

OUTLINE OF *THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL*

by Dr. Klaus Schwarzwaller, University of Gottingen, translated from his *Theologia Crucis: Luthers Lehre von Pradestination nach De servo arbitrio* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1970, pp. 17–27) by Dr. Oliver K. Olson, and reconciled with the version of *De Servo Arbitrio* in the *American Edition of Luther's Works*, Vol. 33 (abbreviated LW) and (where possible) with the translation made and edited by Ernst F. Winter (abbreviated W) with additional edits and reformatting by Rev. Donavon L. Riley.

INTRODUCTION (LW 15; W 97)

Luther explains his delay in replying and admits Erasmus' superior talent.

“Though it is a hopeless one, Erasmus' attempt to prove the freedom of the will nevertheless calls for a refutation for the sake of those brothers whom Erasmus has led to temptation and vacillation.”

PART ONE: REVIEW OF ERASMUS' PREFACE (LW 19; W 100)

The doctrine of free will is thoroughly invalid and disproved; neither spiritual, rational, nor empirical arguments furnish anything approaching a proof.

A.

There is no scriptural basis for the doctrine of free will.

It is an arbitrary confusion and mix of that which pertains to God and that which pertains to man.

The result is that it is uncertain and incapable of giving certainty.

1. Faith confesses with certainty.
 - a. Faith confesses with certainty—is a mark of being a Christian (LW 19; W 100).
 - b. “The Holy Spirit is not a sceptic.” Faith, on the basis of his work, is unshakably certain. To renounce the confident confession—a denial of the Holy Spirit—is to abandon the faith (LW 21; W 102).

II.

Through his work and his Spirit, Jesus Christ has given full clarity (LW 26).

a. Since Jesus Christ, who alone makes the Bible a canon, is revealed, the Scripture is clear and unambiguous.

b. However, the Holy Spirit's inner enlightenment is necessary for real knowledge of its contents (LW 28).

III.

All Christian existence, faith, obedience, worship, are dependent on the exact and certain knowledge of the fact of the exclusive activity of God in everything and in all things. But this is just as sure as his reliability in grace and fidelity to us, in which he is true and on the basis of which the other matter is intelligible.

a. Theology and faith are based on Jesus Christ alone, but he compels certain knowledge of predestination and the assertion of the exclusive activity of God's grace (LW 29; W 104f.).

b. Right worship, right praise of God, but also knowledge of God and the self presuppose the most exact certainty about and knowledge of our acts and God's acts over against us (LW 35).

IV.

c. Since God is God and not man and since his goodness is constant, nothing accidental can occur. Everything, rather, happens on the basis of God's will—which persists even beyond the result of our action (LW 37).

d. Thus, the distinction between *necessitas consequentis* and *necessitas consequentiae* is a needless play with words (LW 39).

e. Furthermore, the idea that there is a transcendent necessity for everything that happens is familiar even to the heathen (LW 41).

f. The reliability of his promise stands and falls with the divine omnipotence and exclusive potency, in which he demonstrates that he is true while all men are liars (LW 42).

g. This is comfort to the Christian in all temptations. At the same time, emphasis is put on the unavoidable necessity of raising these questions (LW 43).

V.

Regardless of the possible consequences, predestination and the unfree will should be taught always and everywhere, as part of the gospel.

a. The incomprehensibility of God's activity, especially in the incarnation, surpasses even the most abstruse human speculations (LW 47).

b. The argument that the doctrine might be misunderstood opens the way for an unspiritual domination of the law (LW 49; W 107).

c. By its very definition, God's word causes tumult and uproar, as is implied by the statement that Jesus Christ came to show (LW 50).

d. For not only does God's activity surpass all human ability to comprehend, but beyond that,

the Gospel places the world's existence in doubt, by delivering it up to sin and complete fallenness (LW 53; W 108f.).

e. This gospel should be proclaimed in every place, at all times and for all ears, according to God's command, who himself works hearing, understanding and faith through the sermon (LW 57).

f. This proclamation must be based on the authority of Jesus Christ alone and must break through every human tradition or authority which leads souls to destruction (LW 58).

VI.

Once again the place, the content and the result of proclamation remain solely in the will of God who commands them, and to whom obedience is necessary (W 110–112).

a. The Word is not to be adjusted to the presuppositions of sinful men. Those presuppositions are rather to be corrected in humility through the Word (LW 60).

b. The proclamation works in God's elect through the Holy Spirit, while those who are not elect go on in their stubbornness to destruction. In both cases, God is wise and just (LW 61).

c. He works salvation through humbling the elect, who are convicted of their lostness; for he always works under the appearance of the opposite; thereby faith, which in obedience and devotion bears and penetrates the appearance, preserves itself (LW 61).

d. Only such preaching, going forth in obedience, cuts off blasphemous human curiosity (LW 63).

VII.

God alone has free will, while man always serves either God or the devil with an unfree will (not to be confused with determinism) which without his own doing takes him into possession as a riding-animal.

a. Unfree will and free will, which are dependent on God for their effect, are to be corrected in humility through the Word (LW 66; W 112).

b. Teaching of Christ, the crucified, is saying: "Freedom of the will is an attribute of God alone, although within the realm of God's omnipotence, man has freedom 'downward.' But he has no freedom of the will" (LW 70; W 113).

B.

The claim that the doctrine of human free will is based on the authority of the church fathers and ecclesiastical tradition is illegitimate; the appeal is based on mistaken ecclesiology and blameworthy disregard of the Scriptures, which are assumed to be unclear.

The arguments, moreover, do not touch the main point, which is the question of the proper preaching of God's grace and Spirit (LW 71; W 115).

To preach Christ and the Holy Spirit means confessing the *servum arbitrium*; for human freedom of the will is an invention of human thought; the proof of Spirit and of power cannot be offered for it (LW 73).

I.

The freedom of the will which is asserted cannot be proved by signs (LW 74).

II.

Neither can it be proved through special works, which would breach through the framework of the area of activity allowed to creatures (LW 75).

PART TWO: REFUTATION OF ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF FREE CHOICE (LW 102)

We reject the false doctrine that there are areas of our lives in which we are not to recognize Jesus Christ; but another Lord—areas in which we do not need justification and sanctification through him.

A.

God's gracious revelation of the law, the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, and the activity of the Holy Spirit—as the Scriptures witness—unmask man as fallen, in spite of the creaturely freedoms he has, and defenseless against the power of Satan, and therefore *a priori* unfree in his will.

This unfreedom is overcome only through the unfreedom of being led only through God's Spirit. The very possibility of a neutral will is excluded.

1. Since the predicate of free will can be applied to God only and since man's life under the lordship of God is never free, the most one could say is that the will is changeable. But without the Holy Spirit's leading, he can change his will only in the direction of evil (LW 102; W 119).

a. The possibility of turning to grace or from grace is never a free possibility, for God's salvation is first made known with his Word through the Holy Spirit and without the illumination of the Holy Spirit cannot be understood (LW 105).

b. The assertion of free will implies the divinisation of the human will, possible only with imprecise and faulty definitions and impermissible argumentation. It is a divinisation since it is

assumed that human will could soar up beyond the self-sacrifice involved in bearing the cross, by its own strength to the omnipotent creator (LW 107).

II.

Accepting various modes of grace and law leads only to confusion; and the very necessity of using these modes shows up the theological and logical impropriety of asserting free will.

- a. Exposition. Erasmus asserts three various ways of understanding free will (LW 112).
- b. There is no human will in and of itself; human will, always dependent on grace, is always unfree (LW 113).
- c. The will—the very existence—of men is related to Jesus Christ. Whoever is not for him is against him, and enslaved through Satan, always will (LW 115; W 123).
- d. Man has lost his liberty, is forced to serve sin, and cannot will anything good (LW 116).

III.

God has given man a relative freedom, appropriate to the mandate to subdue the rest of creation, and regulated by commandments and prohibitions. This has nothing to do with freedom of the will.

- a. The commandments given to man are no proof that he is free. Instead, they show that he is completely designated in the respective sphere of life by God's will (LW 119).
- b. To make logical deductions that since commands have been given they can be fulfilled is a proof not in accordance with the divine law (LW 120; LW 121).
- c. God deals with us in a friendly and fatherly manner in convicting us of our total lostness and corruption and thus opening to us the way to healing and salvation (LW 123).
- d. The logical deduction that since commands exist they necessarily can be obeyed is a denial of God's grace (LW 123).
- e. The supposed free will, that is, the will without the Spirit's leading, in relying on itself, is only turning away from God, continually deluded, as the example of Adam shows (LW 124).

IV.

If free will were able to overcome the desire of the heart for evil, the gracious action of the triune God would be superfluous; any such assertion therefore means a denial of God's gracious action (LW 125).

V.

The reality and the necessity of the Spirit's activity excludes the possibility of man's fulfilling the commandments.

a. The law does not effect the overcoming of sins, which is possible only under the Spirit's leading, but rather, first of all, knowledge of sin (LW 126).

b. Theological proof, therefore, can be based only on those scriptural passages in the indicative mood, not on statements in the imperative, with the help of consequences derived from formal logic (LW 127).

I.

The law, given graciously by God, proves that the will is unfree by blaming the Fall on Satan and pointing to Jesus as the way of "joyful liberation from godless bondage" (LW 128).

a. The commandments do not describe any human possibility, but mankind's negative reality and its disqualifications (LW 128).

b. Man is so unfree in his slavery through Satan, that he would not be able to recognise God's help and redemption, let alone accept them, if he were not brought out of his condition through the law (LW 130).

c. To reason that since a law exists there must be a possibility of fulfilling it is to mix Law and Gospel and thereby heaven and hell. That conclusion, moreover, obviously ignores reality, since fulfilling the Law presupposes love to God, of which no one in himself is capable (LW 132).

d. An attempted evasion of the fact, on the basis of mere human striving, in which man is supposed to have freedom of the will and that therefore freedom of the will is demanded and also possible, is logically and grammatically unjustified and mistaken in view of the demonstrations just made (LW 134).

e. Conversion, however, on which Erasmus builds his argument, is an ambivalent word. It can mean an action of man as demanded by the Law as well as, in an evangelical fashion, God's gracious turning. The distinction between Law and Gospel, consequently, is indispensable for the exegesis of Scripture (LW 134).

In life and death, in woe and blessing,

we are completely dependent on almighty God and his unsearchable will, out of which he desires the salvation of sinners and *for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; who for us, too, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered, and was buried; the third day he rose according to the Scriptures, ascended into heaven, and is seated on the right hand of the Father. He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom shall have no end.*

I.

The gracious, loving God is at the same time, as Lord of his Word, unsearchable, terrible, dark majesty.

He hides himself in it from our understanding. Only the Gospel is the place and the manner in which he is willing to meet us.

a. Ezekiel 18:23 should be understood primarily as Gospel, which promises God's surpassing grace. The Gospel, however, presupposes sinner and sin. It is like the Law in that it names him by name but is differentiated from it in that, instead of demanding, it comforts and establishes (LW 136).

b. God's gracious concern for the life and redemption of sinners excludes free will. This redemption is preached in the Gospel and is certain and trustworthy. It is not seemly, then, to inquire beyond the Gospel. We are rather to fear and in confidence and to adore the unsearchable will and the immeasurable majesty, whom the Gospel is not able to comprehend, but who embraces the Gospel (LW 138).

II.

Therefore, a distinction must be made between the God revealed in the preached Gospel and the hidden God.

In reliance on the Gospel, this difference must be recognized and borne humbly and in prayer. The hidden God cannot be the object of questioning, research, and thought (LW 140).

III.

Gospel and Law prove that man is unfree, bound to sin, and completely subject to God's mercy (LW 141).

a. To assert *liberum arbitrium* is to assert that Christ's death and his whole work is senseless and to deny the work of the Holy Spirit (LW 141).

b. The Law which reveals sin is so near to men that there is no excuse for it before God. If he is unforgivable before God, free will has accomplished nothing (LW 143).

IV.

The true God, who meets us in Jesus Christ, remains unsearchable and hidden in his will and works, through which he effects everything and, consequently, every human work.

It is blasphemy to desire to investigate this unsearchable majesty of God without taking Jesus Christ into account.

a. In Jesus Christ, God encounters us at the same time in the plenitude of his riches and his grace and his sympathy as he, who himself entered into our salvation with his own suffering.

b. Where one is not willing to permit this boundary to reason and respect it, there is a revolt against God; indeed, one fights against him (LW 146).

c. To the extent that we are obedient to the commandments, it occurs only through God's grace, which works such obedience in the elect (LW 149).

V.

In atonement, conversion, sanctification, redemption and exaltation into the kingdom of Jesus Christ, man lives alone from God's promise, without his own cooperation, directed not through his free will, but led through the Holy Spirit (LW 149f.).

a. The New Testament imperatives are based in God's saving deed, worked through the crucified Christ; that is, in the promise. The reward promised to obedience is a kind of promise, since it points to the fulfillment, which has not yet been realized. Therefore, human obedience is only a function of promise, that is, God's work on and in us through the Holy Spirit (LW 150; W 126).

b. The promised reward is, therefore, a consequence of God's gracious activity with us, through which we are brought to the kingdom of God, the reward, which was already prepared before the foundation of the world, that excludes egoistic striving for salvation (LW 153).

c. Admonition and promise are not based on a presumed possibility of fulfilling the commandments, but make sense and have function only because God gives the Holy Spirit at the same time.