

Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation

Translated by E. Gordon Rupp

*In 1524 and 1525, seven years after Martin Luther began the Reformation, Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) and Luther held a “debate” in print entitled *On Free Will and Salvation*. Erasmus initiated this exchange in the form of an open letter in early 1524, and Luther replied in 1525. Erasmus, despite his own criticisms of the excesses and corruption of many Roman Catholic clergymen, felt that the Church was absolutely necessary. Humanity required guidance to avoid sin, Erasmus reasoned, and the best guidance was the accumulated wisdom of the ages, as embodied in the teachings of the Church.*

*For Erasmus, any reform of the Church had to begin by examining its role in shaping individual morality. He felt this depended on the individual Christian’s acceptance of free will (the notion that humans are free to choose their actions without divine coercion or predestination). In **On the Freedom of the Will**, Erasmus argues that the Bible can be obscure, ambiguous, and seemingly contradictory on the question of free will, but that on the whole the Bible and Church tradition favor free will.*

*Luther, conversely, felt that the nature of each individual was largely predetermined in the mind and plan of God, and that the Church was only a teacher or guide, not a true molder of man’s nature. In his response of 1525, **The Bondage of the Will**, Luther does more than argue for predestination. He also strongly asserts the clarity and sufficiency of the Bible (without commentary or church doctrine) on this issue and on all other essential points of faith.*

On the Freedom of the Will: A Diatribe or Discourse by Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam

Erasmus Acknowledges His Limitations and States

His Point of View

In the Name of Jesus.

Among the difficulties, of which not a few crop up in Holy Scripture, there is hardly a more tangled labyrinth than that of “free choice,” for it is a subject that has long exercised the minds of philosophers, and also of theologians old and new, in a striking degree, though in my opinion and more labor than fruit.

More recently, however, it has been revived by Carlstadt and Eck, in a fairly moderate debate, and now it has been more violently stirred up by Martin Luther, who has put out an *Assertion* about “free choice” and although he has already been answered by more than one writer, it seemed good to my friends that I should try my hand and see whether, as a result of our little set-to, the truth might be made more plain.

Here I know there will be those who will forthwith stop their ears, crying out, “The rivers run backward” — dare Erasmus attack Luther, like the fly the elephant? To appease them, if I may be allowed to ask for a little quiet, I need say no more by way of preface than what is the fact, that I have never sworn allegiance to the words of Luther. So that it should not seem unbecoming to anybody if at any point I differ publicly from him, as a man surely may differ from another man, nor should it seem a criminal offense to call in question any doctrine of his, still less it one engages in a temperate disputation with him for the purpose of eliciting truth.

Certainly I do not consider Luther himself would be indignant if anybody should find occasion to differ from him, since he permits himself to call in question the decrees, not only of all the doctors of the Church, but of all the schools, councils, and popes; and since he acknowledges this plainly and openly, it ought not to be counted by his friends as cheating if I take a leaf out of his book.

Furthermore, just in case anyone should mistake this for a regular gladiatorial combat, I shall confine my controversy strictly to this one doctrine, with no other object than to make the truth more plain by throwing together Scriptural texts and arguments, a method of investigation that has always been considered most proper for scholars.

So let us pursue the matter without recrimination, because this is more fitting for Christian men, and because in this way the truth, which is so often lost amid too much wrangling, may be more surely perceived.

To be sure, I know that I was not built for wrestling matches: there is surely nobody less practiced in this kind of thing than I, who have always had an inner temperamental horror of fighting, and who have always preferred to sport in the wider plains of the Muses rather than to brandish a sword in a hand-to-hand fight.

His Dislike of Assertions

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 willingly submit my personal feelings, whether I grasp what it prescribes or not.

Moreover, I prefer this disposition of mine to that with which I see some people endowed who are so uncontrollably attached to their own opinion that they cannot bear anything which dissents from it; but they twist whatever they read in the Scriptures into an assertion of an opinion which they have embraced once for all. They are like young men who love a girl so immoderately that they imagine they see their beloved wherever they turn, or, a much better example, like two combatants who, in the heat of a quarrel, turn whatever is at hand into a missile, whether it be a jug or a dish. I ask you, what sort of sincere judgment can there be when people behave in this way? Who will learn anything fruitful from this sort of discussion —beyond the fact that each leaves the encounter bespattered with the other’s filth? There will always be many such, whom the apostle Peter describes as “ignorant and unstable who twist the Scriptures to their own destruction.”

As far as I am concerned, I admit that many different views about free choice 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. For I have read the *Assertion* of Martin Luther, and read it without prejudice, except that I have assumed a certain favor toward him, as an investigator may toward an arraigned prisoner. And yet, although he expounds his case in all its aspects with great ingenuity and fervor of spirit, I must say, quite frankly, that he has not persuaded me.

If anybody ascribes this to my slowness or inexperience, I shall not quarrel with him, provided they allow us slower ones the privilege of learning by meeting those who have received the gift of God in fuller measure, especially since Luther attributes very little importance to scholarship, and most of all to the Spirit, who is wont to instill into the more humble what he denies to the wise. So much for those who shout so loudly that Luther has more learning in his little finger than Erasmus in his whole body, a view that I shall certainly not attempt to refute here. I simply ask from such, however ill-disposed they may be, that if I grant to Luther in this Disputation that he be not weighed down by the prejudgments of doctors, councils, universities, popes, and of the emperor, they will not damage my cause by mere snap judgments.

For even though I believe myself to have mastered Luther’s argument, yet I might well be mistaken, and for that reason I play the debater, not the judge; the inquirer, not the dogmatist: ready to learn from anyone if anything truer or more scholarly can be brought. Yet I would willingly persuade the man in the street that in this kind of discussion it is better not to enforce contentions which may the sooner harm Christian concord than advance true religion.

The Obscurity of Scripture

For there are some secret places in the Holy Scriptures into which God has not wished us to penetrate more deeply and, if we try to do so, then the deeper we go, the darker and darker it becomes, by which means we are led to acknowledge the unsearchable majesty of the divine wisdom, and the weakness of the human mind.

It is like the cavern near Corycos of which Pomponius Mela tells, which begins by attracting the drawing the visitor to itself by its pleasing aspect, and then as one goes deeper, a certain horror and majesty of the divine presence that inhabits the place makes one draw back. So when we come to such a place, my view is that the wiser and more reverent course is to cry with St. Paul: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” and with Isaiah: “Who has heard the Spirit of the Lord, or what counselor has instructed him?” rather than to define what passes the measure of the human mind. Many things are reserved for that time when we shall no longer see through a glass darkly or in a riddle, but in which we shall contemplate the glory of the Lord when his face shall be revealed.

Therefore, in my judgment on this matter of free choice, having learned what is needful to know about this, if we are in the path of true religion, let us go on swiftly to better things, forgetful of the things which are behind, or if we are entangled in sins, let us strive with all our might and have recourse to the remedy of penitence that by all means we may entreat the mercy of the Lord without which no human will or endeavor is effective; and what is evil in us, let us impute to ourselves, and what is good, let us ascribe wholly to divine benevolence, to which we owe salvation, and that no harm can come to us from a God who is by nature just, even if some things happen that seem to us amiss, for none ought to despair of the pardon of a God who is by nature most merciful. This, I say, was in my judgment sufficient for Christian godliness, nor should we through irreverent inquisitiveness rush

into those things which are hidden, not to say superfluous: whether our will accomplishes anything in things pertaining to eternal salvation; whether it simply suffers the action of grace; whether what we do, be it of good or ill, we do by necessity or rather suffer to be done to us. And then there are certain things of which God has willed us to be completely ignorant — such as the hour of death or the Day of Judgment: “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority,” Acts 1(:7); and Mark 13(:32): “But of that day of that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” There are some things which God has willed that we should contemplate, as we venerate himself, in mystic silence; and, moreover, there are many passages in the sacred volumes about which many commentators have made guesses, but no one has finally cleared up their obscurity: as the distinction between the divine persons, the conjunction of the divine and human nature in Christ, the unforgivable sin; yet there are other things which God has willed to be most plainly evident, and such are the precepts for the good life. This is the Word of God, which is not to be bought in the highest heaven, nor in distant lands overseas, but it is close at hand, in our mouth and in our heart. These truths must be learned by all, but the rest are more properly committed to God, and it is more religious to worship them, being unknown, than to discuss them, being insoluble. How many questions, or rather squabbles, have arisen over the distinction of persons, the mode of generation, the distinction between filiation and procession; what a fuss has been raised in the world by the wrangle about the conception of the virgin as Theotokos! I ask what profit has there been so far from these laborious inquiries, except that with the loss of harmony we love one another the less, while seeking to be wiser than we need.

Some Truths Are Not for Common Ears

Moreover, some things there are of such a kind that, even if they were true and might be known, it would not be proper to prostitute them before common ears. Perhaps it is true, as the Sophists are given to blather, that God, according to his own nature, is not less present in the hole of a beetle (I will not use the more vulgar expression that they are not ashamed to use) than in heaven, and yet this would be unprofitably discussed before the common herd. And that there are three Gods might be said truly according to the rules of dialectic, but would certainly not be spoken before the untutored multitude without great scandal. Even if I were convinced, which is not the case, that this confession which we now use was neither instituted by Christ nor could have been founded by men, and for this reason ought not to be required of any, and further that no satisfaction should be demanded for offenses, yet I should fear to publish this opinion because I see so many mortals who are wonderfully prone to offenses, whom the necessity of confessing either restrains altogether or at least moderates. There are some bodily diseases that are less evil to bear than their removal, as though a man were to bathe in a warm blood of murdered babes to avoid leprosy, so there are some errors that it would cause less damage to conceal than to uproot. Paul knew the difference between what things are lawful and what are expedient. It is lawful to speak the truth; it is not expedient to speak the truth to everybody at every time and in every way. If I were convinced that at a certain council some wrong decision or definition had been made, I should have the right to proclaim the truth, but it would not be expedient, lest wicked men be given a handle to scorn the authority of the Fathers, even in those decisions which they have taken in a godly and devout spirit. I would rather say that they took a decision that seemed reasonable from the point of view of their own times which present needs suggest should be repealed.

The Dangers Inherent in Luther's Teachings

Let us, therefore, suppose that there is some truth in the doctrine which Wyclif taught and Luther asserted, that whatever is done by us is done not by free choice but by sheer necessity. What could be more useless than to publish this paradox to the world? Again, suppose for a moment that it were true in a certain sense, as Augustine says somewhere, that “God works in us good and evil, and rewards his own good works in us, and punishes his evil works in us”; what a window to impiety would the public avowal of such an opinion open to countless mortals! Especially in view of the slowness of mind of mortal men, their sloth, their malice, and their incurable propensity toward all manner of evil. What weakling will be able to bear the endless and wearisome warfare against his flesh? What evildoer will take pains to correct his life? Who will be able to bring himself to love God with all his heart when He created hell seething with eternal torments in order to punish his own misdeeds in his victims as though he took delight in human torments? For that is how most people will interpret them. For the most part, men are by nature dull-witted and sensual, prone to unbelief, inclined to evil, with a bent to blasphemy, so that there is no need to add fuel to the furnace. And so Paul, as a wise dispenser of the Divine Word, often brings clarity to bear, and prefers to follow that which is fitting for one's neighbors rather than the letter of the law: and possesses a wisdom that he speaks among the perfect, but amongst the weak he reckons to know nothing, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. Holy Scripture has its own language, adapted to our understanding. There God is angry, grieves, is indignant, rages, threatens, hates, and again has mercy, repents, changes his mind, not that such changes take place in the nature of God, but that to speak thus is suited to our infirmity and slowness. The same prudence I consider befits those who undertake the task of interpreting the Divine Word. Some things for this reason are harmful because they are not expedient, as wine for a fevered patient. Similarly, such matters might allowably have been treated in discussion by the learned world, or even in the theological schools, although I should not think even this to be expedient save the restraint; on the other hand, to debate such fables before the gaze of a mixed multitude seems to me to be not merely useless but even pernicious.

I should, therefore, prefer men to be persuaded not to waste their time and talents in the labyrinths of this king, but to refute or to affirm the views of Luther. My preface would rightly seem too verbose if it were not almost more relevant to the main issue than the disputation itself.

INTRODUCTION TO THE DISPUTATION

Luther is Opposed Not Only by Scripture but Also by Weighty

Authority of the Church Fathers

Now, since Luther does not acknowledge the authority of any writer, of however distinguished a reputation, but only listens to the canonical Scriptures, how gladly do I welcome this abridgment of labor, for innumerable Greek and Latin writers treat of free choice, either as a theme or incidentally, so that it would be a great labor to collect out of them what each one has to say either for or against free choice, and to explain the several meanings of each individual opinion, or to resolve or approve their arguments — a tedious and long-winded affair, and as regards Luther and his friends, quite useless, especially as they not only disagree among themselves, but often contradict their own doctrine.

Yet in the meantime let the reader be admonished that if we shall seem to give equal weight with Luther to the testimonies and solid arguments of Holy Scripture, he should also bear constantly in mind so numerous a body of most learned men who have found approval in so many centuries down to our own day, whom not only their skill in divine studies but also godliness of life commend. For some of them gave testimony with their blood to that doctrine of Christ which they defend with their writings; such among the Greeks were Origen, Basil, Chrysostom, Cyril, John of Damascus, Theophylact; among the Latin Fathers, Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius, Hilary, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, to say nothing meanwhile of Thomas, Scotus, Durandus, Capreolus, Gabriel, Aegidius, Gregory, Alexander, the skill and force of whose dialectic, in my opinion, no one can afford to despise, not to mention the authority of so many universities, councils, and supreme pontiffs.

From the time of the apostles down to the present day, no writer has yet emerged who has totally taken away the power of freedom of choice, save only Manichaeus and John Wyclif. For the authority of Laurentius Valla, who comes nearest to agreement with them, has not much weight among theologians. The doctrine of Manichaeus, indeed, though it has long been exploded and repudiated by common consent of the whole world, yet I am inclined to think less useless to piety than that of Wyclif. For Manichaeus ascribes good and bad works to two natures in man in such a way that we owe good works to God in consequence of our condition, and yet against the power of darkness he leaves cause for imploring the aid of the Creator, that with this aid we may sin more lightly, and more easily do good works. Wyclif, however, ascribes all things to sheer necessity, and what room does he leave either for our prayers or for our endeavors?

So to return to my first theme, if the reader shall see that my own argument meets the other side with equal weapons, then let him also consider whether more weight ought not to be ascribed to the previous judgments of so many learned men, so many orthodox, so many saints, so many martyrs, so many theologians old and new, so many universities, councils, so many bishops and popes — or to trust instead the private judgment of this or that individual.

Not that, as in human assemblies, I would measure my opinion by the number of votes or the status of the speakers. I know how frequently it happens that the greater part overcomes the better: I know those are not always the best things that are approved by the majority. I know that nothing ever does harm to the investigation of truth, which is added to the industry of one's predecessors. I confess that it is right that the sole authority of Holy Scripture should outweigh all the votes of all mortal men. But the authority of the Scripture is not here in dispute. The same Scriptures are acknowledged and venerated by either side. Our battle is about the meaning of Scripture.

But if in this matter of interpretation some weight is to be given to learning, what minds are sharper and more perceptive than those of the Greeks? Who are more versed in Holy Scripture? Nor among the Latins was insight lacking or skill in interpreting Scripture, for if they have yielded pride of place to the Greeks in natural felicity, they have surely been able, building on their achievements, to equal the industry of the Greeks. And if in this point of judgment we have regard rather to holiness of life than to learning, you will see the caliber of the champions in the party that defends free choice; but, as the lawyers say, comparisons are odious! For I should not like to have to compare the heralds of this new gospel with these veterans.

How Can Inspiration and Authority Be Tested?

I hear the objection, What need is there of an interpreter when the Scripture itself is crystal clear? But if it is so clear, why have so many outstanding men in so many centuries been blind, and in a matter of such importance, as these would appear? If there is no obscurity in Scripture, what was the need of the work of prophecy in the days of the apostles? You say, "This was the

gift of the Spirit.” But I have the suspicion that just as the charasmata of healings and tongues ceased, this charisma ceased also. And if it did not cease, then one must ask to whom it has been passed on. If to any Tom, Dick, or Harry, all interpretation is uncertain. If to nobody, since even now so many obscurities puzzle learned men, no interpretation will be certain. If to those who have succeeded to the place of the apostles, they will object that for many centuries many have succeeded to the office of the apostles who have nothing of the apostolic Spirit. And yet of these men, other things being equal, it may be concluded as more probable that God has infused his Spirit into those whom he has ordained, just as we may more probably believe grace to be given to the baptized than to the unbaptized. But let us grant, as indeed we must, that it is possible that the Spirit might reveal to a single humble and unlearned man what has not revealed to the wise and prudent, seeing that Christ thanked his Father for this, that what he had concealed from the wise and prudent, namely, scribes and Pharisees and philosophers, he had revealed to babes, that is, to the simple and foolish according to this world. And perhaps such a fool was Dominic, such was Francis, if it had been permitted to them each to follow his own spirit. But if Paul in his time, in which the gift of the Spirit was in full force, orders spirits to be tested whether they be of God, what ought to be done in this carnal age? How, then, shall we prove the Spirit? By learning? On both sides there are scholars. By holiness of life? On both sides are sinners. On the other hand, there is a whole choir of saints who support free choice. True, they say, but these are only men. But I am now comparing men with men, not men with God. I hear you say, “What has a multitude to do with the meaning of the Spirit?” I reply, “What have a handful?” You say, “What has a miter to do with the understanding of Holy Scripture?” I reply, “What has a sack-cloth or a cowl?” You say, “What has the knowledge of philosophy to do with the knowledge of sacred letters?” I reply, “What has ignorance?” You say, “What has an assembled synod to do with the understanding of Scripture, in which it may be that there is nobody who has the Spirit?” I reply, “What, then, of private conventicles of the few, of whom it is much more likely that none has the Spirit?” Paul cries, “Do you wish for proof of Christ who dwells in me?” (II Cor. 13:3). The apostles were not believed unless miracles created belief in their doctrine. Now every Tom, Dick and Harry claims credence who testifies that he has the Spirit of the gospel.

Seeing that the apostles shook off vipers, healed the sick, raised the dead, and by laying on of hands bestowed the gift of tongues, they were at length believed, but they were scarcely believed for teaching paradoxes! But now these people bring forth what common opinion accounts as more than paradoxes, yet not one of them has so far appeared who can cure even a lame horse! And miracles apart, would that they could equal the sincerity and simplicity of the apostolic character which for us slow of heart would suffice instead of miracles.

I do not intend this to refer specifically to Luther, whom I do not know personally, and from whose writings I get a mixed impression. I say it rather of certain others better known to me who, if there is any controversy concerning the meaning of the Scriptures, when we bring forward the authority of the Early Fathers, chant at once, “Ah! but they were only men.” And if you ask them by what argument the true interpretation of Scripture may be known, since both sides are men, they reply, “By the sign of the Spirit.” If you ask why the Spirit should rather be absent from those who have illuminated the world by their published miracles than from themselves, they reply as though for thirteen hundred years there had been no gospel in the world. If you seek of them a life worthy of the Spirit, they reply that they are just by faith, not by works. If you look in vain for miracles, they say that the age of miracles is past, and that there is no need of them now that we have so much light in the Scriptures. And if you deny the Scriptures to be clear in such a point about which so many great men have stumbled in darkness, the argument returns full circle.

Moreover, if we grant that he who has the Spirit is sure of the meaning of the Scriptures, how can I be certain of what he finds to be true for himself? What am I to do when many bring diverse interpretations, about which each swears he has the Holy Spirit? And since the Spirit does not furnish the whole truth to anyone, even he who has the Spirit may be mistaken or deceived in some single point. So much for those who so easily reject the interpretation of the Fathers in Holy Scripture and oppose their views to ours as if delivered by an oracle. Finally, even supposing that the Spirit of Christ could have allowed his people to err in trivial matters on which the salvation of men does not greatly depend, how can it be believed that for more than thirteen hundred years he would have concealed the error in his Church and not have found anybody among so many saintly men worthy to be inspired with the knowledge of what these people claim to be the chief doctrine of the whole gospel?

Truly — to conclude this argument — what such people choose to claim for themselves is their own affair. I claim for myself neither learning nor holiness, nor do I trust in my own spirit. I shall merely put forward with simple diligence those considerations which move my mind. If anybody shall try to teach me better, I will not knowingly withstand the truth. If they prefer to rail at one who treats them with courtesy and without invective, rather discoursing than disputing, who will not find them lacking in that spirit of the gospel which is always on their lips? Paul cries, “As for the man who is weak in faith, support him” (Rom. 14:1). And Christ did not extinguish the smoking flax, while Peter the apostle says, “Always be prepared to make a defense to all who call you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (I Peter 3:15). So that if they reply that Erasmus is an old vessel, and is not capable of the new wine of the Spirit which they offer to the world: if they really rate themselves so highly, let them at least treat us as Christ treated Nicodemus and the apostle Gamaliel. Although Nicodemus was ignorant, the lord did not repulse him, because he desired to learn; and the disciples did not reject Gamaliel because he would suspend his judgment until the outcome of the matter should reveal by what spirit it had been done.

PART I. SCRIPTURE PASSAGES THAT SUPPORT FREE CHOICE

I have completed half of this book, in which, if I do but persuade the reader that it would be better not to contend too superstitiously about things of this kind, particularly before the multitude, there is no need for the kind of argument for which I now gird myself, in the hope that truth may everywhere prevail, by comparison of Scriptures, as fire comes from striking flint.

Definition of Free Choice and Discussion

of Ecclesiasticus 15:14-17

In the first place, it cannot be denied that there are many places in the Holy Scriptures which seem to set forth free choice. On the other hand, others seem to take it wholly away. Yet it is clear that Scripture cannot be in conflict with itself, since the whole proceeds from the same Spirit. First, then, we shall survey those passages which confirm our position; then we shall try to resolve those which seem to make for the opposite point of view. By free choice in this place we mean a power of the human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from them.

Among the texts that support free choice, priority is usually given to a passage in the book called Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Sirach, ch. 15(:14-17):

“God made man from the beginning, and left him in the hand of his own counsel.

He added his commandments and precepts. If thou wilt observe the commandments, and keep acceptable fidelity forever, they shall preserve thee.

He hath set water and fire before thee; stretch forth thine hand for which thou wilt.

Before man is life and death, good and evil; that which he shall choose shall be given him.”

I do not think anyone will object against the authority of this work that, as Jerome points out, it was not formerly received into the canon of the Hebrews, since the Church of Christ has received it into its canon with common consent, nor do I see any reason why the Hebrews should have thought fit to exclude this from their canon when they accept The Proverbs of Solomon and The Song of Songs. And as for the last two books of Esdras, the story in Daniel of Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, Judith, Esther, anyone who reads those books carefully will easily see why they were not received as canonical, but counted among the Hagiographa. Yet in this work there is nothing of that kind to disturb the reader. This passage, therefore, declares that Adam, the head of our race, was so created as to have an uncorrupted reason which could discern what should be sought and what avoided. But there was added will, also incorrupt but nevertheless free so that it could turn itself from good and incline toward evil. In the same state were the angels created before Lucifer and his companions renounced their Creator. In those who fell, the will was so thoroughly perverted that they could not return to better things, while in those who remained faithful, their will was so established in good that it could not henceforth turn aside into iniquity.

Man Before and After the Fall: The Forgiveness of Sins Restores

Freedom of Choice Through Grace

In man the will was so upright and free that, apart from new grace, he could continue in innocence but, apart from the help of new grace, he could not attain the happiness of eternal life which the Lord Jesus promised to his followers. And although all these things cannot be proved by the plain witness of the Scriptures, yet they have been most convincingly argued in the orthodox Fathers. In the case of Eve, however, not only does the will seem to have been corrupt, but the reason also or intellect, the source of all good and evil, for the serpent seems to have persuaded her that the threats were vain with which the Lord had forbidden them to touch the Tree of Life.

In Adam, the will seems rather to have corrupted by immoderate love toward his spouse, whose desire he preferred to satisfy rather than the commandment of God. Nevertheless, I think that in this his reason, from which the will is born, was also corrupted. This power of the soul with which we judge, and it matters not whether you call it *nous*, that is, “mind” or “intellect,” or *logos*, that is, “reason,” is obscured by sin, but not altogether extinguished. The will with which we choose or refuse was thus so far depraved that by its natural powers it could not amend its ways, but once its liberty had been lost, it was compelled to serve that sin to which it had once for all consented.

But, by the grace of God, when sin has been forgiven, the will is made free to the extent that, according to the views of the Pelagians, even apart from the help of new grace it could attain eternal life, so that just as it could do homage for salvation

received to God who created and restored free will, according to the orthodox, so it is possible for man, with the help of divine grace (which always accompanies human effort), to continue in the right, yet not without a tendency to sin, owing to the vestiges of original sin in him. Thus, as the sin of our progenitors has passed into their descendants, so the tendency to sin has passed to all, though grace by abolishing sin so far mitigates it that it may be overcome, but not rooted out. Not that grace is incapable of destroying it altogether, but that it was not expedient for us.

The Work of the Will, and the Threefold Law of Nature,

Works, and Faith

Likewise, just as in those who lack grace (I speak now of peculiar grace) reason was obscured but not extinguished, so it is probably that in them, too, the power of the will was not completely extinguished, but that it was unable to perform the good. What the eye is to the body, reason is to the soul. This is partly enlightened by that native light which is implanted in all men though not in equal measure, as the psalm reminds us: "The light of thy countenance is impressed upon us, O Lord!" (Ps. 4:6), and partly by divine precepts and Holy Scriptures, according as our psalmist says: "Thy word is a lamp to my feet" (Ps. 119:105). Thus there arises for us a threefold kind of law: law of nature, law of works, law of faiths, to use Paul's words. The law of nature is thoroughly engraved in the minds of all men, among the Scythians as among the Greeks, and declares it to be a crime if any does to another what he would not wish done to himself. And the philosophers, without the light of faith, and without the assistance of Holy Scripture, drew from created things the knowledge of the everlasting power and divinity of God, and left many precepts concerning the good life, agreeing wholeheartedly with the teachings of the Gospels, and with many words exhorting to virtue and the detestation of wickedness. And in these things it is probable that there was a will in some way ready for the good but useless for eternal salvation without the addition of grace by faith. The law of works, on the other hand, commands and threatens punishment. It doubles sin and engenders death, not that it is evil, but because it commands actions which we cannot perform without grace. The law of faith commands more arduous things than the law of works, yet because grace is plentifully added to it, not only does it make things easy which of themselves are impossible, but it makes them agreeable also. Faith, therefore, cures reason, which has been wounded by sin, and charity bears onward the weak will. The law of works was like this: "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen. 2:16-17). This law of works was further revealed by Moses: "You shall not kill: if you have killed, you shall be killed"; "You shall not commit adultery" (Ex. 20:13-14). But what says the law of faith, which orders us to love our enemies, to carry our cross daily, to despise our life? "Fear not, little flock, for yours is the kingdom of heaven" (Luke 12:32). And "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). And "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt 28:20). This law the apostles showed forth when, after being beaten with rods for the name of Jesus, they went away rejoicing from the presence of the Council. Thus Paul: "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). And no doubt this is what Ecclesiasticus had in mind in saying: "He established with them an eternal covenant, and showed them his judgments" (Ecclus. 17:12). For whom? In the first place, for those two founders of the human race in person, then the Jewish people by Moses and the prophets. The Law shows what God wills, sets out the penalty to him who disobeys and the rewards to the obedient. For the rest it leaves the power of choice to the will that was created in them free and able rapidly to run to one or the other. And, therefore, it says: "If you will keep the commandments, they shall keep you" (Ecclus. 15:15). And again: "Stretch out your hand to whatever you wish" (v. 16). If the power to distinguish good and evil and the will of God had been hidden from men, it could not be imputed to them if they made the wrong choice. If the will had not been free, sin could not have been imputed, for sin would cease to be sin if it were not voluntary, save when error or the restriction of the will is itself the fruit of sin. Thus the responsibility for rape is not imputed to the one who has suffered violence.

Although this quotation from Ecclesiasticus seems peculiarly suited to our first parents, yet in a certain sense it is relevant to all the posterity of Adam, but it would be irrelevant if there were no strength of free choice at all in us. For although free choice is damaged by sin, it is nevertheless not extinguished by it. And although it has become so lame in the process that before we receive grace we are more readily inclined toward evil than good, yet it is not altogether cut out, except that the enormity of crimes which have become a kind of second nature so clouds the judgment and overwhelms the freedom of the will that the one seems to be destroyed and the other utterly lost.

Different Kinds of Grace, and Three Views of Its Relation to Free Choice

What, then, is free choice worth in us after sin and before grace? About this point ancient and modern writers differ amazingly, as each is concerned with a different aspect of the problem. Those who would avoid despair and complacency, but who would inspire men to hope and endeavor, attributed more to free choice. Pelagius taught that once the human will was freed and healed by grace there was no need of new grace, but that with the help of free will a man might attain to eternal salvation, but that man owed his salvation to God, without whose grace the will of man was not effectively free to do good. And this very power of the soul, with which a man embraces good when he knows it, and turns away from its opposite, is a gift of the Creator who might have made him a frog instead of a man.

Those who profess the doctrine of Scotus are still more in favor of free choice, for they believe it to have such power that even though a man has not received the grace which destroys sin, he may nonetheless, by his own natural powers, perform what they call morally good works which, not “condignly” but “congruously,” merit that grace which “makes acceptable,” for so they speak.

Diametrically opposed are those who argue that all these works, even though morally good, were detestable to God, no less than crimes of the order of adultery and homicide, since they did not proceed from faith and love toward God. This view seems too severe, especially since, if certain philosophers have had some knowledge of God, they might also have had faith and charity toward God, for they did not act out of vainglory, but from a love of virtue and goodness, which, according to their teaching, is to be embraced for no other reason than that it is good. Whether the case of a man who, on behalf of his country, exposed himself to perils for the sake of vainglory is good in itself or morally good I do not know. St. Augustine and those who follow him, considering how harmful to true godliness it is for man to trust in his own powers, are more inclined to favor grace, which Paul everywhere stresses. For this reason, he denies that man liable to sin can turn to amend his life by his own powers, or do anything which will bring him to salvation unless he is moved by the free gift of God to desire those things which lead to eternal life. This grace which others call “prevenient,” Augustine calls “operative.” For faith, which is the doorway to salvation, is the free gift of God. To this, charity is added by the more abundant gift of the Spirit, which he calls “cooperative grace,” which is always present in those who strive until they attain their end, but on condition that at the same time and in the same work both free choice and grace operate; grace, however, as the leader and not as a companion. Some, however, make a distinction at this point, saying: “If you consider the work according to its nature, its principal cause is the will of man; if according to what is merited, grace is the more powerful.” Nevertheless, faith which makes us will the things that belong to salvation, and love which sees that we do not desire them in vain, are distinguished not so much in time as in nature. They both can be increased in successive degrees. Since grace signifies a benefit freely given, we may speak of three or, if you prefer, four graces. The first is implanted by nature and vitiated by sin (but, as we said, not extinguished), which some call a natural influx. This is common to all, and remains even in those who persist in sin: they are free to speak, be silent, sit down, get up, help the poor, read Holy Scripture, listen to sermons; but these things, in the opinion of some, in no way conduce to eternal life. Nor are there lacking those who, bearing in mind the manifold goodness of God, say that man can so far make use of benefits of this kind that he may be prepared for grace and so call forth the mercy of God. On that other hand, there are those who deny that this can happen without peculiar grace. Since this grace is common to all, it is not called grace, though it really is grace, just as God every day works greater miracles by creating, preserving, and ordering all things than if he healed a leper or liberated a demoniac, and yet these things are not called miracles, because they are offered to all men alike every day.

The second is peculiar grace, with which God in his mercy arouses the sinner wholly without merit to repent, yet without infusing that supreme grace which abolishes sin and makes him pleasing to God. Thus the sinner assisted by a second grace which we called operative grace begins to be displeased with himself, although he has not yet put off all the desire of sin, yet by his alms and prayers and his devotion to sacred studies, and by listening to sermons, as well as by appeals to good men for their prayers and other deeds morally good, as they call them, he behaves as a candidate for the highest grace. They consider that this grace, which we call the second grace, is, by the goodness of God, not denied to anyone, for the divine benevolence supplies sufficient opportunities to each in this life by which he may recover, if he will, the use of the free choice that remains to him and put his powers at the disposal of that divine will which invites but does not constrain him forcibly to higher things. And this they consider to be within the power of our own choice — that we may apply our wills to grace, or turn away from it, just as we can open our eyes to the light that is borne in upon them or close them again. Since, then, the immense love of God toward the race of men does not suffer men to be cheated, so also by that grace which they call pleasing grace, if he seeks it with all his powers, no sinner ought ever to be secure, yet on the other hand, none ought to despair; and, moreover, no man perishes save by his own fault. There is, therefore, a natural grace; there is a stimulating grace (albeit imperfect); there is the grace that makes the will effective, which we called cooperating, which allows us to perform that which we have undertaken to do; there is a grace that carries things to a conclusion. These three they think to be one, although they are called by different names according to what they effect within us. The first arouses, the second promotes, the third completes.

On the other hand, those who, at the other extreme from Pelagius, attribute most of all to grace and practically nothing to free choice, yet do not entirely remove it, for they deny that man can will the good without peculiar grace, they deny that he can make a beginning, they deny that he can progress, they deny he can reach his goal without the principal and perpetual aid of divine grace. Their view seems probably enough in that it leaves man to study and strive, but it does not leave aught for him to ascribe to his own powers. But harder is the opinion of those who contend that free choice is of no avail save to sin, and that grace alone accomplishes good works in us, not by or with free choice but in free choice, so that our will does nothing more than wax in the hand of the craftsman when it receives the particular shape that pleases him. These seem to me so anxious to avoid all reliance on human merit that they pass *praeter casam*, as we say. Hardest of all seems the view of all those who say that free choice is a mere empty name, nor does it avail either in the case of the angels or in Adam or in us, either before or after grace, but it is God who works evil as well as good in us, and all things that happen come about by sheer necessity. My dispute will be most concerned with the two last positions.

These things we have treated at some length for the sake of the inexpert reader (for I write as a plain man to plain men) that may more easily understand the rest of the argument. That is why we considered first the passage from Ecclesiasticus, in which he seems to point out most clearly the origin and power of free choice. Now, let us resume more rapidly the other testimonies of Scripture. But that we may do this, let me first point out that this place is otherwise expounded in the Aldine edition than by modern Ecclesiastical Latinists. For in the Greek there is not added "*conservabunt te*," nor does Augustine add this in citing this text. I myself judge that *poiētai* was written for *poiēsai*.

On the Bondage of the Will: by Martin Luther

Introduction

To the venerable Master Erasmus of Rotterdam, Martin Luther sends grace and peace in Christ.

Luther Explains His Delay in Replying and Admits Erasmus' Superior Talent

THAT I HAVE TAKEN SO LONG TO REPLY TO YOUR *Diatribes Concerning Free Choice*, venerable Erasmus, has been contrary to everyone's expectation and to my own custom; for hitherto I have seemed not only willing to accept, but eager to seek out, opportunities of this kind for writing. There will perhaps be some surprise at this new and unwonted forbearance — or feat! — in Luther, who has not been roused even by all the speeches and letters his adversaries have flung about, congratulating Erasmus on his victory and chanting in triumph, "Ho, ho! Has that Maccabee, that most obstinate Asserter, at last met his match, and dares not open his mouth against him?" Yet not only do I not blame them, but of myself I yield you a palm such as I have never yielded to anyone before; for I confess not only that you are far superior to me in powers of eloquence and native genius (which we all must admit, all the more as I am an uncultivated fellow who has always moved in uncultivated circles), but that you have quite damped my spirit and eagerness, and let me exhausted before I could strike a blow.

There are two reasons for this: first, your cleverness in treating the subject with such remarkable and consistent moderation as to make it impossible for me to be angry with you; and secondly, the luck or chance or fate by which you say nothing on this important subject that has not been said before. Indeed, you say so much less, and attribute so much more to free choice than the Sophists have hitherto done (a point on which I shall have more to say later) that it really seemed superfluous to answer the arguments you use. They have been refuted already so often by me, and beaten down and completely pulverized in Philip Melancthon's *Commonplaces* — an unanswerable little book which in my judgment deserves not only to be immortalized but even canonized. Compared with it, your book struck me as so cheap and paltry that I felt profoundly sorry for you, defiling as you were your very elegant and ingenious style with such trash, and quite disgusted at the utterly unworthy matter that was being conveyed in such rich ornaments of eloquence, like refuse or ordure being carried in gold and silver vases.

You seem to have felt this yourself, from the reluctance with which you undertook this piece of writing. No doubt your conscience warned you that, no matter what powers of eloquence you brought to the task, you would be unable so to gloss it over as to prevent me from stripping away the seductive charm of your words and discovering the dregs beneath, since although I am unskilled in speech, I am not unskilled in knowledge, by the grace of God. For I venture thus with Paul (II Cor. 11:6) to claim knowledge for myself that I confidently deny to you, though I grant you eloquence and native genius such as I willingly and very properly disclaim for myself.

What I thought, then, was this. If there are those who have imbibed so little of our teaching or taken so insecure a hold of it, strongly supported by Scripture though it is, that they can be moved by these trivial and worthless though highly decorative arguments of Erasmus, then they do not deserve that I should come to their rescue with an answer. Nothing could be said or written that would be sufficient for such people, even though it were by recourse to thousands of books a thousand times over, and you might just as well plow the seashore and sow seed in the sand or try to fill a cask full of holes with water. Those who have imbibed the Spirit who holds sway in our books have had a sufficient service from us already, and they can easily dispose of your performances; but as for those who read without the Spirit, it is no wonder if they are shaken like a reed by every wind. Why, God himself could not say enough for such people, even if all his creatures were turned into tongues. Hence I might well have decided to leave them alone, upset as they were by your book, along with those who are delighted with it and declare you the victor.

It was, then, neither pressure of work, nor the difficulty of the task, nor your great eloquence, nor any fear of you, but sheer disgust, anger, and contempt, or — to put it plainly — my considered judgment on your *Diatribes* that damped my eagerness to answer you. I need hardly mention here the good care you take, as you always do, to be everywhere evasive and equivocal; you fancy yourself steering more cautiously than Ulysses between Scylla and Charybdis as you seek to assert nothing while appearing to assert something. How, I ask you, is it possible to have any discussion or reach any understanding with such people, unless one is clever enough to catch Proteus? What I can do in this matter, and what you have gained by it, I will show you later, with Christ's help.

There have, then, to be special reasons for my answering you at this point. Faithful brethren in Christ are urging me to do so, and point out that everyone expects it, since the authority of Erasmus is not to be despised, and the truth of Christian doctrine is being imperiled in the hearts of many. Moreover, it has at length come home to me that my silence has not been entirely honorable, and that I have been deluded by my mundane prudence — or knavery — into insufficient awareness of my duty, whereby I am under obligation both to the wise and to the foolish (Rom. 1:14), especially when I am called to it by the entreaties of so many brethren. For although the subject before us demands more than an external teacher and besides him who plants and him who

waters outwardly (I Cor. 3:7), it requires also the Spirit of God to give the growth and to be a living teacher of living things inwardly (a thought that has been much in my mind), yet since the Spirit is free, and blows not where we will but where he wills (John 3:8), we ought to have observed that rule of Paul, “Be urgent in season and out of season” (II Tim. 4:2), for we do not know at what hour the Lord is coming (Matt. 24:42). There may be, I grant, some who have not yet sensed the Spirit who informs my writings, and who have been bowled over by that *Diatribē* of yours; perhaps their hour has not yet come.

And who knows but that God may even deign to visit you, excellent Erasmus, through such a wretched and frail little vessel of his as myself, so that in a happy hour — and for this I earnestly beseech the Father of mercies through Christ our Lord — I may come to you by means of this book, and win a very dear brother. For although you think and write wrongly about free choice, yet I owe you no small thanks, for you have made me far more sure of my own position by letting me see the case for free choice put forward with all the energy of so distinguished and powerful a mind, but with no other effect than to make things worse than before. That is plain evidence that free choice is a pure fiction; for, like the woman in the Gospel (Mark 5:25 f.), the more it is treated by the doctors, the worse it gets. I shall therefore abundantly pay my debt of thanks to you, if through me you become better informed, as I through you have been more strongly confirmed. But both of these things are gifts of the Spirit, not our own achievement. Therefore, we must pray to God that he may open my mouth and your heart, and the hearts of all men, and that he may himself be present in our midst as the master who informs both our speaking and hearing.

But from you, my dear Erasmus, let me obtain this request, that just as I bear with your ignorance in these matters, so you in turn will bear with my lack of eloquence. God does not give all his gifts to one man, and “we cannot all do all things”; or, as Paul says: “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit” (I Cor. 12:4). It remains, therefore, for us to render mutual service with our gifts, so that each with his own gifts bears the burden and need of the other. Thus we shall fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2).

PART I. REVIEW OF ERASMUS’ PREFACE

Christianity Involves Assertions; Christians Are No Skeptics

I want to begin by referring to some passages in your Preface, in which you rather disparage our case and puff up your own. I note, first, that just as in other books you censure me for obstinate assertiveness, so in this book you say that you are so far from delighting in assertions that you would readily take refuge in the opinion of the Skeptics wherever this is allowed by the inviolable authority of the Holy Scriptures and the decrees of the Church, to which you always willingly submit your personal feelings, whether you grasp what it prescribes or not. This is the frame of mind that pleases you. (E., p. 37.)

I take it (as it is only fair to do) that you say these things in a kindly and peace-loving spirit. But if anyone else were to say them, I should probably go for him in my usual manner; and I ought not to allow even you, excellent though your intentions are, to be led astray by this idea. For it is not the mark of a Christian mind to take no delight in assertions; on the contrary, a man must delight in assertions or he will be no Christian. And by assertion — in order that we may not be misled by words — I mean a constant adhering, affirming, confessing, maintaining, and an invincible persevering; nor, I think, does the word mean anything else either as used by the Latins or by us in our time.

I am speaking, moreover, about the assertion of those things which have been divinely transmitted to us in the sacred writings. Elsewhere we have no need either of Erasmus or any other instructor to teach us that in matters which are doubtful or useless and unnecessary, assertions, disputings, and wranglings are not only foolish but impious, and Paul condemns them in more than one place. Nor are you, I think, speaking of such things in this place — unless, in the manner of some foolish orator, you have chosen to announce one topic and discuss another, like the man with the turbot, or else, with the craziness of some ungodly writer, you are contending that the article about free choice is doubtful or unnecessary.

Let Skeptics and Academics keep well away from us Christians, but let there be among us “assertors” twice as unyielding as the Stoics themselves. How often, I ask you, does the apostle Paul demand that *plērophoria* (as he terms it) — that most sure and unyielding assertion of conscience? In Rom. 10:10 he calls it “confession,” saying, “with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” And Christ says: “Everyone who confesses me before men, I also will confess before my Father” (Matt. 10:32). Peter bids us give a reason for the hope that is in us (I Peter 3:15). What need there to dwell on this?

Nothing is better known or more common among Christians than assertion. Take away assertions and you take away Christianity. Why, the Holy Spirit is given them from heaven, that a Christian may glorify Christ and confess him even unto death — unless it is not asserting when one dies for one’s confession and that he takes the initiative and accuses the world of sin (John 16:8), as if he would provoke a fight; and Paul commands Timothy to “exhort” and “be urgent out of season” (II Tim. 4:2). But what a droll exhorter he would be, who himself neither firmly believed nor consistently asserted the thing he was exhorting about! Why, I would send him to Anticyra!

But it is I who am the biggest fool, wasting words and time on something that is clearer than daylight. What Christian would agree that assertions are to be despised? That would be nothing but a denial of all religion and piety, or an assertion that neither religion, nor piety, nor any dogma is of the slightest importance. Why, then, do you too assert, "I take no delight in assertions," and that you prefer this frame of mind to its opposite?

However, you will wish it to be understood that you have said nothing here about confessing Christ and his dogmas. I am rightly reminded of that, and as a favor to you I will waive my right and my custom, and not judge of you heart, but will leave that for another time or to other people. Meanwhile, I advise you to correct your tongue and your pen and to refrain in future from using such expressions, for however upright and honest your heart may be, your speech (which they say is the index of the heart) is not so. For if you think that free choice is a subject we need know nothing about, and one that has nothing to do with Christ, then your language is correct, but your thought is impious. If, on the other hand, you think it is a necessary subject, then your language is impious, though your thought is correct. And in that case, there was no room for such a mass of complaints about useless assertions and wranglings, for what have these to do with the question at issue?

But what will you say about this statement of yours, in which you do not refer to the subject of free choice alone, but to all religious dogmas in general, when you say that if it were allowed by the inviolable authority of the divine writings and the decrees of the Church, you would take refuge in the opinion of the Sceptics, so far are you from delighting in assertions? (E., p. 37.) What a Proteus is in these words "inviolable authority" and "decrees of the Church"! You pose as having a great reverence for the Scriptures and the Church, and yet make it plain that you wish you were at liberty to be a Sceptic. What Christian would talk like that?

If you are speaking about useless and indifferent dogmas, what are you saying that is new? Who would not wish for the liberty to adopt a skeptical attitude here? Indeed, what Christian does not in fact freely make use of this liberty, and condemn those who are committed and bound to any particular opinion? Unless you take Christians in general (as your words almost suggest) to be the kind of people who hold useless dogmas over which they stupidly wrangle and wage battles of assertions. If on the other hand you are speaking of dogmas that are vital, what more ungodly assertion could anyone making than that he wished for the liberty of asserting nothing in such cases?

This is how a Christian will rather speak: So far am I from delighting in the opinion of the Sceptics that, whenever the infirmity of the flesh will permit, I will not only consistently adhere to and assert the sacred writings, everywhere and in all parts of them, but I will also wish to be as certain as possible in things that are not vital and that lie outside of Scripture. For what is more miserable than uncertainty?

What, furthermore, are we to say of the comment you add: "To which I everywhere willingly submit my personal feelings, whether I grasp what it prescribes or not"? What are you saying, Erasmus? Is it not enough to have submitted your personal feelings to the Scriptures? Do you submit them to the decrees of the Church as well? What can she decree that is not decreed in the Scriptures? Then what becomes of the liberty and power to judge those who make the decrees, as Paul teaches in I Cor. (14:29): "Let the others judge"? Does it displease you that anyone should sit in judgment on the decrees of the Church, although Paul enjoins it? What new religion, what new humility is this, that you would deprive us by your own example of the power of judging the decrees — of *men*, and subject us in uncritical submission — to *men*? Where does the Scripture of God impose this on us?

Then again, what Christian would so throw the injunctions of Scripture and the Church to the winds, as to say, "Whether I grasp them or not"? Do you submit yourself without caring at all whether you grasp them? Anathema be the Christian who is not certain and does not grasp what is prescribed for him! How can he believe what he does not grasp? For by "grasp" you must mean here to "apprehend with certainty" and not to "doubt like a Sceptic"; for otherwise, what is there in any creature that nay man could "grasp" if "grasp" meant perfect knowledge and insight? In that case, there would be no possibility that anyone should at the same time grasp some things and not others; for if he had gasped one thing, he would have grasped all — in God, I mean, since whoever does not "grasp" God never" grasps any part of his creation.

In short, what you say here seems to mean that it does not matter to you what anyone believes anywhere, so long as the peace of the world is undisturbed, and that in case of danger to life, reputation, property, and goodwill, it is permissible to act like the fellow who said, "Say they yea, yea say I; say they nay, nay say I," and to regard Christian dogmas as no better than philosophical and human opinions, about which it is quite stupid to wrangle, contend, and assert, since nothing comes of that but strife and the disturbance of outward peace. Things that are above us, you would say, are no concern of ours. So, with a view to ending our conflicts, you come forward as a mediator, calling a halt to both sides, and trying to persuade us that we are flourishing our swords about things that are stupid and useless.

That, I say, is what your words seem to mean; and I think you understand, my dear Erasmus, what I am driving at. But as I have said, let the words pass. Meanwhile, I absolve your heart so long as you display it no further. See that you fear the Spirit of God, who tries the minds and hearts (Ps. 7:9; Jer. 11:20), and is not deceived by cleverly devised phrases. For I have said all this so

that you may henceforward cease from charging me with obstinacy and willfulness in this matter. By such tactics you only succeed in showing that you foster in your heart a Lucian, or some other pig from Epicurus' sty who, having no belief in God himself, secretly ridicules all who have a belief and confess it. Permit us to be assertors, to be devoted to assertions and delight in them, while you stick to your Sceptics and Academics till Christ calls you too. The Holy Spirit is no Sceptic, and it is not doubts or mere opinions that he has written on our hearts, but assertions more sure and certain than life itself and all experience.

The Clarity of Scripture

I come now to the second passage, which is of a piece with this. Where you distinguish between Christian dogmas, pretending that there are some which it is necessary to know, and some which it is not, you say that some are secret and some plain to see. (E., p. 38.) You thus either play games with other men's words or else you are trying your hand at a rhetorical sally of your own. You adduce, however, in support of your view, Paul's saying in Rom. 11 (:33): "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God," and also that of Isa. 40(:13): "Who has directed the Spirit of the lord, or what counselor has instructed him?"

It was easy for you to say these things, since you either knew you were not writing to Luther, but for the general public, or you did not reflect that it was Luther you were writing against, whom I hope you allow nonetheless to have some acquaintance with Holy Writ and some judgment in respect of it. If you do not allow this, then I shall force you to it. The distinction I make — in order that I, too, may display a little rhetoric or dialectic — is this: God and the Scripture of god are two things, no less than the Creator and the creature are two things.

That in God there are many things hidden, of which we are ignorant, no one doubts — as the Lord himself says concerning the Last Day: "Of that day no one knows but the Father" (Mark 13:32), and in Acts 1(:7): "It is not for you to know times and seasons"; and again: "I know whom I have chosen" (John 13:18), and Paul says: "The Lord knows those who are his" (II Tim. 2:19), and so forth. But that in Scripture there are some things abstruse, and everything is not plain — this is an idea put about by the ungodly Sophists, with whose lips you also speak here, Erasmus; but they have never produced, nor can they produce, a single article to prove this mad notion of theirs. Yet with such a phantasmagoria Satan has frightened men away from reading the Sacred Writ, and has made Holy Scripture contemptible, in order to enable the plagues he has bred from philosophy to prevail in the Church.

I admit, of course, that there are many texts in the Scriptures that are obscure and abstruse, not because of the majesty of their subject matter, but because of our ignorance of their vocabulary and grammar; but these texts in no way hinder a knowledge of all the subject matter of Scripture. For what still sublimer thing can remain hidden in the Scriptures, now that the seals have been broken, the stone rolled from the door of the sepulcher (Matt. 27:66; 28:2), and the supreme mystery brought to light, namely that Christ the Son of God has been made man, that God is three and one, that Christ has suffered for us and is to reign eternally? Are not these things known and sung even in the highways and byways? Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find left in them?

The subject matter of the Scriptures, therefore, is all quite accessible, even though some texts are still obscure owing to our ignorance of their terms. Truly it is stupid and impious, when we know that the subject matter of Scripture has all been placed in the clearest light, to call it obscure on account of a few obscure words. If the words are obscure in one place, yet they are plain in another; and it is one and the same them, published quite openly to the whole world, which in the Scriptures is sometimes expressed in plain words, and sometimes lies as yet hidden in obscure words. Now, when the thing signified is in the light, it does not matter if this or that sign of it is in darkness, since many other signs of the same things are meanwhile in the light. Who will say that a public fountain is not in the light because those who are in a narrow side street do not see it, whereas all who are in the marketplace do see it?

Your reference to the Corycian cave, therefore, is irrelevant; that is not how things are in the Scriptures. Matters of the highest majesty and the profoundest mysteries are no longer hidden away, but have been brought out and are openly displayed before the very doors. For Christ has opened our minds so that we may understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45), and the gospel is preached to the whole creation (Mark 16:15); "Their voice has gone out to all the earth" (Rom. 10:18), and "Whatever was written was written for our instruction" (Rom 15:4); also: "All Scripture inspired by God is profitable for teaching" (II Tim. 3:16). See, then, whether you and all the Sophists can produce any single mystery that is still abstruse in the Scriptures.

It is true that for many people much remains abstruse; but this is not due to the obscurity of Scripture, but to the blindness or indolence of those who will not take the trouble to look at the very clearest truth. It is as Paul says of the Jews in II. Cor. (3:15): "A veil lies over their minds"; and again: "If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this world has blinded" (II Cor. 4:3 f.). With similar temerity a man might veil his own eyes or go out of the light into the darkness and hide himself and then blame the sun and the day for being obscure. Let miserable men, therefore, stop imputing with blasphemous perversity the darkness and obscurity of their own hearts to the wholly clear Scriptures of God.

Now, when you quote Paul's saying: "Unsearchable are his judgments" (Rom. 11:33), you appear to make the pronoun *eius* refer to Scripture; but Paul does not say that the judgments of Scripture are unsearchable, but the judgments of God. Similarly, Isa. 40:(13) does not say, "Who has known the mind of the Scripture," but "the mind of the Lord"; and although Paul asserts that the mind of the Lord *is* known to Christians, he is referring of course to "the gifts bestowed on us," as he says in the same passage, I Cor. 2:(12). So you see how inattentively you have look at these passages of Scripture, and how aptly you have quoted them — just as aptly as in almost all your quotations on behalf of free choice.

Similarly, the examples you go on to give, though not without a suspicion of sarcasm, are quite wide of the mark — things such as the distinction of the Persons (of the Trinity), the conjunction of the divine and human natures (in Christ), and the unforgivable sin; in all these cases, you say, there is ambiguity that has never been cleared up. (E., p. 39.) If you have in mind the questions debated by the Sophists in connection with these subjects, what has Scripture in its entire innocence of such things done to you that you should make the abuse of it by scoundrelly men a reproach to its purity? Scripture simply confesses the trinity of God and the humanity of Christ and the unforgivable sin, and there is nothing here of obscurity or ambiguity. But *how* these things can be, Scripture does not say (as you imagine), nor is it necessary to know. It is their own dreams that the Sophists are busy with here, so you should accuse and condemn them, and acquit the Scriptures. If, on the other hand, what you have in mind is the fact itself, again you should not accuse the Scriptures, but the Arians, and those for whom the gospel is so veiled that, through the working of their god Satan, they do not see the very clearest testimonies concerning the trinity of the Godhead and the humanity of Christ.

To put it briefly, there are two kinds of clarity in Scripture, just as there are also two kinds of obscurity: one external and pertaining to the ministry of the Word, the other located in the understanding of the heart. If you speak of the internal clarity, no man perceives one iota of what is in the Scriptures unless he has the Spirit of God. All men have a darkened heart, so that even if they can recite everything in Scripture, and know how to quote it, yet they apprehend and truly understand nothing of it. They neither believe in God, nor that they themselves are creatures of God nor anything else, as Ps. 13(14:1) says: "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no god.'" For the Spirit is required for the understanding of Scripture, both as a whole and in any part of it. If, on the other hand, you speak of the external clarity, nothing at all is left obscure or ambiguous, but everything there is in the Scriptures has been brought out by the Word into the most definite light, and published to all the world.

It is Vital to Know the Truth About Free Choice

But what is still more intolerable is that you count this subject of free choice among the things that are useless and unnecessary, and replace it for us with a list of the things you consider sufficient for the Christian religion. (E., pp. 39 f.) It is such a list as any Jew or Gentile totally ignorant of Christ could certainly draw up with ease, for you make not the slightest mention of Christ, as if you think that Christian godliness can exist without Christ so long as God is worshipped with all one's powers as being by nature most merciful. What am I to say here, Erasmus? You reek of nothing but Lucian, and you breathe out on me the vast drunken folly of Epicurus. If you consider this subject unnecessary for Christians, then please quit the field; you and I have nothing in common, for I consider it vital.

If it is irreverent, if it is inquisitive, if it is superfluous, as you say (E., p. 39), to know whether God foreknows anything contingently; whether our will accomplishes anything in things pertaining to eternal salvation, or simply suffers the action of grace; whether it is of mere necessity that we do, or rather suffer, whatever we do of good or ill; then what, I ask you, is there that it is reverent or serious or useful to know? This is no use at all, Erasmus; you go much too far. It is difficult to attribute this to your ignorance, for you are no longer young, and you have lived among Christians and have long studied Holy Writ, so that you leave no room for us to excuse you or to think well of you. And yet the papists pardon and put up with these enormities of yours simply because you are writing against Luther; otherwise, if Luther were out of the way and you wrote such things, they would get their teeth into you and tear you to shreds.

Let Plato be a friend and Socrates a friend, but truth must be honored above all. For suppose you had no great understanding of the Scriptures or of Christian piety, surely even an enemy of Christians ought to have known what Christians regard as necessary and useful, and what they do not. But when you who are a theologian and a teacher of Christians set out to describe the nature of Christianity for them, so far from showing even your usual skeptical hesitation about what is useful and necessary for them, you actually fall into precisely the opposite error. For contrary to your natural bent, and with an assertion unprecedented for you, you declare that those things are not necessary; whereas, unless they are necessary and known with certainty, then neither God, nor Christ, nor gospel, nor faith, nor anything is left, not even of Judaism, much less of Christianity. By the immortal God, Erasmus, what a "window" (E., p. 41) or rather, what a wide arena you open for one to act and speak against you! How could you write anything good or true about free choice when by saying things of this kind you confess such an ignorance of Scripture and piety? But I will draw in my sails, and not deal with you here in my own words (as I may perhaps later), but in yours.

Christianity as you describe it (E., p. 39) includes this among other things: that we should strive with all our might have recourse to the remedy of penitence, and entreat by all means the mercy of the lord, without which no human will or endeavor is

effective; also, that no one should despair of the pardon of a God who is by nature most merciful. These words of yours, devoid of Christ, devoid of the Spirit, are colder than ice itself, so that they even tarnish the beauty of your eloquence. Perhaps they were dragged out of you, poor fellow, by fear of the pontiffs and tyrants, lest you should seem to be altogether an atheist! They do, however, assert that there are powers in us, that there is a striving with all our powers, that there is a mercy of God, that there are means of entreating mercy, that God is by nature just, by nature most merciful, etc. If, then, anyone does not know what those powers are, what they can achieve, what their efficacy or lack of it may be, what is he to do? What would *you* tell him to do?

It is, you say, irreverent, inquisitive, and superfluous to want to know whether our will does anything in matters pertaining to eternal salvation or whether it is simply passive under the action of grace. Yet now you contradict this by saying that Christian godliness means striving with all one's powers, and that without the mercy of God the will is not effective. Here you plainly assert that the will does something in matters pertaining to eternal salvation, when you represent it as striving, though you make it passive when you say it is ineffective apart from mercy. You do not, however, state precisely how this activity and passivity are to be understood, for you take good care to keep us in ignorance of what God's mercy and our will *can* achieve, even while you are telling us what they actually do. Thus that prudence of yours makes you veer about, determined not to commit yourself to either side, but to pass safely between Scylla and Charybdis; with the result that, finding yourself battered and buffeted by the waves in the midst of the sea, you assert everything you deny and deny everything you assert.

Let me show you by a few analogies what your theology is like. Suppose that a man who wants to compose a good poem or speech should not consider what sort of talent he has, or ask himself what he is and is not capable of, and what the subject he has chosen requires — plainly ignoring that precept of Horace about “what the shoulders can stand, and what they will refuse to bear — but instead should just rush headlong to work, thinking: “The effort must be made to get it done; it is inquisitive and superfluous to ask whether such learning, such eloquence, such force of intellect as it requires is forthcoming.” Or suppose someone who wants to get a good crop from his land should not be inquisitive and take superfluous care to examine the soil, as Vergil inquisitively and vainly teaches in his *Georgics*, but should rush blindly on, thinking of nothing but the work, plowing the seashore and sowing the seed in whatever turns up, whether sand or mud. Or suppose someone who is going to war and wants a glorious victory, or who has any other public duty to fulfill, should not be so inquisitive as to give careful thought to what it is in his power to do — whether he has sufficient funds, whether his troops are fit, whether there is any scope for action — but should completely disregard the historian's remark that “before you act, careful thought is needed, and when you have thought, prompt action,” and rush in with his eyes and ears shut, simply shouting, “War, war!” and press on with the job. What, I ask you, Erasmus, would be your verdict on such poets, farmers, generals, and heads of state? I will add the Gospel saying about one who desires to build a tower, and does not first sit down and count the cost, and whether he has enough to complete it. What is Christ's verdict on him?

But this is just what you are doing. You prescribe our actions, but forbid us first to examine and measure our powers, or to find out what we can and cannot do, as if that were inquisitive and superfluous and irreverent. Hence, while with your excessive prudence you abhor recklessness and make a show of sober judgment, you arrive at the point of actually teaching the utmost recklessness. For whereas the Sophists are indeed reckless and mad in pursuing their inquisitive inquiries, yet their sin is less serious than yours, who make madness and recklessness the positive point of your teaching. And to make the madness all the greater, you try to persuade us that this recklessness is the most beautiful Christian piety, sobriety, godly seriousness, and salvation; and unless we do as you say, you assert that we are irreverent, inquisitive, and vain — you who are such an enemy of assertions! A fine job you make of avoiding Scylla while you are steering clear of Charybdis!

But it is confidence in your own wits that has driven you do this, for you believe you can so impose on everyone's intelligence by your eloquence that no one will notice what you cherish in your heart and what your purpose is with these slippery writings of yours. But God is not mocked (Gal. 6:7), and it is not safe to run up against him. Furthermore, if the matter at issue were composing poems, preparing crops, conducting wars or other public undertakings, or building houses, and you had taught us such recklessness, then although it would be intolerable in so eminent a man, you would nevertheless have been deserving of some indulgence, at least among Christians, who set no store on temporal affairs. But when you tell Christians themselves to become reckless workers, and order them not to be inquisitive about what they can and cannot do in the matter of obtaining eternal salvation, this is beyond question the truly unforgivable sin. For as long as they are ignorant of what and how much they can do, they will not know what they should do; and being ignorant of what they should do, they cannot repent if they do wrong; and impotence is the unforgivable sin. This is what your moderate Skeptical Theology leads us to.

Therefore, it is not irreverent, inquisitive, or superfluous, but essential 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 (I Cor. 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.

So you see that this problem is one half of the whole sum of things Christian, since on it both knowledge of oneself and the knowledge and glory of God quite vitally depend. That is why we cannot permit you, my dear Erasmus, to call such knowledge irreverent, inquisitive, and vain. We owe much to you, but godliness claims our all. Why, you yourself are aware that all the good in us is to be ascribed to God, and you assert this is in your description of Christianity (E., p. 39.) But in asserting this, you are surely asserting also that the mercy of God alone does everything, and that our will does nothing, but rather is passive; otherwise, all is not ascribed to God. Yet a little later you say that it is not religious, pious, and salutary to assert or to know this. But it is a mind at variance with itself, uncertain and inexpert in matters of religion, that is compelled to talk like that.

God's Foreknowledge; Contingence and Necessity

The other half of the Christian *summa* is concerned with knowing whether God foreknows anything contingently, and whether we do everything of necessity. And this, too, you find irreverent, inquisitive, and vain, just as all ungodly men do, or rather, as the demons and the damned find it hateful and detestable. You are well advised to steer clear of such questions if you can, but you are a pretty poor rhetorician and theologian when you presume to discuss and expound free choice without the two subjects just mentioned. I will act as a whetstone and, although no rhetorician myself, will teach a distinguished rhetorician his business.

Suppose Quintilian, proposing to write about oratory, were to say: "In my judgment, that stupid and superfluous stuff about choice of subject, arrangement of material, style, memorization, delivery, ought to be omitted; suffice it to know that oratory is the art of speaking well" — would you not ridicule such an exponent of the art? Yet you act no differently yourself. You propose to write about free choice, and you begin by rejecting and throwing away the whole substance and all the elements of the subject on which you are going to write. For you cannot possibly know what free choice is unless you know what the human will can do, and what God does, and whether he foreknows necessarily.

Do not even your rhetoricians teach you that when you are going to speak on any subject, you ought to say first whether it exists, then what it is, what its parts are, what things are contrary to it, akin to it, similar to it, etc.? But you deprive free choice (poor thing!) of all these advantages, and lay down no question concerning it, unless perhaps the first, namely, whether it exists; and you do this with arguments (as we shall see) of such a kind that, apart from the elegance of the language, I have never seen a feebler book on free choice. The very Sophists provide at least a better discussion on this subject, for while they have no idea of style, yet when they tackle free choice they do define all the questions connected with it — whether it exists, what it is, what it does, how it is related, etc. — though even they do not succeed in doing what they set out to do. In this book, therefore, I shall press you and all the Sophists hard until you define for me the strength and effectiveness of free choice; and I shall press you (with Christ's aid) so hard that I hope I shall make you repent of ever having published your *Diatribes*.

Here, then, is something fundamentally necessary and salutary for a Christian, to know that God foreknows nothing contingently, but that he foresees and purposes and does all things by his immutable, eternal, and infallible will. Here is a thunderbolt by which free choice is completely prostrated and shattered, so that those who want free choice asserted must either deny or explain away this thunderbolt, or get rid of it by some other means. However, before I establish this point by my own argument and the authority of Scripture, I will first deal with it in your words.

Was it not you, my dear Erasmus, who asserted a little earlier that God is by nature just, by nature most merciful? (e., p. 39.) If this is true, does it not follow that he is immutably just and merciful — that as his nature never changes, so neither does his justice or mercy? But what is said of his justice and mercy must also be said of his knowledge, wisdom, goodness, will, and other divine attributes. If, then, the assertion of these things concerning God is, as you state, religious, pious, and salutary, what has come over you that now contradict yourself by asserting that it is irreverent, inquisitive, and vain, to say that God foreknows necessarily? You declare that the will of God is to be understood as immutable, yet you forbid us to know that his foreknowledge is immutable. Do you, then, believe that he foreknows without willing or wills without knowing? If his foreknowledge is an attribute of his will, then his will is eternal and unchanging, because that is its nature; if his will is an attribute of his foreknowledge, then his foreknowledge is eternal and unchanging, because that is its nature.

From this it follows irrefutably that everything we do, everything that happens, even if it seems to us to happen mutably and contingently, happens in fact nonetheless necessarily and immutably, if you have regard to the will of God. For the will of God is effectual and cannot be hindered, since it is the power of the divine nature itself; moreover it is wise, so that it cannot be deceived. Now, if his will is not hindered, there is nothing to prevent the work itself from being done, in the place, time, manner, and measure that he himself both foresees and wills. If the will of God were such that, when the work was completed, the work

remained but the will ceased — like the will of men, which ceases to will when the house they want is built, just as it also comes to an end in death — then it could be truly said that things happen contingently and mutably. But here the opposite happens; the work comes to an end and the will remains, so remote is it from possibility that the work itself, during its production and completed existence, should exist or persist contingently. To happen contingently, however — in order that we may not misuse terms — means in Latin, not that the work itself is contingent, but that it is done by a contingent and mutable will, such as there is not in God. Moreover, a work can only be called contingent when *from our point of view* it is done contingently and, as it were, by chance and without our expecting it, because our will or hand seizes on it as something presented to us by chance, when we have thought or willed nothing about it previously.

(I could wish indeed that another and a better word had been introduced into our discussion than this usual one, “necessity,” which is not rightly applied either to the divine or the human will. It has too harsh and incongruous a meaning for this purpose, for it suggests a kind of compulsion, and the very opposite of willingness, although the subject under discussion implies no such thing. For neither the divine nor the human will does what it does, whether good or evil, under any compulsion, but from sheer pleasure or desire, as with true freedom; and yet the will of God is immutable and infallible, and it governs our mutable will, as Boethius sings: “Remaining fixed, Thou makest all things move”; and our will, especially when it is evil, cannot of itself do good. The reader’s intelligence must therefore supply what the word “necessity” does not express, by understanding it to mean what you might call the immutability of the will of God and the impotence of our evil will, or what some have called the necessity of immutability, though this is not very good either grammatically or theologically.)

The Sophists have labored for years over this point, but in the end they have been beaten and forced to admit that everything happens necessarily, though by the necessity of consequence (as they say) and not by the necessity of the consequent. They have thus eluded the full force of this question, or indeed it might rather be said they have deluded themselves. For how meaningless this is I shall have no difficulty in showing. What they call the necessity of consequence means broadly this: If god wills anything, it is necessary for that thing to come to pass, but it is not necessary that the thing which comes to pass should exist; for God alone exists necessarily, and it is possible for everything else not to exist if god so wills. So they say that an action of God is necessary if he wills it, but that the thing done is not itself necessary. But what do they achieve by this playing with words? This, of course, that the thing done is not necessary, in the sense that it has not a necessary existence. But this is no different from saying that the thing done is not God himself. Nevertheless, it remains a fact that everything that comes into being does so necessarily, if the action of god is necessary, or if there is a necessity of consequence, however true it is that, when it has been brought into being, it does not exist necessarily, that is to say, it is not God and has not a necessary existence. For if I myself am brought into existence necessarily, it is of little concern to me that my being or becoming is mutable, for my contingent and mutable self, though not the necessary being that God is, is nonetheless brought into existence.

Hence their amusing idea, that everything happens by necessity of consequence but not by necessity of the consequent, amounts to no more than this: all things are indeed brought about necessarily, but when they have thus been brought about, they are not God himself. But what need was there to tell us this/ As if there were any fear of our asserting that created things are God, or that they have a divine and necessary nature! Hence the proposition stands, and remains invincible, that all things happen by necessity. Nor is there here any obscurity or ambiguity. It says in Isaiah: “My counsel shall stand and my will shall be done” (ch. 46:10). What schoolboy does not know the meaning of these terms “counsel,” “will,” “shall be done,” “shall stand”?

But why are these things abstruse to us Christians, so that it is irreverent and inquisitive and vain to discuss and come to know them, when heathen poets and even the common people speak of them quite freely? How often does Vergil (for one) remind us of Fate! “By changeless law stand all things fixed”; “Each man’s day stands fixed”; “If the Fates call thee”; “If thou canst break the harsh bonds of Fate.” That poet has no other aim than to show that in the destruction of Troy and the rise of the Roman Empire, Fate counts for more than all the endeavors of men, and therefore it imposes a necessity on both things and men. Moreover, he makes even their immortal gods subject to Fate, to which even Jupiter himself and Juno must necessarily yield. Hence the current conception of the three Parcae, immutable, implacable, irrevocable. The wise men of those days were well aware of what fact and experience prove, namely, that no man’s plans have ever been straightforwardly realized, but for everyone things have turned out differently from what he thought they would. Vergil’s Hector says, “Could Troy have stood by human arm, then it had stood by mine.” Hence the very common saying on everyone’s lips, “God’s will be done”; and “God willing, we will do it,” or “Such was the will of God.” “So it pleased those above”; “Such was your will,” says Vergil. From this we can see that the knowledge of God’s predestination and foreknowledge remained with the common people no less than the awareness of his existence itself. But those who wished to appear wise went so far astray in their reasonings that their hearts were darkened and they became fools (Rom. 1:21f.)), and denied or explained away the things that the poets and common people, and even their own conscience, regarded as entirely familiar, certain, and true.

I go farther and say, not only how true these things are — as will be shown more fully below from the Scriptures — but also how religious, devout, and necessary a thing it is to know them. For if these things are not known, there can be neither faith nor any worship of God. For that would indeed be ignorance of God, and where there is such ignorance there cannot be salvation, as we know. For if you doubt or disdain to know that God foreknows all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutably, how

can you believe his promises and place a sure trust and reliance on them? For when he promises anything, you ought to be certain that he knows and is able and willing to perform what he promises; otherwise, you will regard him as neither truthful nor faithful, and that is impiety and a denial of the Most High God. But how will you be certain and sure unless you know that he knows and wills and will do what he promises, certainly, infallibly, immutably, and necessarily? And we ought not only to be certain that God wills and will act necessarily and immutably, but also to glory in this fact; as Paul says in Rom. 3(:4): “Let God be true though every man be false,” and again (in ch. 9:6): “Not as though the word of God had failed,” and elsewhere: “But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are his’” (II Tim. 2:19). And in Titus 1(:2) he says: “Which God, who never lies, promised ages ago,” and in Heb. 11(:6): “Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who hope in him.

Therefore, Christian faith is entirely extinguished, the promises of God and the whole gospel are completely destroyed, if we teach and believe that it is not for us to know the necessary foreknowledge of God and necessity of the things that are to come to pass. For this is the one supreme consolation of Christians in all adversities, to know that God does not lie, but does all things immutably, and that his will can neither be resisted nor changed nor hindered.

See now, my dear Erasmus, what that most moderate and peace-loving theology of yours leads to! You warn us off, and forbid us to try to understand the foreknowledge of God and the necessity laid on things and men, advising us to leave such things alone, and to shun and condemn them. And by this ill-advised labor of yours you teach us both to cultivate ignorance of God (which comes of its own accord, and indeed is inborn in us), and to despise faith, let go the promises of God, and treat all the consolations of the Spirit and certitudes of conscience as of no account. Such advice Epicurus himself would scarcely give! Then, not content with this, you call anyone who seeks knowledge of such things irreverent, inquisitive, and vain, but one who despises them, religious, devout, and sober. What else do you imply by these words than that Christians are inquisitive, vain, and irreverent, and that Christianity is a matter of no moment at all, but vain, foolish, and really quite impious? So it happens again that while you wish above all to preserve us from temerity, you are carried away, as foolish people often are, and do the very opposite, teaching nothing but the greatest temerities, impieties, and perditions. Do you not see that in this part our book is so impious, blasphemous, and sacrilegious that it is without an equal anywhere?

I am not, as I said above, speaking of your heart, nor do I think you so abandoned that at heart you desire either to teach these things or to see them taught and practiced. But I am trying to show you what frightful things a man is bound to babble if he undertakes to support a bad cause, and what it means to run counter to divine truth and divine Scripture when we put on an act to please others and play a part that is foreign to us against our conscience. It is no game or joke to give instruction in Holy Writ and godliness, for it is very easy to fall here in the way that James describes: “Whoever fails in one point has become guilty of all” (James 2:10). For thus it comes about that when we think we mean to trifle only a little, and do not treat Holy Writ with sufficient reverence, we are soon involved in impieties and immersed in blasphemies, just as has happened to you here, Erasmus — may the Lord forgive you and have mercy on you.

That the Sophists have produced such swarms of questions on these subjects, and have mixed up a lot of other useless things with them, many of which you specify, we know and admit as you do, and we have attached them more sharply and more fully than you have. But you are imprudent and rash when you mix up, confuse, and assimilate the purity of sacred realities with the profane and stupid questions of ungodly men. “They have defiled the gold and changed its good color,” as Jeremiah says (Lam. 4:1), but the gold must not forthwith be treated like rubbish and thrown away, as you are doing. The gold must be rescued from these men, and the pure Scripture separated from their dregs and filth, as I have always sought to do, in order that the divine writings may be kept in one place, and their trifles in another. And it ought not to disturb us that nothing has come of these questions, “except that with the loss of harmony we love one another the less, while seeking to be wiser than we need” (E., p.40). For us the question is not what the Sophists have gained by their questions, but how we may become good Christians; and you ought not to blame it on Christian doctrine that the ungodly behave badly, since that has nothing to do with the case, and you could have spoken of it in another place and spared your paper here.

Should Divine Truth Be Kept from Common Ears?

In the third section you proceed to turn us into modest and peace-loving Epicureans, with a different sort of advice, though no sounder than the two already mentioned. That is to say, you tell us that some things are of such a kind that even if they were true and might be known, it would not be proper to prostitute them before common ears (E., p. 40.)

Here again you confuse and mix everything up in your usual way, putting the sacred on a level with the profane and making no distinction between them at all, so that once again you have fallen into contempt and abuse of Scripture and of God. I said above that things which are either contained in or proved by Holy Writ are not only plain, but also salutary, and can therefore safely be published, learned, and known, as indeed they ought to be. Hence your saying that they ought not to be prostituted before common ears is false if you are speaking of the things that are in Scripture; and if you are speaking of other things, what you say does not interest us and is out of place, so that you are wasting your time and paper on it. Besides, you know that there is no

subject on which I agree with the Sophists, so that you might well have spared me and not cast their misdoings in my teeth. For it was against me that you were to speak in that book of yours. I know where the sophists go wrong without needing you to tell me, and they have had plenty of criticism from me. I should like this said once and for all, and repeated every time you mix me up with the Sophists and make my case look as crazy as theirs, for you are being quite unfair, as you very well know.

Now, let us see the reasons for your advice. Even if it were true that “God, according to his own nature, is no less present in the hole of a beetle” or even in a sewer than in heaven (though you are too reverent to say this yourself, and blame the Sophists for blathering so), yet you think it would be unreasonable to discuss such a subject before the common herd (E., p. 40).

First, let them blather who will; we are not here discussion what men do, but what is right and lawful, not how we live, but how we ought to live. Which of us always lives and acts rightly? But law and precept are not condemned on that account, but they rather condemn us. Yet you go looking for irrelevancies like these, and rake a pile of them together from all sides, because this one point about the foreknowledge of God upsets you; and since you have no real argument with which to overcome it, you spend the time trying to tire out your reader with a lot of empty talk. But we will let that pass, and get back to the subject. What, then, is the point of your contention that certain matters ought not to be discussed publicly? Do you count the subject of free choice among them? In that case, all I said above about the necessity of understanding free choice will round on you again. Moreover, why did you not follow your own advice and leave your *Diatribes* unwritten? If it is right for you to discuss free choice, why do you denounce such discussion? If it is wrong, why do you do it? On the other hand, if you do not count free choice among the prohibited subjects, you are again evading the real issue, dealing like a wordy rhetorician with topics that are irrelevant and out of place.

Even so, you are wrong in the use you make of this example, and in condemning as unprofitable the public discussion of the proposition that God is in the hole or the sewer. Your thoughts about God are all too human. There are, I admit, some shallow preachers who, from no motives of religion or piety, but perhaps from a desire for popularity or a thirst for some novelty or a distaste for silence, prate and trifle in the shallowest way. But these please neither God nor men, even if they assert that God is in the heaven of heavens. But where there are serious and godly preachers who teach in modest, pure, and sound words, they speak on such a subject in public without risk, and indeed with great profit. Ought we not all to teach that the Son of God was in the womb of the Virgin and came forth from her belly? But how does a human belly differ from any other unclean place? Anyone could describe it in foul and shameless terms, but we rightly condemn those who do, seeing that there are plenty of pure words with which to speak of that necessary theme even with decency and grace. Again, the body of Christ himself was human as ours is, and what is fouler than that? Are we therefore not to say that God dwelt in it bodily, as Paul has said (Col. 2:9)? What is fouler than death? What more horrifying than hell? Yet the prophet glories that God is present with him in death and hell (Ps. 139:8).

Therefore, a godly mind is not shocked to hear that God is present in death or hell, both of which are more horrible and foul than either a hole or a sewer. Indeed, since Scripture testifies that God is everywhere and fills all things (Jer. 23:24), a godly mind not only says that He is in those places, but must needs learn and know that he is there. Or are we to suppose that if I am captured by a tyrant and thrown into a prison or a sewer — as has happened to many saints — I am not to be allowed to call upon God there or to believe that he is present with me, but must wait until I come into some finely furnished church?

If you teach us to talk such nonsense about God, and are so set against the locating of his essence, you will end by not even allowing him to remain for us in heaven; for the heaven of heavens cannot contain him, nor is it worthy of him (I Kings 8:27). But as I have said, it is your habit to stab at us in this hateful way in order to disparage our case and make it odious because you see that for you it is insuperable and invincible.

As for your second example, I admit that the idea that there are three Gods is a scandal if it is taught; but it is neither true, nor does Scripture teach it. The Sophists speak in this way with their newfound dialectic, but what has that to do with us?

In the remaining example, regarding confession and satisfaction, it is wonderful to see with what felicitous prudence you put your case. Everywhere you walk so delicately, as is your habit, in order to avoid giving the impression either that you do not wholeheartedly condemn our views or that you are not opposed to the tyranny of the popes, for that would be by no means safe for you. So you bid adieu meanwhile to God and to conscience — for how does it concern Erasmus what God wills in these matters and what is good for the conscience? — and launch an attack on mere externals, charging the common people with abusing the preaching of free confession and satisfaction and turning it into carnal liberty to suit their own evil inclination, whereas by the necessity of confession (you say) they were at all events restrained.

What outstandingly brilliant reasoning! Is that the way to teach theology? To bind souls by laws and, as Ezekiel says (Ezek. 13:18 f.), to slay them when they are not bound by God? By this token you set up for us again the whole tyranny of papal laws, as being useful and salutary because by them too the wickedness of the common people is restrained. But instead of attacking this passage in the way it deserves, let me put the point briefly. A good theologian teaches as follows: the common people are to be restrained by the external power of the sword when they behave wickedly, as Paul teaches in Rom. 13(4); but their consciences

are not to be ensnared with false laws, so that they are burdened with sins where God has not willed that there should be sins. For consciences are bound only by a commandment of God, so that the interfering tyranny of the popes, which falsely terrifies and kills souls inwardly and vainly wearies the body outwardly, has simply no place in our midst. For although it makes confession and other outward burdens compulsory, the mind is not kept in order by these means, but is rather provoked into hatred of God and men; and it is in vain that the body is tortured to death with outward observances, for this makes mere hypocrites, so that legal tyrants of this kind are nothing else but ravening wolves, thieves, and robbers of the souls (Matt. 7:15; John 10:8). Yet it is these that you, good spiritual counselor that you are, commend to us again. You set before us the cruelest of soul destroyers, and want us to let them fill the world with hypocrites who blaspheme and dishonor God in their hearts, as long as outwardly they are kept in some degree of order, as if there were not another means of keeping them in order, which makes no hypocrites and is applied without any ruination of consciences, as I have said.

Here you produce analogies, of which you seek to give the impression that you have an abundant store and make very apt use. You say, for instance, that there are diseases which are less evil to bear than their removal, such as leprosy, etc. You also bring in the example of Paul, who distinguished between things lawful and things expedient (I Cor. 6:12; 10:23). It is lawful, you say, to speak the truth, but it is not expedient to do so to everybody at every time in every way. What a fluent orator you are! Yet you understand nothing of what you are saying. In a work, you treat this subject as if it were simply an affair between you and me about the recovery of a sum of money, or some other quite trivial matter, the loss of which (as being of much less value than your precious external peace) ought not to trouble anyone enough to prevent him from giving way, and doing or suffering as the occasion requires so as to make it unnecessary for the world to be thrown into such an uproar. You thus plainly show that outward peace and quietness are to you far more important than faith, conscience, salvation, the Word of God, the glory of Christ, and God himself.

Let me tell you, therefore — and I beg you to let this sink deep into your mind — that what I am after in this dispute is to me something serious, necessary, and indeed eternal, something of such a kind and such importance that it ought to be asserted and defended to the death, even if the whole world had not only to be thrown into strife and confusion, but actually to return to total chaos and be reduced to nothingness. If you do not understand this or are not concerned about it, then mind your own affairs and let those understand and be concerned about it on whom God has laid the charge.

For even I, by the grace of God, am not such a fool or so mad as to have been willing to maintain and defend this cause for so long, with so much zeal and constancy (which you call obstinacy), amid so many dangers to life, so much hatred, so many treacheries, in short, amid the fury of men and demons, simply for the sake of money (which I neither possess nor desire), or popularity (which I could not obtain if I wished, in a world so incensed against me), or physical safety (of which I cannot for a moment be certain). Do you think that you alone have a heart that is moved by these tumults? Even we are not made of stone, or born of the Marpesian rocks; but when nothing else can be done, we prefer to be battered by temporal tumult, rejoicing in the grace of God, for the sake of the Word of God, which must be asserted with an invincible and incorruptible mind, rather than to be shattered by eternal tumult under the wrath of God, with intolerable torment. May Christ grant, as I hope and pray, that your mind may not come to that, although your words certainly sound as if you thought, like Epicurus, that the Word of God and a future life were fables; for you seek with your magisterial advice to persuade us that, as a favor to pontiffs that princes or for the sake of peace, we ought if occasion arises, to give way and set aside God, faith, salvation, and everything Christian. How much better is the admonition of Christ, that we should rather spurn the whole world (Matt. 16:26)!

You say things like these, however, because you do not read or do not observe that it is the most unvarying fate of the Word of God to have the world in a state of tumult because of it. This is plainly asserted by Christ, when he says: “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10:34), and in Luke: “I came to cast fire upon the earth” (ch. 12:49). And Paul in I (II) Cor. 6(:5) says: “In tumults,” etc. And the prophet in the Second Psalm abundantly testifies the same, asserting that the nations are in tumult, the peoples murmur, kings rise up, princes conspire, against the Lord and against his Christ; as if he would say, numbers, rank, wealth, power, wisdom, righteousness, and whatever is exalted in the world, opposes itself to the Word of God. Look into The Acts of the Apostles and see what happens in the world on account of Paul’s word alone, to say nothing of the other apostles. See how he alone sets both Gentiles and Jews by the ears, or as his enemies themselves say in the same place, he turns the world upside down (Acts 17:6; cf. 24:5). Under Elijah the Kingdom of Israel was troubled, as Ahab complains (I Kings 18:17). And what tumult there was under the other prophets! They are all killed or stoned, while Israel is taken captive to Assyria and Judah to Babylon! Was this peace? The world and its god cannot and will not endure the Word of the true God, and the true God neither will nor can keep silence; so when these two Gods are at war with one another, what can there be but tumult in the whole world?

To wish to stop these tumults, therefore, is nothing else but to wish to suppress and prohibit the Word of God. For the Word of God comes, whenever it comes, to change and renew the world. Even the heathen writers testify that changes of things cannot take place without commotion and tumult, nor indeed without bloodshed. But it is the mark of a Christian to expect and endure these things with presence of mind, as Christ says: “When you hear wars and rumors of wars, see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet” (Matt. 24:6). For myself, if I did not see these tumults I should say that the Word of God was not in the world; but now, when I do see them, I heartily rejoice and have no fear, because I am quite certain that the kingdom

of the pope, with all his followers, is going to collapse; for it is against this in particular that the Word of God, now at large in the world, is directed.

I am aware, of course, that you, my dear Erasmus, complain in many books about these tumults and the loss of peace and concord, and with the best of intentions (as I verily believe) you try hard to find a remedy for them. But this gouty foot laughs at your doctoring hands; for here in truth you are, as you say, rowing against the stream, or rather, you are putting out a fire with straw. Stop your complaining, stop your doctoring; this tumult has arisen and is directed from above, and it will not cease till it makes all the adversaries of the Word like the mud on the streets. But it is sad to have to remind a theologian like you of these things, as if you were a pupil instead of one who ought to be teaching others.

It is here, therefore, that your aphorism (which is neat enough, though your use of it is inapposite) really belongs — I mean your aphorism about diseases that are less evil to bear than their removal. You should say that the diseases which are less evil to bear are these tumults, commotions, disturbances, seditions, sects, discords, wars, and anything else of this sort, by which the whole world is shaken an shattered on account of the Word of God. These things, I say, because they are temporal, are less evil to bear than the inveterate wickedness through which souls will inevitably be lost if they are not changed by the Word of God; and if that Word were taken away, then eternal good, God, Christ, the Spirit, would go with it. But surely it is preferable to lose the world rather than God the creator of the world, who is able to create innumerable worlds again, and who is better than infinite worlds! For what comparison is there between things temporal and things eternal? This leprosy of temporal evils ought therefore to be borne, rather than that all souls should be slaughtered and eternally damned while the world is kept in peace and preserved from these tumults by their blood and perdition, seeing that the whole world cannot pay the price of redemption for a single soul.

You have some elegant and unusual analogies and aphorisms, but when you are dealing with sacred matters your application of them is puerile and indeed perverse, for you creep on the ground and never have a thought that rises above human comprehension. For the operations of God are not childish or bourgeois or human, but divine and exceeding human grasp. But you do not seem to see that these tumults and divisions are marching through the world by the counsel and operation of God, and you are afraid lest the heavens should fall. But I, by the grace of God, see this clearly, because I see other greater troubles in time to come, by comparison with which these present seem no more than the whisper of a breeze or the murmur of a gentle stream.

But the dogma concerning the freedom of confession and satisfaction you either deny or do not know to be the Word of God. That is another question. We, however, know and are sure that it is God's Word by which Christian freedom is asserted, so that we may not allow ourselves to be trapped and brought into bondage by human traditions and laws. This we have abundantly taught elsewhere; and if you wish to go into the question, we are prepared to state our case or debate it with you as well. There are not a few books of ours available on this subject.

But at the same time, you will say, the laws of the pontiffs ought in charity to be borne with and observed equally with divine laws, if by any chance it is possible in this way to maintain both eternal salvation through the Word of God and also the peace of the world. I have said above that that is not possible. The prince of this world does not allow the pope and his own pontiffs to have their laws observed freely, but his purpose is to capture and bind consciences. This the true God cannot tolerate, and so the Word of God and the traditions of men are irreconcilably opposed to one another, precisely as God himself and Satan are mutually opposed, each destroying the works and subverting the dogmas of the other like two kings laying waste each other's kingdoms. "He who is not with me," says Christ, "is against me" (Matt. 12:30).

As to your fear that many who are inclined to wickedness will abuse this freedom, this should be reckoned as one of the said tumults, part of that temporal leprosy which has to be endured and that evil which has to be borne. Such people should not be considered so important that in order to prevent their abusing it the Word of God must be taken away. If all cannot be saved, yet some are saved, and it is for their sake that the Word of God comes. These love the more fervently and are the more inviolably in concord. For what evil did ungodly men not do even before, when there was no Word? Or rather, what good did they do? Was not the world always inundated with war, fraud, violence, discord, and every kind of crime? Does not Micah liken the best of the men of his day to a thorn hedge (Micah 7:4)? And what do you think he would call the rest? But now the coming of the gospel begins to be blamed for the fact that the world is wicked, whereas the truth is that the good light of the gospel reveals how bad the world was when it lived in its own darkness without the gospel. In a similar way the uneducated find fault with education because their ignorance is shown up where education flourishes. That is the gratitude we show for the Word of life and salvation.

What apprehension must we not suppose there was among the Jews when the gospel set everyone free from the law of Moses? What did not so great a freedom seem likely to permit to evil men? Yet the gospel was not on that account taken away, but the ungodly were allowed to go their own way, while the godly were charged not to use their freedom as an opportunity to indulge the flesh (Gal. 5:13).

Nor is that part of your advice or remedy of any value, where you say it is lawful to speak the truth, but not expedient to do so to everybody at every time in every way; and it is quite inappropriate for you to quote Paul's saying: "All things are lawful for

me, but not all things are expedient" (I Cor. 6:12). Paul is not there speaking of doctrine or the teaching of the truth, in the way that you misinterpret him and make him mean what you want. Paul wishes the truth to be spoken everywhere at every time and in every way. He can therefore rejoice even when Christ is preached in pretense and from envy, and he declares plainly and in so many words that he rejoices in whatever way Christ is preached (Phil. 1:15 ff.). Paul is speaking factually and about the use made of the doctrine, that is, about those who boasted of Christian freedom but were seeking their own ends and took no account of the hurt and offense given to the weak. Truth and doctrine must be preached always, openly, and constantly, and never accommodated or concealed; for there is no scandal in it, for it is the scepter of righteousness (Ps. 45:6-7).

Who has empowered you or given you the right to bind Christian doctrine to places, persons, times, or causes when Christ wills it to be proclaimed and to reign throughout the world in entire freedom? "The word of God is not bound," says Paul (II Tim. 2:9); and will Erasmus bind the Word? God has not given us a Word that shows partiality in respect of persons, places, or times; for Christ says: "Go into all the world" (Mark 16:15). He does not say, "Go to one place and not another," as Erasmus does. And he says, "Preach the gospel to every creature" (*ibid.*), not "to some and not to others." In short, you prescribe for us respect of persons, respect of places and customs, and respect of times, in the service of the Word of God, whereas it is one great part of the glory of the Word that (as Paul says) there is no *prosōpolēmpsia* and God is no respecter of persons. You see again how rashly you run counter to the Word of God, as if you much prefer your own ideas and counsels.

If we now asked you to distinguish for us the times, persons, and ways in which the truth ought to be spoken, when would you be ready to do it? The world would reach the limit of time and its own end before you had established any certain rule. Meanwhile, what would become of the ministry of teaching and the souls that should be taught? But how could you be able to give us a rule when you know no means of assessing either persons or times or methods? And even if you most decidedly did, yet you do not know men's hearts. Or does "method," "time," and "person" mean for you that we should teach the truth in such a way as not to offend the pope or annoy the emperor or upset the pontiffs and princes, and not to cause any commotions and tumults in the world, lest many be made to stumble and become worse? What sort of advice this is, you have seen above; but you would rather spin fine though useless phrases than say nothing at all.

How much better it would be for us miserable men to let God, who knows all men's hearts, have the glory of prescribing the manner, persons, and times for speaking the truth! For he knows what should be spoken to each, and when and how. As it is, however, he has enjoined that his gospel, which is necessary for all, should know no limit or place or time, but should be preached to all in every time and place, and I have proved above that the things set forth in the Scriptures are of a kind intended for all, and must necessarily be broadcast and are thoroughly salutary — as even you yourself have stated, with better sense than you show now, in you *Paraclesis*. Those who do not want souls redeemed, like the pope and his crowd — let it be left to them to bind the Word of God and keep men from life and the Kingdom of Heaven, so that they neither enter themselves nor permit others to enter (Matt. 23:13); to whose madness you perniciously pander, Erasmus, by this advice of yours.

The same sort of prudence underlies your next bit of advice, that if some wrong definition had been made in the Councils, it ought not to be proclaimed, lest a handle should be given to scorn the authority of the Fathers. (E., p. 41.) This, of course, was just what the pope wanted you to say; he would rather hear it than the gospel, and he is the worst of ingrates if he does not reward you with a cardinal's hat and the income that goes with it. But in the meantime, Erasmus, what will souls do that are bound and slain by that unjust statute? Is that nothing to you?

You, of course, always hold, or profess to hold, that human statutes can be observed without peril along with the Word of God. If they could, I should not hesitate to join you in the view you express here. So if you do not know it, I tell you again: Human statutes cannot be observed together with the Word of God, because they bind consciences, while the Word sets them free. The two are as mutually incompatible as water and fire, unless the human statutes are kept freely, that is, as not being binding — a thing that the pope will not and cannot allow, unless he wants his kingdom ruined and brought to an end, since it is only maintained by the ensnaring and binding of consciences which the gospel asserts to be free. Therefore the authority of the Fathers is neither here nor there, and statutes wrongly enacted (as are all which are not in accordance with the Word of God) ought to be torn up and thrown away, for Christ ranks higher than the authority of the Fathers. In short, if this view of yours has reference to the Word of God, it is impious; if it refers to other things, your wordy argument in support of it is nothing to us, for we are arguing about the Word of God.

From: *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*. E. Gordon Rupp, trans. "The Library of Christian Classics." Westminster: John Knox Press, 1969.