense the fruitlessness of his effort. R. B. Drummond explains:

He knew well that he would do no good by it, that he would only exasperate the reform party, who already sufficiently distrusted him; and whether he could satisfy even the less violent adherents of the Papacy, must have seemed to him very doubtful.³⁹

He also knew that was not physically or emotionally fit for such a struggle. He had sought peace all of his life, and now as an old man he was not anxious to enter the arena of polemics.⁴⁰ He regarded the question of the will as a non-essential matter, yet he opposed Luther because he sincerely opposed dogmas and definitions in religion and the exclusiveness which he felt they promoted.⁴¹ Craig Thompson, in his introduction to the *Inquisitio de Fide*, explains Erasmus' feelings on the issue at hand:

When he came to write *De Libero Arbitrio*, he chose a topic which he knew to be paramount to Luther but to which he himself could not attach the same importance. To him the problem of the will, though important, was not comparable in importance with the articles of the Creed, nor should differences over that very difficult question be permitted to jeopardize the harmony of the Church.⁴²

Luther, on the other hand, saw the bound will as a basic tenet of the Christian faith. In fact, in *The Bondage of the Will* Luther praises Erasmus for attacking at “The essential issue,” “the jugular vein” of his theology.⁴³ At the time of their debate, Luther was in his prime, a robust, powerful man. Unlike Erasmus, he was willing to risk his own well-being and the well-being of the existing order for the assertions which he saw to be clear in Scripture. As he wrote to Erasmus, “You with your peace-loving theology, you don't care about the truth. Suppose the world does go to smash. God can make another world.”⁴⁴ Such a willingness to risk everything for the sake of a belief was a trait that was quite foreign to his opponent. In addition, Luther delighted in the battle of ideas. He thrived upon such struggles. Martin Bucer, a close associate of Luther's, once described this quality as he had observed it: “An almost deathly shudder runs down my back when I recall the

fury that boils up within the man as soon as he comes face to face with an opponent."⁴⁵ When Luther was involved in controversy, he was fully at ease; when Erasmus entered such struggles, his sense of values weighed him down with regret. Thus, when Luther and Erasmus crossed swords, it was a clash between Humanism and the Reformation.

After extended preparation, perhaps because Erasmus hoped to make his work unanswerable,⁴⁶ the *Diatribes on the Freedom of the Will* appeared in September of 1524. The work, according to J. I. Packer, a translator of *The Bondage of the Will*, can be divided into three parts. The first two speak of the personalities of Luther and Erasmus, and the last, and most significant, deals with the question of the will.⁴⁷

As Erasmus describes Luther, he is a bit cranky, somewhat conceited, and lacking in a sense of proportion. Erasmus presents himself as reasonable, tolerant, and ever in search of peace.⁴⁸ In fact, he insists, on several occasions, that he would prefer avoiding the discussion altogether, rather than engage in a distasteful battle of assertions. Erasmus was a fine classical scholar, but he was not a systematic theologian, and he knew it.⁴⁹ Perhaps this helps further to explain his reluctance to enter the dialogue in the first place. Before setting forth his position, Erasmus humbly stated:

There will be no invective . . . I merely want to analyze and not to judge, to inquire and not to dogmatize. I am ready to learn from anyone who advances something more accurate or more reliable, though I would rather persuade mediocre minds not to argue too stubbornly on such matters. It harms Christian concord more than it helps piety.⁵⁰

Having established his purposes, Erasmus proceeded to discuss the will.

In his writing of the *Diatribes*, it is important to understand that Erasmus was proceeding on the mistaken notion that Luther's view of the will made man into an automaton, a creature incapable of any decision-making. This was not the case, as will be shown later, but this misunderstanding made the debate unnecessarily sharp and bitter.⁵¹ In order to appreciate what was said on both sides, it seems appropriate to examine how each of the reformers viewed the process of salvation. This approach should serve to bring to light each man's estimation of the power of the will in this most crucial of concerns, eternal salvation. After all, Erasmus defined free will as "the power to apply to or turn away from that which leads unto salvation."⁵²

Logically, the first place to begin is with the condition of mankind subsequent to the Fall. Only when one understands

the nature of man can he begin to determine what man is capable of doing for himself, and what must be done for him from without. As Erasmus views man, he sees a creature damaged by sin, to be sure, but not totally corrupted by it. Man's free choice, he insists, is obscured by sin, but is not extinguished by it. To prove his point, Erasmus is determined to make full use of the Fathers who say that there are certain seeds of virtue implanted in the minds of men by which they in some way see and seek after virtue, but mingled with grosser affections which incite them to other things.⁵³

Thus, he pictures man as a creature with the ability to do either good or evil; all depends upon his choice. Hermann Saase criticizes Erasmus at this point, claiming that "he has never been able to understand the depth of human sin."⁵⁴

Having posited man as only partially corrupted by sin, Erasmus is logically able to allow man to cooperate with God's grace in his own salvation. This process is explained by Erasmus in a fashion reminiscent of Thomas Aquinas, a strange style for a man who claims to abhor the Scholastics. Like Thomas, Erasmus is unwilling to say that either God's grace or man's merit is entirely responsible for man's salvation; so he chooses an intermediate theory. God's grace is said to be very active in the process, but it must have reference to some sort of merit on the part of man. Although he does not use Thomistic terminology, Erasmus seems to be distinguishing between merit (*meritum de condigno*) and approximate merit (*meritum de congruo*), which is a distinction commonly made by the Scholastics.⁵⁵ Like Luther, Erasmus agrees that genuine merit does not exist, but he argues that God, in his boundless mercy, treats the lesser merit as though it were the greater. In effect, then, a man who does his best on the level of the *meritum de congruo* is given the gift of a special grace whereby he can eventually achieve genuine merit. Mann Phillips describes this process in simpler terms:

Just as the general is said to win the battle, but the soldiers are not unimportant, or the architect is said to build the house, but the bricklayers have done their part, so in all good actions the inspiration and completion are of God, but man co-operates by opening his mind to God's grace.⁵⁶

Erasmus distinguishes three parts of each action: the initial inspiration, the continuation, and the successful achievement. It is only in the second, the continuation, that man's free will is said to be of any avail. It is essential to point out that when Erasmus speaks of the cooperation of the human will with grace, he never fails to mention that grace must come first:

“Yet . . . in consenting, grace and human will act together, but in such a way that grace is the principle cause, and the secondary cause our will.”⁵⁷

When Erasmus speaks of grace in the *Diatribes*, he distinguishes between several kinds. The first type, he says, is possessed by all men by nature. Despite his fall, man continues to be preserved by God, and, even though he has been corrupted by sin, man still retains his freedom to do as he chooses. This is a basic type of grace which Erasmus thinks is forgotten by too many of us. The second type of grace he calls extraordinary grace. With this grace God moves the undeserving sinner to contrition. As the sinner is affected by this grace, he becomes dissatisfied with himself and becomes capable of improving his way of life. This grace too is offered to all men, but if they are to experience true repentance and renewal of life, they must attach their will to it and strive for betterment. If a man devotes his will to the task, a third grace is applied by God, allowing him to succeed. This, in effect, is a sanctifying grace. The final grace is that which offers salvation for his efforts. Erasmus calls these varieties of grace natural grace, operative or efficient grace, and a grace which leads to the final goal.⁵⁸ Despite the vast powers of God's grace, Erasmus firmly states that, “No one perishes except through his own fault.”⁵⁹

In reading the *Diatribes* one cannot help but be struck by Erasmus' treatment of Pelagianism. Pelagius taught, in the fourth century, that no new grace was needed once it liberated and healed the free will of man. This view was condemned, yet the Scholastic theologians held to a view of salvation which can only be described as Semi-Pelagian. Erasmus supports a similar position. In the *Diatribes*, he makes the rewards of salvation a direct result of man's merits: “If man does nothing, there is no room for merits; when there is no room for merits, there is no room for punishments or rewards . . .”⁶⁰ To this he adds, “If man does all, there is no room for grace.”⁶¹ His confidence in the powers of man echoes the words of St. Thomas, who said, “Man has free will; otherwise counsel, exhortation, precept, prohibition, reward and punishment would all be in vain.”⁶² This point was to Erasmus one of the strongest arguments in favor of the free will. He cannot understand the meaning of Scripture if it exhorts man to do that which he is incapable of performing.

His attempts to establish the freedom of the will are somewhat obfuscated by his attempt to refute the supposed elements of necessitarianism in Luther as well. At times, this goal leads Erasmus to argue at cross-purposes, but he may only be reflecting the prevailing lack of clarity on this issue in his

time.⁶³ In his arguments, he relies heavily on common sense and reason. He examines Scripture and argues that over six hundred exhortations to godliness contained therein are clear proof of man's freedom to choose the will of God.⁶⁴ He further illustrates his position with the story of the prodigal son, which he interprets in this way:

What signifies the son speaking to himself, planning to confess and return home? It signifies the will of man turning towards grace, which has stimulated him . . . What signifies the father who hastens to meet his son? He signifies the grace of God which furthers our will so that we can accomplish that which we wish.⁶⁵

In his conclusion to this section, Erasmus seems uncharacteristically assertive:

We oppose those who conclude like this: "Man is unable to do anything unless God's grace helps him. Therefore there are no good works of man." We propose the rather more acceptable conclusion: Man is able to accomplish all things, if God's grace aids him. Therefore it is possible that all works of men be good.⁶⁶

The strange similarity of these two conclusions helps illustrate the difficulty which Erasmus encounters in attempting to explain the relationship of the will and grace.

Perhaps, as Roland Bainton suggests, Erasmus' deepest concern is over the doctrine of predestination,⁶⁷ which is a logical consequence of a justification entirely by grace. If salvation results from a gift, predestination must follow. Erasmus, "untrammelled by logic," as Bainton puts it,⁶⁸ calls predestination a monstrous doctrine. This was certainly a key issue in his disagreement with Luther. Sensing his inability to argue the case convincingly, Erasmus anxiously adds the following:

. . . I would ask that the reader will also consider whether it is reasonable to condemn the opinion of so many doctors of the Church, which the consensus of so many centuries and peoples has approved, and to accept in their stead certain paradoxes on account of which the Christian world is now in an uproar.⁶⁹

When the *Diatriba* was released, the reaction was much as Erasmus had anticipated. Few were pleased.⁷⁰ In a letter to Spalatin, Luther complained, "I can't tell you how I loathe the Treatise on Free Will; I have not yet read more than a few pages of it. It is unpleasant to me to have to reply to so unlearned a book by so learned a man."⁷¹ Other reports indicate that Luther called the book "stupid, impious, blasphemous, ignorant and hypocritical,"⁷² and wished to throw it into the fire.⁷³ Had it not been for problems in Germany with Carlstadt

and other enthusiasts, Luther probably would have answered it immediately. However, more than a year passed, exciting in many the false hope that Erasmus had written an unanswerable book.⁷⁴ These hopes were dashed in December of 1525 when Luther published *The Bondage of the Will*, a vehement rejection of the *Diatribes*.

As one would expect, Luther thoroughly rejects Erasmus' distaste for assertions. To Erasmus' plea for peace in doctrinal matters, Luther replies, "Take away assertions, and you take away Christianity."⁷⁵ After taking Erasmus to task for his loose treatment of Scripture⁷⁶ and for his willingness to abide by faulty decisions of the Church for the sake of concord,⁷⁷ Luther launches into the subject of the will. For one thing, Luther criticizes Erasmus for using contradictory definitions of free will. The original definition by Erasmus was "the power to apply or turn away from that which leads unto salvation," and Erasmus set out to prove that man has such power. He later admitted in several places, however, that the will, apart from grace, is not free to perform truly good acts, although with grace it can do all things. Luther justifiably exposes this contradiction:⁷⁸

Throughout your treatment you forget that you said that "free-will" can do nothing without grace, and you prove that "free-will can do all things without grace! . . . This you did not undertake to prove and, indeed, have denied. Consequently, "proofs" of this sort are nothing but disproofs of the strongest kind. . . . Indeed, the *Diatribes* itself maintains the same as I do when it asserts that "free-will" by its own strength can will no good, and necessarily serves sin—even though it lays this down in the course of proving the exact opposite!⁷⁹

There can be no question that Erasmus seemed to lose sight of that which he was trying to prove, thereby opening a deep wound in his argument.

A fundamental point of difference between Erasmus and Luther is over the condition of man subsequent to the Fall. As we have seen, Erasmus views the damage as partial; Luther feels that it is far more extensive. In fact, Luther feels that the Fall has left man in a perpetual state of sin.⁸⁰ Man is not capable of meeting the demands of God, who calls for purity of heart, self-effacement, and complete obedience to the divine will.⁸¹ The effect of the Fall has been that man's back has been turned upon God, leaving him totally unable to please God in matters relating to salvation. The impossibility of man's situation is that the Law requires absolute obedience; salvation by the Law can only come by way of a perfect life. With his back turned to God, man can never fulfill these requirements.

Packer explains that “. . . the truth about him is that deliberately, spontaneously, heartily, voluntarily, he always chooses the way of noncompliance and nonconformity when the full demands of the Law confront him.”⁸² The question of the condition of man is one which Luther feels to be at the very core of the Gospel. He clearly sees that if man is not totally fallen into sin, there is no longer any need for a Redeemer. This is a concern which he feels very deeply:

And, finally, if we believe that Christ redeemed men by His blood, we are forced to confess that all of man was lost; otherwise, we make Christ either wholly superfluous, or else the redeemer of the least valuable part of man only; which is blasphemy, and sacrilege.⁸³

There is no place in Luther's system for a virtuous man; so there can be no place for merit either. He feels that merit is a completely non-Scriptural, man-made notion which does little more than mislead sincere people. As a result, he tears it apart with the same fervor with which he glorifies Christ:

. . . what will the guardians of “free-will” say to what follows: “being justified freely by His grace”? What does “freely” mean? How will endeavor, and merit, accord with freely given righteousness? Perhaps they will here say that they assign to “free-will” as little as possible, not by any means condign merit. But these are empty words . . . Paul here gives the answer—there is no such thing as merit at all, but all that are justified are justified freely, and this is ascribed to nothing but the grace of God.⁸⁴

Luther also sees, unlike Erasmus, that the allowance of merit, however minimal, detracts from the power of grace, and from the work of Christ. In Luther's eyes, one either denies merit and works, or else one denies the grace of God. To opt for a combination of the two is to opt for a humanistic distortion of the Gospel which has no basis other than the imagination of man. The two simply cannot be permitted to stand together:

So, either it is false that we receive our grace for the grace of another, or else it is apparent that “free-will” is nothing; for these two positions cannot stand together, that the grace of God is both so cheap that it may be gained anywhere and everywhere by a little endeavor on the part of any man, and so dear that it is given to us only in and through the grace of this one great man!⁸⁵

Along with this flat denial of merit, Luther seeks to reject the Semi-Pelagianism which he finds inherent in Erasmus' thought. He feels that Erasmus and other proponents of the free will are dishonest in their discussion of merit and will not straightforwardly say what they mean. He states:

. . . the Pelagians confess and assert condign merit . . . candidly and honestly, calling a spade a spade and teaching what they really hold. But our friends here, who hold and teach the same view, try to fool us with lying words and false appearances, giving out that they disagree with the Pelagians, when there is nothing that they are further from doing!⁸⁶

Harry McSorley, the Roman Catholic historian and theologian, thinks that Luther may have pressed his dislike for Semi-Pelagianism too far. He feels that Luther, in his legitimate desire to deny the freedom of the sinner to do anything truly good, actually eliminates man's free decision even in the sins which he commits.⁸⁷ He claims that Luther "carefully and deliberately avoids explaining sin in terms of man's free will."⁸⁸ McSorley goes on to say that it is precisely in terms of man's responsibility for his actions and the origin of evil in God's good creation that each theological rejection of free will must justify itself.⁸⁹ In effect, McSorley is saying that Luther, by taking free will away from man makes God the originator of evil.⁹⁰ In actuality, however, Luther maintains man's responsibility for his actions and the existence of evil. If one examines Luther's complete theology of man, the answers are forthcoming. Man is in a condition of sin; there is nothing that he can do to remove himself from it. He may choose freely to perform an act of civil righteousness, or he may choose not to do so. But such freedom and such choices are non-spiritual matters. Man's decisions are based on motivations other than God's will. Yet in all of his actions, man is held responsible, for all of these actions are sins in the eyes of God. A life built upon such actions alone leads to eternal damnation. Man, therefore, apart from God, has no choice but to sin,⁹¹ yet he remains responsible for it. McSorley is correct in stating that Luther cannot say that man *freely* chooses sin. But this is hardly a fatal criticism when one takes into account that Paul cannot say it either.

However, Luther would say that the first man, Adam, did have this complete freedom, and freely chose to do that which was evil, or contrary to God's will. This choice resulted in the Fall of man,⁹² the enormous consequences of which even McSorley seems unable to grasp. The freedom which Adam misused is no longer ours to enjoy, for we are bound to sinfulness from the time of our origin.⁹³ Perhaps what McSorley is seeking from Luther is an answer to the question of why Adam chose evil, or why God holds all men accountable for his choice. Here Luther's concept of the "hidden God," the *Deus Absconditus*, is properly employed. Luther says that he simply cannot answer such questions:

If God does not desire our death, it must be laid to the charge of our own will if we perish; . . . For He desires that all men should be saved, in that He comes to all by the word of salvation, and the fault is in the will which does not receive him; . . . But why the Majesty does not remove or change this fault of will in every man (for it is not in the power of man to do it), or why He lays this fault to the charge of the will, when men cannot avoid it, it is not lawful to ask; and though you should ask much, you would never find out; as Paul says in Rom. 11: "Who art thou that replies against God?"⁹²

Perhaps, in this case, Luther is not so much in error for not answering this question as McSorley is for asking it.

Contrary to Erasmus' understanding, Luther does accept the existence of a free will in all matters unrelated to the spiritual. Within this lower sphere, he allows man freedom to do whatever he chooses. He can go out or come in as he pleases, milk the cow or not do so, and generally carry on any way he chooses.⁹⁵ But these actions have absolutely no bearing on salvation. Man's freedom of the will ends, for Luther, as soon as one begins to discuss spiritual concerns. Luther is very much to the point in his rejection of a virtuous free will. He quotes Paul, and allows the apostle to cement the case for him:

"Thus it is written," he says: "there is none righteous, there is none that understandeth, none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are all together become unprofitable, there is none that doeth good, no, not one," etc. (Romans 3:10-12) Here let him that can give me a "convenient explanation", or invent "figures", or contend that the words are ambiguous and obscure! Let him that dares defend "free-will" against these indictments, and I will gladly give way and recant, and be a confessor and assertor of "free-will" myself!⁹⁶

In answer to Erasmus' appeal to the exhortations in Scripture as proof of free will, Luther says that they are intended to show man his own weakness and lead him to repentance. The exhortations serve as the tools of the Law. McSorley feels that Luther's explanation is "opposed to common sense and the rules of personal communication."⁹⁷ But common sense is highly subjective, and rules of communication, if any truly exist, are certainly vague. Luther's argument accords more with the Church Fathers, and is certainly more consistent with the constant testimony of Scripture. The common sense of Scripture is all that Luther seeks.

With man in a helpless state of sinfulness, Luther relied upon his glorious concept of grace which alone is capable of rescuing

the lost. Packer defines this grace as "the loving action of a sovereign Creator saving guilty sinners who cannot lift a finger to save themselves."⁹⁸ There are no scholastic distinctions in Luther, no levels or types of grace. There is simply saving grace, a grace which rules out works, which rules out merit, and which eliminates all talk of free will. For Luther the issue is clear; one is either saved by works, or one is saved by grace. Luther comes down wholeheartedly on the side of the latter.

Finally, on the issue of predestination, Erasmus' denial was without foundation. He claimed to accept the doctrine of justification by faith, but failed to realize that predestination was a logical outgrowth of it. In fairness to Erasmus, he probably recognized the logical difficulty of his position, but chose to stand on the side of the dignity and freedom of man where he had spent all of his life.

After *The Bondage of the Will*, the course of the Reformation became clear. There could no longer be a turning back, for the issues now ran far deeper than spiritual renewal. The *Diatribes*, failing to silence Luther, actually prompted him to an open attack which went to the very core of the doctrinal system of Rome. Erasmus was left a disillusioned and broken man. His views had changed little over the years, yet the world around him had undergone drastic alterations. It was the fate of Erasmus to help pioneer a movement which would eventually leave him far behind. There can be no doubt that his writings were read by the young Luther and influenced him in his early reforming activities. His later attempts to reason with Luther only led to mutual distrust and eventual conflict, which served to broadcast the fundamental split with Rome. Aleander was mistaken when he called Erasmus a Lutheran; but there is no doubt that, in his reforms and later attempts at peaceful settlement, Erasmus was, in a significant way, responsible for the course of Lutheran history. If properly understood, then, the charge that Erasmus laid the egg and Luther hatched it was a substantially accurate one.

FOOTNOTES

1. A. B. Pennington, *The Life and Character of Erasmus* (London, 1875). p. 219.
2. Ernst F. Winter, trans. and ed., *Erasmus and Luther—Discourse on Free Will* (New York, 1961). p.2.
3. R. D. Jones, *Erasmus and Luther* (London, 1968), p.12.
4. Matthew Spinka, ed., *Advocates of Reform* (Philadelphia, 1953), p. 282.
5. A. G. Dickens, *The Counter-Reformation*, (New York, 1969), p. 62.
6. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, trans., *Martin Luther on the Bondage of the Will* (Westwood, New Jersey, 1957), p. 17.
7. J. I. Packer, "Luther Against Erasmus," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 37 (1966), p. 207.

8. Dickens, pp. 10-11.
9. Spinka, p. 375.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 302.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 306.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 321.
13. Pennington, pp. 207-208.
14. Jose Chapiro, *Erasmus and Our Struggle for Peace* (Boston, 1950), p. 19.
15. Craig R. Thompson, ed., *Erasmus: Inquisitio de Fide* (New Haven, 1950), pp. 6-7.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
17. *Ibid.*, p.10.
18. Roland Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom* (New York, 1969), p. 157.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
20. Packer and Johnston, p. 25.
21. Thompson, pp. 12,13.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
23. *Ibid.*, p.22.
24. Bainton, p. 165.
25. Packer and Johnston, p. 31.
26. Bainton, p. 167.
27. Thompson, p. 17.
28. Bainton, p. 176.
29. Packer and Johnston, p. 34.
30. Bainton, pp. 179, 180.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
32. Packer, p. 209.
33. M. M. Phillips, *Erasmus and the Northern Renaissance* (London, 1949), p. 186.
34. Bainton, p. 178.
35. Thompson, p. 24.
36. Bainton, pp. 183 ff.
37. Thompson, p. 73.
38. Spinka, p. 289.
39. R. B. Drummond, *Erasmus: His Life and Character*, II. (London, 1873), p. 201.
40. Phillips, p. 181.
41. Chapiro, p. 121.
42. Thompson, p. 47.
43. Packer and Johnston, p. 319.
44. Jones, p. 24.
45. S. Zweig, *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, (New York, 1934), p. 139.
46. Phillips, p. 160.
47. Packer, pp. 209, 210.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
49. Bainton, p. 186.
50. Ernest Gordon Rupp, trans, *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, (Philadelphia, 1953) p. 36.
51. Bainton, p. 188.
52. Rupp, p. 47.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
54. H. Sasse, "Erasmus, Luther and Modern Christendom," *Reformed Theological Review*, 27 (1968). p. 51.
55. Bainton, p. 188.
56. Phillips, pp. 194, 195.
57. Rupp, p. 80.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
61. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
62. Preserved Smith, *Erasmus* (New York, 1923), p. 338.
63. Harry McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong?* (New York, 1969), p. 289.
64. Winter, p. 59.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
67. Bainton, p. 189.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
69. Rupp, p. 97.
70. Phillips, p. 197.
71. Drummond, p. 215.
72. Phillips, p. 198.
73. Zweig, p. 206.
74. J. J. Mangan, *Life, Character and Influence of Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, II* (New York, 1927), p. 246.
75. Packer and Johnston, p. 67.
76. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
77. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
78. McSorley, p. 286.
79. Packer and Johnston, pp. 160, 161, and 189.
80. McSorley, p. 367.
81. Bainton, p. 187.
82. Packer, p. 216.
83. Packer and Johnston, p. 318.
84. *Ibid.*, p. 292.
85. *Ibid.*, p. 304.
86. *Ibid.*, p. 293.
87. McSorley, p. 332.
88. *Ibid.*, p. 342.
89. *Ibid.*, p. 343.
90. *Ibid.*, p. 343.
91. Packer and Johnston, p. 275.
92. *Ibid.*, p. 297.
93. *Ibid.*, p. 298.
94. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
95. Smith, p. 339.
96. Packer and Johnston, p. 279.
97. McSorley, p. 331.
98. Packer, p. 219.