**Excerpt from**

***Taking the World by Surprise***

**Gehard O. Forde**

Edited by Ken Sundet Jones

**The Bondage of Fallen Humanity.**

The discussion of the content of Scripture and our relation to it introduces us to the fundamental issue: The nature and extent of the bondage of fallen humanity. How does it come about that we are *bound* to misunderstand or at least *bound* to fail in our attempt to use and apply Scripture and its message properly without the aid of the Holy Spirit? Can such a position really be defended?

Luther’s position is at bottom profoundly simple. Why do we not understand? Why do we not apply ourselves to the things that “pertain to salvation?” Simply because *we don’t want to*, we don’t will to do so. We *will* not, because we are bound to ourselves and our own supposed “freedom. Luther’s position is pretty well summed up in the statement from the explanation to the Third Article of the Apostle’s Creed: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him”[[1]](#footnote-1) (a remarkable kind of double-talk — I believe that I cannot believe! — about which we shall say more later).

But how can this really be maintained? Is it not the case that we are all striving in some way to “reach God” and find “salvation?” Do not all people, or most at least, in one way or another seek religious goals and satisfactions? So indeed, we like to picture ourselves. We like to see ourselves as seekers after the things of “the spirit” — if not terribly earnest seekers nevertheless. We like to think, certainly, that our problem is not that we don’t want or don’t will to be religious and spiritual, but that we can’t manage what we really want to accomplish. “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak,” as the saying goes. We would *like* to live up to the divine commandments, but we can’t always do it, so we picture ourselves as potential spiritual athletes whose only problem is that we don’t quite have the qualifications to make the team, even though we would desperately like to. Perhaps we are too small or weak or uncoordinated. Or perhaps we just have trouble obeying the training rules and keeping in shape, so we always fail when the crucial moment arises. “Way down deep” we really want to make it, but we can’t. All we really need is some help in doing what we want and know we ought to do. And so it is that Luther’s understanding of the bondage of the will, if it is accepted at all, usually degenerates into the idea that for some reason we can’t do what we want to do. [[2]](#footnote-2) Or even perhaps that God, because he “predestines” things, might prevent us from doing what we want to do.

But, as we shall see, this is not at all what Luther means by bondage. For Luther the entire picture we have of ourselves as *religious beings*, potential spiritual athletes, is false. It’s not that we can’t do what we want to do. The problem is much deeper: We simply don’t want to do it at all. Indeed, it is impossible for us to do so! “Not that man *cannot* fulfill the commandment of God is meant by this proposition [on the bound will], but that he *will* not and *cannot so will*.”[[3]](#footnote-3) But how can this be so?

To see Luther’s point, we must look more closely into the argument itself. Erasmus had argued, it will be recalled, from the basic “logic” of morality. If people are not free, they are not responsible. If they are not responsible, then God is — for sin as well as for good, and people are simply animated puppets. Moreover, since God has given so many commandments and demands that humans make choices about, it is only “logical” to assume at least some freedom on a person’s part. All that seems “logical” enough, and one can point, ostensibly, to a number of scriptural passages to support it.

Luther’s basic argument, however, is that this position is not really logical if one takes belief in God or even the concept of God with any seriousness at all. For if it is true that God as scripture asserts is the sovereign, almighty, immutable creator of heaven and earth who rules and incessantly governs and disposes all things to his purposes and end, where does that leave a person? Where does that lead if one wants to argue “logic?” And one cannot arbitrarily stop somewhere along the line when the going gets rough; one must remain logical. It leads, of course, to the shattering, not to say horrible, thought that God decides, rules and holds sway over all things, and that everything that occurs happens necessarily, because God wills it to happen and humanity is left with nothing. It brings one to the awful thought of determinism. Theologically it brings one to the specter of double predestination. And if we are looking for avenues of escape, scripture itself is not very reassuring. A host of passages point in this direction. Nor does scripture here teach anything basically different from what any honest person, from philosopher to common peasant knows to be true: that if God is God, then God necessarily rules all things and everything happens in some way or another — even if we can’t understand how — because he so wills.[[4]](#footnote-4) There is, Luther is saying, a kind of “resistless logic”[[5]](#footnote-5) in the very idea of God which all of humanity is forced to recognize which simply wipes out the idea of free will through God’s veritable will for humanity. For God is the almighty creator, ruler and sustainer of all things and humans are God’s creatures. And certainly, Luther argues, it is important for us to know and acknowledge this. It most certainly is not, as Erasmus thought, one of those things which the common person should not be told. Indeed, what common person does not know it? Everyone has to come to grips with it because the “secret” is already out![[6]](#footnote-6)

It is, then, fundamentally necessary and wholesome for Christian to know that God foreknows nothing contingently, but that He foresees, purposes, and does all things according to His own immutable, eternal and infallible will. This bombshell knocks ‘free will’ flat, and utterly shatters it; so that those who want to assert it must either deny my bombshell, or pretend not to notice it, or find some other way of dodging it.[[7]](#footnote-7)

It could hardly be stated more bluntly. The logic of God shatters the logic of free will. Indeed, it should be added, lest the wrong impression be given, that for Luther this is not primarily a matter of logic — as though it were simply an abstract and theoretical question. Luther refers to it repeatedly throughout as a matter of *conscience* and the basic experience of life itself.[[8]](#footnote-8) Reason may indeed try to escape the logic, but the “arrow of conviction has remained, fastened deep in the hearts of learned and unlearned alike, whenever they have made a serious approach to the matter…”[[9]](#footnote-9) “No rhetoric can cheat an honest conscience. The arrow of conscience is proof against all the forces and figures of eloquence.”[[10]](#footnote-10) The “problem” of this “logic of God,” you might say, is stuck deep in one’s “heart” and “conscience” so that one will remain uneasy and disquieted no matter what kind of “solution” that “reason” can come up with. That is why, in asserting the scriptural evidence, it can never be a matter of counting passages for and against free will, adding them up and seeing which side comes off best. The “heart” and “the conscience” cannot be touched by ”figures and explanations.” Indeed, *one passage* against free will is enough to rout ten thousand for it and shatter the most elegant rational defense, because it is a matter of “heart” and conscience.[[11]](#footnote-11)

But does this mean that Luther has established his case for the “bound will” of fallen human beings? Is the argument now complete? By no means! For this argument merely establishes the fact that the human is a creature and not a creator, that its will is in some way overridden by God’s. All the argument does really, is to remove the fiction of a supposedly free will. It does not establish a *bound* will. It seems to me that this is where mistakes are most commonly and persistently made in attempting to follow Luther’s argument and where, I think, even Erasmus failed to grasp what was going on. It is supposed that, because Luther argues as he does about God and his foreknowledge, he draws *directly* from that the conclusion that the human will is *bound*. That, however, *is by no means the case*. If he were concerned to argue that way he would, at best, establish some kind of determinism, or establish that we are forced somehow by God’s willing to do something *against* our own will. It must be most emphatically asserted that Luther is absolutely *not concerned to argue that way*.[[12]](#footnote-12) The *bondage* of the will is *not* a conclusion drawn from the doctrine of God as such. It is rather, as we have already intimated and shall develop more fully later, a *confession* evoked by the work of Christ. Luther’s argument that follows is therefore much more subtle and profound than is usually realized. It is what happens *after* we are confronted with this logic of God that is all important.

For the basic question now is how we react to the idea of God once the plain, unvarnished truth strikes home to us. How do we cope with it both in our thought and in our lives? How does it *actually* strike us? How is it actually with “hearts, soul and mind” when we come up against the very idea of *God*? Quite obviously we do not like it. It seems a terrible, impossible thought which simply robs life, responsibility and history of all “meaning.” When we hear the argument, our whole being protests. We simply cannot accept it. It simply can’t be so that God is *that* kind of a being! We do not like it at all. And *that* of course, is Luther’s point! We *can’t* accept it! “The natural man cannot will God to be God.”

So, what is to be done about it? There is only one thing we can do. We must find a way to assert our own freedom. We must find a loophole in the argument somewhere. We must find a metaphysical distinction, a theological argument, a common-sense platitude — something, anything — to save us from this catastrophe. We must be able to believe in ourselves and our freedom. Those readers who know something about the history of philosophy — and theology! — will quickly rehearse and call to mind the countless ways that the “problem” of divine free will and foreknowledge has been “solved” in an attempt to salvage at least some responsibility and meaning for human life and history. And the less sophisticated will grasp for any sort argument to rescue human freedom. And so it is that, in direct contradiction to the “logic of God” which “remains fastened deep in the heart,” we must construct the fiction of our own freedom and find some way to neutralize the freedom of God. Confronted with the threat of God and complete lack of knowledge about what he actually has in mind, we must believe in our own freedom, in the efficacy of our own choices. This is something we *must* do because we can do nothing else.

Furthermore, it should be noted, it is a *faith*. It is not, over against the logic of God, a “logical” position at all, nor is it merely a logical error. It is a necessary *presumption* of fallen humanity.[[13]](#footnote-13) Since God is the threat he is, I cannot trust him, therefore I *must* believe in myself, even if that belief be reduced to the bare minimum of a little bit of freedom. The assertion of freedom is therefore revealed for what it is: a faith — indeed, a faith *in myself* to which I am driven in defiance of what little I know about God. Thus: “The natural man cannot will God to be God. Rather he wants himself to be God…”

*Now we have arrived at the point of the bondage of the will of fallen humanity.* This is something I am *bound* to do, something I *will* do, something I cannot escape doing, because in my fallen state I simply don’t *want* to do anything else. And [cut off on right margin] left to myself, I will it *immutably*. Whatever “God” may mean (and I may for reasons of “heart” and “conscience” not to say “sentiment” no doubt still be haunted by the idea and want to hang on to it), he shall have to conform to *my* immutable will. Thus, I am bound. I am bound to the belief in my own freedom in defiance of God. “Scripture sets before us a man who is not only bound, wretched, captive, sick and dead, but who through the operation of Satan his Lord, *adds to his other miseries that of blindness, so that he believe himself to be free, happy, possess of liberty and ability, whole and alive*.[[14]](#footnote-14) The *bondage* of the will, therefore, is not a logical *conclusion* from the idea of God and his absolute necessity, it is the inevitable, the inescapable (for fallen creatures) *recoil from* such an idea. This is the point that is almost universally missed and the hinge upon which the coherence of Luther’s argument depends. The reasoning of not only pagan philosophers and poets but also peasants cannot logically avoid absolute necessity. This “bombshell” “shatters” free will and “knocks it flat.” Nevertheless, this *cannot* be accepted. The will is bound to assert, to protest, to *believe* in its own freedom. Without the Spirit of God, it *must* do so. The bondage of the will is the recoil, the natural response to the very idea of God. Luther is not making an abstract logical deduction, he is *describing* human experience — what is actually the case.

The bondage of the will is not, therefore, the result of some kind of determinism by which I am forced to do something I really don’t want to do. I will exactly what I will to will. That is precisely the bondage. I cannot will anything else.

That is to say, a man without the Spirit of God does not do evil against his will, under pressure, as though he were taken by the scruff of the neck and dragged into it, like a thief or footpad being dragged off against his will to punishment; but he does it spontaneously and voluntarily, and this willingness or volition is something which he cannot in his own strength eliminate, restrain or alter. He goes on willing and desiring to evil; and if external pressure forces him to act otherwise, nevertheless he will within remain avers to do doing and chafes under such constraint and opposition.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The bound will of a fallen person, in other words, wills just what it wills. That is its bondage: immutably!

Thus, when Luther talks about the bondage of the will, he is not arguing about theoretical or abstract issues. He is trying to get at what is actually the case with human beings in their mind and heart, conscience and will over against the one God they can find. It is a question of what really *is* in the heart, soul and mind that the First and Great Commandment is concerned about, a question of what they actually do and can will and what they *actually* feel in their heart, think in their mind and say with their lips about God. The issue is not, in the first instance, at least, the more or less theoretical one of how human freedom or activity might possibly be made to rhyme with God’s sovereignty — how, conceivably one might make room for human freedom if God foreknows, and governs all thing. Indeed, given the state of bondage, attempts to “solve” that very problem are themselves the result of bondage. Because I am bound to believe in my freedom, I must find some way to rhyme this with the idea of God’s sovereignty. The very attempt to “solve” the problem is itself a part of my defense mechanism. I *must* do it *somehow* to protect myself from God. And so, the circle is closed and there is no way out.

The “bondage of the will” is, therefore, not intended as a matter of mere theory, not a conclusion drawn from certain first principles, but a description of what actually is the case. This means that for Luther there must be a fundamental reordering and redefinition of the nature of freedom as this is applied to the human will. His constant complaint in the debate was that no one took care to define the terms carefully in accord with the way things really are. The language was not adequate to the reality of the case and, thus, simply ends up as a lot of empty and misleading verbiage.[[16]](#footnote-16) *Free will* as such, as we have seen, i.e., as absolute freedom, belongs to God alone. It is a divine name. God is the Creator and Ruler of all and alone has the freedom to dispose over all things as he sees fit. To attribute this to human beings is not only ridiculous but blasphemous. All the same, it is obvious that in our own actions we human beings are not *forced* to do as we do and that we do what we do and will what we will because *we* want to. Regardless of what we may say about God’s freedom and will, there is, therefore, an inner freedom from compulsion or constraint from the human point of view!

So, Luther makes his famous distinction between what is above and what is below.[[17]](#footnote-17) If, Luther says, we do not want to drop the term free will as applied to humans altogether (which he feels would be safest and most Christian!), it must be carefully defined to accord with the actual facts of life and experience. And that means that a person can be said to possess free will over those things that are “below him” but not over those things that are “above him.” That means that there is a whole range of things over which people can dispose as best they can by simply willing to do it and setting about to accomplish it. They can will to do this or that with their possessions, with their life and work, and so on. Luther is simply recording a fact which everyone knows. One is free to will a lot of things and to try one’s best to realize that will. The fact that God, in the secret of his majesty goes along with that will somehow or perhaps in certain unforeseen ways or unknown ways guides or even frustrates it does not really matter on this level. It is not what God *might* do, but what he *does* do that matters. As a creature one is given this “freedom.” One can and will, and one does and is not compelled or forced by God. God gives a person this “freedom,” this “kingdom,” for its own. And all people are directly conscious of it. The fact that God “nevertheless” in ways known only to him “overrules” this freedom with his own “free will” to his own appointed ends does not remove this evident “freedom” of the creature. That is simply a fact.

However, we are not free in those things that are “above” us. What this means is revealed by the analysis of the bondage of the will we have just put forth. As we have seen when left to ourselves— that is, in our “fallen” state, we cannot simply let God be God. We cannot like the very idea of God. God has given us life and creaturely freedom, but the very idea that there is someone who “overrules” this freedom is threatening and repugnant. We must find some “self-defense.” We must believe in our own freedom and our own right to preside over our own fate. Thus, we are bound to ourselves. We are not free in those things that are *above* us. There is no way for us to break out of the closed circle. We cannot *trust* a God who really is *God*. We *must* find some way to cut God down to size so that we can have things as we want them. The futility of all such attempts itself demonstrates the deeper dimensions of this unfreedom relative to that which is “above.” For the arguments which aim to cut God down to size in order to accommodate human freedom lack convincing and staying power. “The arrow of conviction” remains stuck in the “heart” and the “conscience” that God is God, nevertheless, in spite of all rhetoric. The arguments always come undone and constantly have to be redone. When it is a matter of “conscience” and “heart” the simplest biblical passage (for instance: “Jacob I loved; Esau I hated” — before they were born!) is enough to reduce a beautiful argument to shambles, to say nothing of the manner in which events of life itself — especially the tragic ones destroy all our neat theodicies and raise the naked question for us all over again. People may indeed construct their defenses against God but, in the end, it is futile. They cannot cheat on “honest conscience.” For we are not free in those things that are “above” us. We cannot domesticate God and draw “the arrow” from the “heart.”

**The Divine Surprise**

As stated at the outset, the overwhelming and complete negation of Erasmus’ argument that we have tried to spell out arises from Luther’s positive point of view. This is, at bottom, a *confession* made from the point of view of faith, of being captivated by Christ. And this state of being captivated, bound, even “raptured” by Christ — this state of being made a lover with one’s whole heart and will — this is what human beings are *for*; this defines one’s very being, one’s “substance.” Human beings, as we said, were made to be a love, made to be captivated and, therefore, they must love something — if not God, then themselves. We are now in a position to develop this more fully in contrast to a position like Erasmus’ and, I hope, to begin to catch a glimpse of the “the divine surprise,” that informs the kind of thing Luther says.

What Luther cannot abide in an argument such as Erasmus’ for a supposed “little bit” of freedom is that, under the guise of reasonableness and “humanism,” it introduces a kind of half-heartedness that is in turn to be presided over by a dreary ecclesiastical authoritarianism. Thus, it paints an entirely false — indeed despairing — picture of humanity in its relationship to God.

In order to save the idea of human responsibility and at the same time absolve God from the charge of being responsible for sin and evil, one must hold out for at least a little bit of freedom. But this makes it seem as though God, if he is to have any effect on an individual at all, must somehow go to work through or respect this little bit of freedom. “Grace” appears as a certain mysterious something which is supposed somehow to augment the pitiful remnant of free will left in a person. The acts of God must then be presented to people as an “option,” a “choice” which appears “logical” to what little sense of “moral responsibility” left in a person. But for the most part this is a rather dreary and hopeless battle because we remains basically committed in other directions — dragged and weighed down by the “lusts of the flesh” as it is put — and thus we must remain in tutelage to church authority and discipline.

And the worst of it is that this position by its very nature seems designed willy-nilly to protect humanity from any greater invasions of divine action and power. One cannot, from this point of view, “understand” such things as divine foreknowledge, election, and predestination. One cannot “understand” salvation by “grace alone.” Such things are virtually a complete riddle, and one can only take refuge behind a kind of agnosticism or perhaps even skepticism and the idea that the scriptures are “unclear” — or at best leave the matter for scholars to argue about behind closed doors.

So, from a position like Erasmus’ the situation appears to be fundamentally hopeless. There appears to be no way to reconcile “the ways of God to men.” Starting from the premise of a little bit of freedom as an irreducible minimum there is no way to cope with “logic” of the idea of God. There is no way to cope with his absolute sovereignty, no way to cope with his initiative in grace, his election, his choice, his predestination. It seems impossible that this “riddle” should ever be “solved.” We are left where we began with our little bit of freedom to defend ourselves as best we can in our despair against the threat of God. And so it has been and continues to be, for the most part, with us. We have thought it impossible that such problems could ever be “solved.” But that means, in effect that we have thought it impossible that God could ever really get through to us in such a way as to lay to rest all our fears and objections and claim our affections. Thus, we remain barricaded behind our defenses. Luther himself well knew this situation. Erasmus chided him for thinking that he, Luther, could be so presumptuous as to “solve” this problem in any better fashion when the bulk of the entire tradition stood against him. In a telling passage Luther replies:

I grant, my good Erasmus, that you may well be influenced by these considerations [i.e., that so many church Fathers argues as Erasmus did for free will]. For more than ten years they so influenced me that I should not think any other mortal was ever so deeply moved by them, *I, too, thought it incredible that the Troy of ours, so often assaulted and so long unconquered, could ever be taken*. And I call God witness against my soul, that I would have continued so, and would be under their influence today, *had not constraint of conscience and evidence of facts forced me on to a different road*. Doubtless you can appreciate that my heart is not made of stone; and that, had it been stone, it could not but have been softened by the buffeting received in my struggle with the waves and storms, as I dared to do that which, one done, must, as I saw, bring down the whole weight of authority of those whom you have listed like a deluge upon my head.[[18]](#footnote-18)

This remarkable passage indicates that Luther was fully aware of the problem, indeed, that it seemed *incredible* that this “Troy” could ever be taken. Yet he was audacious enough to believe that it *could be done*, indeed had been done, in spite of that weight of almost all the tradition. This seems, of course, a preposterous if not to say almost megalomaniacal claim which has ever since brought down upon Luther’s head the charge of extreme egoism. How could this “Troy” be taken? And how, above all, could Luther be so sure of himself here where so many before him had failed? The answer to these questions takes us deeply into the heart of “the divine surprise.”

The astounding thing is that, in itself, the answer is really quite simple. As Luther repeatedly insisted to Erasmus, it is no deep dark secret hidden away somewhere in the maze of theological dialectics. It is *revealed* for all to see who have eyes to see, and all to hear who have ears to hear. If one were to put it simply and directly in biblical terms, one would have to say that “God *was* in Christ reconciling the world unto himself.” That, in essence, *is* the divine surprise. No doubt, at first blush, it seems simply a pious dodge to throw out a biblical passage like that. Indeed, we shall be engaged in the rest of the book trying to get at what is really so surprising about it. For the remainder of this chapter we shall be engaged trying to get our first glimpses of this surprise.

The surprising thing is that God’s action in Christ, when taken at face value, leads one to speak in an entirely different fashion about God and human beings from the way Erasmus speaks. This is what informs Luther’s positive starting point, his confession about humanity’s position vis á vis God. What is involved, one might say, is somehow an entirely different language, one in which everything appears in a radically different light and leads one along different paths. “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself”: that means that God was in Christ making people lovers with their whole heart once again, *doing* to us what the first and great commandment declares is what we are supposed to be. God in Christ recreating lovers, *reclaiming* his own. That is, God is in Christ enabling us actually to take that very idea of God against which we are bound to rebel if left to ourselves. More than that, he is in Christ enabling us, setting us free, to love him, to realize what we are made for. We were *made* to be lovers and we have no choice in that as creatures. We are as “beasts made to be ridden” who are in fact driven by the wrong rider. God in Christ, in an actual historical person, a suffering and dying person, enters into contention, into battle to unseat that wrong rider and reclaim us for himself *completely*. He comes to *reconcile* us to *himself*, that is, he comes not to destroy us, not to force or eradicate our “will,” and most certainly not to appeal to or sanctify our half-heartedness but to make us — and our wills — whole. He plants himself in Christ squarely in our paths, he *becomes* human, enters into the very stuff and fabric of our humanity, our very wills to release them from bondage to strange riders so they can be what they were meant to be: lovers of God and other human creatures. That is to say, God has prepared a way, in Christ to “take us by surprise” in such a fashion that all our usual defenses are broken down and our hearts and wills are completely captivated by him and begin to think, speak and act quite differently, so much so indeed, that the kind of argument one finds in someone like Erasmus appears completely irrelevant and nonsensical, not to say abhorrent.

But how can one convey this surprise? It sounds, no doubt, simply platitudinous to say the sort of thing we have just said, which is to say that the words do not really “strike home” to us; they do not come through to us with unmistakable “clarity.” But the question is, *why* is this the case? If we attend carefully to the argument against Erasmus we can, I think, get some clues. The reason lies, Luther says, not on the level of “external” clarity. The words are in themselves clear and straightforward enough. The reason lies rather on the level of “internal” clarity, in the fact that, because of our own confusion, our own prior commitments, our own very real inability to love God and the neighbor, we do not grasp them from the “inside.” We are not, so to speak, “in tune” with them. That is, because of our own commitment, our *faith* in our own freedom and responsibility, we resist and do not grasp what is being said so clearly and unmistakenly. We don’t grasp the “logic” — if we may use that word — from “within.” As St. Augustine (who also struggled in his own way with the same problem!) once put it: “…Behold thou were within, and I without, and there I, deformed, searched for Thee… stumbling among those fair forms which thou hadst made. Thou were with me, but I was not with thee.”[[19]](#footnote-19) We come up against a certain impasse which is extremely difficult to get around — indeed, for someone like Luther, it is impossible without the Holy Spirit.

How can we get “inside” the language that is being spoken? In the strict sense, as I shall argue later, this is not really very possible in a mere theological treatise such as this book. One does not get “inside” unless one is *actually* surprised. And that, I shall contend, is the task of preaching and the sacraments, the concrete Christian witness. Nevertheless, it is the task of a theological treatise such as this to clarify as best it can just what the situation is so that one can see how the impasse is to be gotten around in the task of preaching and the witness itself.

The best way to do this, I think, is to use certain analogies that will, hopefully, give us some glimpses of the way in which the language of being surprised looks from “the inside.” This is, I think one can say, what Jesus himself did in many of his parables. To my mind, the best and most appropriate analogy and one on which I shall rely throughout is the analogy of love, and the strange sorts of things we say when we experience a love that simply “possesses” us. And, it could be added, lest anyone think such an analogy inappropriate, one can simply be referred to the scriptures where it is certainly a dominant — if not *the* dominant — analogy. One need recall only the Old Testament motifs of Israel as God’s chosen, God’s beloved, and the New Testament language about the Heavenly Bridegroom and his chosen bride.

The language of love seems to be a very different sort of language from that which we use in other areas. There are a number of expressions which are quite common to us all in our “everyday” speech — so much so we would, I suppose, call them clichés — which indicate how different this language is, and which in this sphere we seem to take almost for granted, or at least accept without difficulty. To see this, picture the following situation:

A man and a woman find each other one day quite by accident and fall in love desperately and completely in love. They hadn’t planned it that way. As a matter of fact, they both had their hearts set on remaining single for a while at least. They enjoyed their “freedom” and had thought about playing the field for a while at least. But it happened. They just bumped into each other, and that was that. And they both had no doubts about it. They were hopelessly hooked on each other. And they began to speak that strange language to each other which humans sometimes speak when “perfect love casts out fear,” a language which sounds quite silly perhaps, and dangerously irrational to anyone who doesn’t know it from “the inside.” They began to say things like “You were made for me!,” “You are everything to me!,” or, “Before I met you, I didn’t know what life was all about; everything seems fresh and new. If I ever lost you, I would be nothing. I wouldn’t know what to do with myself.” And so on and so on. They both agreed that it must be “fate,” that their coming together must have been “planned in heaven” or “written in the stars,” and the like. Thus, they encouraged one another and grew together into one. Everything was “perfect.”

Admittedly such a picture is somewhat idealized, and the language, in a world grown cynical of deep and lasting human relationships, may strike us in our more rational moments as exaggerated.[[20]](#footnote-20) Yet it is a picture, I think, with which we can identify. If we are somewhat ashamed to *talk* that way openly, at least we *sing* that way in our love songs,[[21]](#footnote-21) and write thus is our poems and novels! And, can we not ask, in spite of our cynical reservations, does it not give us a glimpse at least, of what the ideal might be?[[22]](#footnote-22) At any rate, if our songs and our literature are any indication, we seem to persist in hoping that such can happen to us. Sometimes it does!

The interesting thing to note, for our purposes, is the kind of language that is being used. It is not the language of what we would call “rational” deliberation and choice, the language of “free will” and “responsibility” in the usual sense. Love is spoken of as something we “fall into” when we are somehow completely surprised by being actually confronted with the other. We speak even of being “consumed” by love. Marriage is referred to as “getting hooked.” We are bound up in the other and their “irresistible graces. And yet in a much deeper fashion we are not bound, but set free, free to realize what we are really for. We discover what “life” is all about. Life seems new and fresh and full. We are not even afraid in such instances to talk about “fate!” Since the beloved appears so absolutely as one who is “made for me,” one of whom there can be no fear, we are not afraid of saying that this love was “written in the stars,” or “prepared in heaven.” One is not afraid when “fate is [cut off on side of page]. We can even say that without such love we are “nothing,” and if we lose it we seem, momentarily at least, to lose the very core of our being, our “reason” for living.

By contrast, such language can seem utterly incomprehensible and often “irresponsible” to someone on “the outside.” Parents and friends may worry that the lovers have taken leave of their senses. They worry that they are going to lose touch with “reality” and do something foolish to wreck their lives, ruin a promising career, waste a good education and so on. And indeed, they might actually do so. But for the purposes of our analogy that is not important. The point is that the lovers do not care about that. They do not care about what the “outsiders” consider to be “rational” or “sensible.” They don’t worry about “freedom” and “choice.” They are simply beyond all that. They now speak of such things in an entirely different fashion. Everything simply has to be rearranged to fit the fact that they found each other and are in love. The reasons for living, the plans, and all must be made to fit another “logic,” no matter how strange and irrational this seems to the outsider. They simply run roughshod over everything that stands in the way of their love, emotionally, intellectually, physically, or whatever.

For our purposes, I think the most obvious contrast to such lovers, this most obvious “outsider” would be the adamant single “playboy” bachelor so celebrated in our time.[[23]](#footnote-23) The free-wheeling playboy bachelor calls himself “free” because he is committed to and reserves to himself the power of “choice.” He “plays the field” to gratify his desires, and, no doubt he tells himself, the desires of those lucky “playmates” upon whom he bestows his favors. He thinks of himself as a “great lover” and is “responsible” to this image of himself. He preens and grooms himself to *become* a lover, as he understands that word. He avoids prolonged and messy affairs. He backs out when things get “serious.” He is “responsible” to *his* image of himself. He doesn’t want to lose his “freedom.”

Now try to imagine, if you will, a conversation or a debate, about freedom and responsibility between the lover in the first scenario and the playboy in the second as akin to that between Luther and Erasmus. It is, no doubt, somewhat unfair to Erasmus to compare him with the playboy, but it does help us to see the point Luther was trying to make. Perhaps it is only fair that we try to turn the tables a bit! From the point of view of the lover, the arguments of the playboy are nonsensical and ridiculous. The argument might go something like this: The playboy asks, “How can you hold people to their responsibility to become lovers with all that talk about your love being ‘*made in heaven*?’ How can people be held responsible for success or failure if they aren’t in some sense free?”

To the lover, such questions surely are ludicrous. He explodes in reply, “What in the world are you talking about? You can’t be serious! Responsibility? The fact is there is *nothing* within my power I wouldn’t do for the one I love! You don’t seem to know what the word means. I wasn’t at all before. I wasn’t “able to respond” to anyone but myself. Now I hope I am. My whole being responds! Freedom? You call what you have freedom? That endless preening and primping to live up to your ideal of a lover? That’s slavery, bondage to the rack of your own self-esteem, which only gets worse the older and more faded and jaded you become. Your so-called responsibility is only a cover-up for your own self-image. When I fell in love, I finally realized what a nothing I had been. I finally saw that I hadn’t been free at all, nor did I know what love was. But *now* I am free, and I am, I hope, becoming a real lover. I am beginning to understand now.”

But the playboy protests, “All that nonsense about “fate” and “written in the stars”,![[24]](#footnote-24) Isn’t that dangerous? It sounds as though you have resigned all control of your life! Do you really believe some God or fate or something that directs your life and love? If what you say is to be taken literally how can the events of life and history have any meaning at all? Are you really serious? Isn’t it the exaggeration of someone “blinded” by love? Don’t we have to interpret it somehow in a figurative sense as the hyperbole of someone momentarily ‘out of his mind?’”

The lover replies: “Don’t try to fool me with all your metaphysical claptrap! Of course I am serious! I talk that way because I have never been more certain of anything in my life! I have met the one who is for me. So I am not afraid anymore of what life and time and ’history’ has to offer. The trouble with you is that you just haven’t met anyone like that. You call yourself a great lover, but I think you are really afraid of love. You back out when anyone ‘goes serious’ on you. You’re afraid of losing what you call your ‘freedom.’ And you try to cover that up by hiding behind a metaphysical smoke screen — all that talk about ’history’ not having any ‘meaning’ if you’re not free in your own terms. Do you actually believe there is any *meaning* to those so-called ‘acts of freedom’ of yours, that endless procession of conquests without any real love or commitment? Don’t you see that life and ‘history’ only *gets* meaning when you meet someone who puts an end to all that, when you meet someone who actually *makes* a lover out of you! I’m not ‘blinded’ by love! My eyes have been opened! Now I see! Someday maybe it will happen to you. I hope so. But I fear you may be becoming too hardened to recognize it when you see it.”

We needn’t prolong the imaginary argument. The point should be clear. The playboy looks on from the “outside,” the lover speaks from the “inside.” They both use many of the same words — “freedom,” “love,” “responsibility,” etc., but they function quite differently. The difference between them is that the lover has actually met someone in “history,” if can use that word, who changes and “upsets” everything. He has met someone who actually said, “I love you,” in such a way that he heard and believed. He is led to reinterpret everything and to speak from an entirely different standpoint. He is not even afraid of such things as “fate” or the belief that his meeting with the one he loves was “planned in heaven.” Such affirmations only lend certainty to what has happened and give “history” its meaning for him. It opens him up to the real meaning of life. He simply runs roughshod, so to speak, over what appears “reasonable” and “sensible” to the playboy. This can only be threatening to the playboy, the “outsider,” because it spells the end of everything he stands for and is. The lover, however, doesn’t care about that because he has met *the* one; he has been taken by the surprise of love. And he knows that this is the only things that can “save” the playboy. When it happens, the playboy — to use a theological metaphor — dies to what he was and becomes something *new*: a whole-hearted lover.

It doesn’t take much imagination to apply this analogy, in spite of limitations, to what the biblical message is about. The New Testament, especially in Jesus’ parables, abound in analogies of a similar sort. One need recall only all the “lost” and “found” imagery, the “secret” which is “revealed,” to say nothing of the bridegroom and bride. “The kingdom of heaven,” we are told, for instance, is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” Like our lover, the man doesn’t *plan* to find the treasure, there is no way he can *will* to do it. It would be silly to think so. No doubt he is bound to another vision, the vision of “making it” by being “responsible” and faithfully plowing the field — exercising his will and “freedom.” But he stumbles on the treasure. He is utterly surprised. Everything is changed. His will is completely claimed by what he has found. In his joy he goes and sells *all* to get the field. What would his friends and especially his family — if he has one — think? Has he suddenly lost his mind and all sense of “responsibility”? No; he has simply been taken by the surprise of what he has found. He is responsible to that. Everything is different. His “will” is set free to sell *all*.

This is what is at stake in the argument between Luther and Erasmus. Erasmus finds it impossible to mesh such ideas as necessity and predestination with freedom and responsibility. He constantly argues that morality and responsibility will simply be lost if all things happen by “necessity.” Therefore, the prudent course is to exhort people to do their best and not trouble them with “abstract” questions about how much or how little power the will has. This, for Erasmus, is a “problem” that cannot be solved. It is the “Troy” that cannot be taken.

Luther sees it all differently. The “Troy” *has* been taken by the concrete historical act of God in Christ. That God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself means that there *is* a breakthrough in which God comes to reclaim our wills entirely for himself. He comes to do what is impossible for us. That is the surprise, the unheard-of surprise. Someone actually comes to make lovers of us once again! He comes, that is to say, to reconcile us to the very idea of God and all that that entails. He acts in such a way that we need not fear the “necessity” that so threatens one like Erasmus. He sets us *free* for God! As in our analogy, what is threatening for the playboy is comforting for the lover. For Luther, the fact that what happens concretely in history according to *God’s* immutable necessity is the guarantee that the saving events are real and true and not just the result of human whim and fancy. This is what he meant by insisting that all the secrets are now *revealed*, and that scripture is in fact *absolutely* clear and unambiguous in this respect. The historical event *is* the revelation of God’s immutable will. What was hidden is now revealed. Now *of* *course*, such assertions raise a whole nest of problem. But, as with the lovers this simply means that *everything* is rearranged to fit the one single fact that one *has* *been* *found* by love. Or to put it in terms of the parable, you *really* *do* begin at least to sell *everything* once you get a glimpse of the treasure! The lover in our analogy cannot allow his metaphysics to deny him his historical treasure.

Thus, in Luther’s terms, it is of *highest importance* to know what the human will is capable or incapable of. For Luther this question is related directly to the concrete historical event of Christ as the one who reconciles us to God. For to say that the human will is in any way capable of “applying itself to the things of salvation” is to do two disastrous things. It is on the one hand to detract from the concrete historical event. It is, to use the Pauline phrase, “to make Christ of no effect,” or at best to make him the savior of only that part that supposedly resists what the “free will” wants to accomplish — which leads to the old flesh-spirit dichotomy. The “spirit,” the “free” and “rational” will, supposedly wants to get “salvation” while the “flesh” is the culprit. Christ would then be the savior of only the lower part, the “flesh.”

And on the other hand, to assert the power of free will here is actually to insulate oneself from that which alone can save the will and make it whole, that which can *save*. For such “free will” is *in fact* the culprit that *prevents* us from taking the Christ event just as it stands in its historical concreteness and actuality, defends us from the surprise. It is the attempt to maintain this “free will” that turns Christ into a metaphysical abstraction to be manipulated by us and, thus, to make him less than a real savior and “of no effect.”

This can be made clearer perhaps in terms of our analogy. The assertion of free will is like the playboy insisting on his own freedom in the face of the threat of someone who gets “serious.” He insists that he is capable of being a “lover” on his own terms without exposing himself to the other as a concrete historical being. Thus, the “objects” of his love remain abstractions which only serve his own preconceived ideas of “love.” He hides behind his freedom and cannot or will not open himself to a concrete other. The other is thus rendered “of no effect.”

Therefore, the question of what the will is and what it is capable of in and of itself is of highest importance, an indispensable part of any complete summary of Christianity.

For if I am ignorant of the nature, extent and limits of what I can and must do with reference to God, I shall be equally ignorant and uncertain of the nature, extent and limits of what God can and will do in me —though God, in fact, works all in all. Now, if I am ignorant of God’s works and power, I am ignorant of God himself; and if I do not know God, I cannot worship, praise, give thanks or serve him, for I do not know how much I should attribute to myself and how much to him.[[25]](#footnote-25)

What is at stake is “God’s works and power,” i.e., God’s concrete historical act of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. When one is claimed by that action one is as a lover “fallen in love.” One then sees and confesses under what absolute bondage one had been enslaved and one’s mouth is opened to praise and limbs unfettered to serve. The dumb speak; the deaf hear; the blind see; the lame walk! The assertion of the bondage of the will is a confession arising from what Christ is and has done. “…Every statement concerning Christ is a direct testimony against ‘free will.’”[[26]](#footnote-26) Since Christ actually heals the will, “Christ crucified bring all these things with him….”[[27]](#footnote-27)

Thus, at the end of his work Luther can make the *confession* which is so astounding to the “outsider”:

I frankly confess that, for myself, even if it could be, I should not want “free-will” to be given to me, nor anything to be left in my hands to enable me to endeavor after salvation; not merely because in face of so many dangers and adversities and assaults of devils, I could not stand my ground and hold fast my “free-will” (for the devil is stronger than all men, and on these terms no man could be saved); but because, even were there no dangers, adversities, or devils, I should still be forced to labour with nor guarantee of success, and to beat my fists in the air. If I lived and worked to all eternity my conscience would never reach comfortable certainty as to how much it must do to satisfy God. …But now that God has taken my salvation out of the control of my will, and put it under the control of His and promised to save me, not according to my working or running, but according to His own grace and mercy, I have the comfortable certainty that He is faithful and will not lie to me, and that He is also great and powerful, so that no devils or opposition can break Him or pluck me from him.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Thus, we can see the point to the words of the Catechism’s explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed mentioned earlier: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him…” It is a *confession* arising from what the Holy Spirit does through Jesus. Such a confession astounds and even offends in a manner analogous to the way the words of the lover offend the playboy. It *sounds* like the resignation of all responsibility and freedom, the surrender of all effort, an excuse for inactivity. It should be read, however, like the words of a lover. With those words we are merely saying that above all we do not want the supposed freedom of will like that of the playboy. We do not want to fall back into that hopeless and loveless state of having to make ourselves into a “lover” by the endless primping and preening and consulting of all the latest manuals which set forth the newest ideals to be striven for. That is the road of bondage to self and despair. How can one ever make it? We confess that in the miracle of a moment of actual time we have met the one who has *made* us a lover and [unclear] his will completely. Thus, our beloved has set us free to become [cut off at top of page]. We are responsible to that and such response means unceasing, joyful activity. We have met someone with — to use another phrase which terribly offends the superficial — “irresistible grace!” We are not rendered “inactive” or “ineffective” by that. How can the “irresistible grace” of the beloved render the lover inactive or in any way violate or hurt us? All such talk is sheer nonsense. It merely betrays how little one understands and/or how much one casts one’s lot with the playboy. St. Augustine himself who used such terms was well aware of this. In defending his view he once said:

Give me a man in love; he knows what I mean. Give me one who yearns; give me one who is hungry; give me one far away in the desert, who is thirsty and sighs for the spring of the eternal country. Give me that sort of man: he knows what I mean. But if I speak to a cold man, he just does not know what I am talking about….[[29]](#footnote-29)

It is not strange that Luther found Erasmus’ theology “chillier than very ice.”

Furthermore, since the will can be released from its bondage only by an actual confrontation with the other, the beloved, in a moment of time, it is of highest importance, Luther insists, to know that what happened happens because God intends it so to happen. That means the, for Luther, things must be seen to happen in accordance with what he calls God’s “immutable necessity.” Of *course*, such an assertion raises all sorts of problems. Luther was, if anything, more aware of this than anyone. We shall have to take up some of these problems in more detail later. For the moment, the important thing to see is that Luther contends first, foremost, and above all for the reality and seriousness of the historical event. *Everything else* will have to be settled secondarily as best it can. The proponent of freedom worries that God’s immutable necessity is going to violate human responsibility and integrity and render what they call “history” meaningless. For Luther it is just the opposite. The fact that events — especially saving events — happen according to *God’s* immutable necessity is precisely what gives them their unshakeable significance and meaning. “History” has its “meaning” because *God* acts in it to save according to *his* will. God is unchangeably true to his purpose, come what may. If it were not so, history would simply be the dismal record of our whims and fancies, our paltry deeds and misdeeds. It would be, in terms of our analogy, simply the meaningless record of the playboy’s adventures (the kind of thing we, in fact, seem to dote upon these days!). If we are “free” in that sense, then history is really meaningless. Nothing *important*, nothing *meaningful* ever can reach us from without. We isolate ourselves *from* history and indeed, life itself, by our supposed freedom.

For Luther the assertion that things happen according to God’s immutable necessity, whatever other difficulty that entails, means that the saving acts of God are real and trustworthy. They are the kind of events that both break down and break through the defenses of so-called freedom. In terms of our analogy, it is the concrete advent of the one with irresistible grace who simply cancels out the “freedom” of the playboy and makes him confess that such a meeting was “ordained in heaven.” The playboy meets someone in “history” who breaks into his meaningless world. Luther’s point is that if such saving events do not happen by God’s immutable necessity, then we are simply left to ourselves, bound in the prison of our supposed freedom with no assurance of anything. As he puts it:

For where [this] is not known, there can be no faith, nor any worship of God. To lack this knowledge is really to be ignorant of God — and salvation is notoriously incompatible with such ignorance. For if you hesitate to believe, or are too proud to acknowledge, that God foreknows and wills all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutable, how can you believe, trust and rely on his promises? When He makes promises, you ought to be out of doubt that He knows, and can and will perform, what He promises; otherwise, you will be accounting Him neither true nor faithful, which is unbelief, and the height of irreverence, and a denial of the most high God! And how can you be thus sure and certain, unless you know that certainly, infallibly, immutable and necessarily, He knows, wills and will perform what He promises?[[30]](#footnote-30)

Luther’s point is that unless the actual historical meeting can be trusted as the act of the immutable God, the breakthrough in which what was hidden is revealed, the promise which he *will* carry through, there can be no faith, but only another “option” to which *we* have to provide the necessary impetus by strength of “will power.” Jesus becomes the “ideal,” whom we have to accept or emulate if we so “choose.” The actual historical cross is of “no effect,” and the proclamation of the cross and the administering of the sacraments are reduced to little more than religious charades. Then the act of baptism, for instance, is not a significant historical act of God in which he says, “You are mine and I promise to stand by you immutable,” but instead may be only the whim of one’s parents because it was “the thing to do.” But if it is seen as an act of God — *regardless* of what other human motivations may be present — then it is an act upon which one *can* rely and so, one which *creates* and sustains *faith*. Thus, Luther could fend off the temptations of the devil by claiming “I am baptized!”[[31]](#footnote-31)

Then the significance of this historical witness collapses:

[If] then we are taught and believe that we ought to be ignorant of the necessary foreknowledge of God and the necessity of events, Christian faith is utterly destroyed, and the promises of God and the whole gospel fall to the ground completely; for the Christian’s chief and only comfort in every adversity lies in knowing that God does not lie, but brings all things to pass immutable, and that His will cannot be resisted, altered or impeded.[[32]](#footnote-32)

It could hardly be put more pointedly. Indeed, it is put so pointedly that one might wonder whether at this point Luther in the heat of the argument has not gone too far. Is it not a kind of theological “overkill?” Is this really the “Christian’s *chief* and *only* comfort? Does not Luther here really go *beyond the historical* event to base faith somehow directly on God and his transcendent immutability? Does not Luther in this type of argument really go beyond theology to indulge in some rather questionable metaphysics? This is a question which I shall try to deal with more fully later.[[33]](#footnote-33) For the moment I shall only say that I do not think this to be the case. Luther is simply saying that the *historical* event is trustworthy, because it is the revelation of God’s immutable steadfast love and promise (which is not different from immutable necessity). That is to say that the question of what God might or might not have in mind “for you” is answered by what he does do and promise in the concrete historical address and event. He stands immutable behind the historical event. The fact that he does is the Christian’s “chief and only comfort.” If he does not, we are left to ourselves and our “freedom” to make the most we can of it. And that is the point: *We* have to make what *we* can of it and *that* would involve us in metaphysics. As I shall try to show[[34]](#footnote-34) it is the assertion of free will that involves us in metaphysics, *not* Luther’s position.

As we have said, it is obvious that Luther’s uncompromising position here does raise problems. It raises directly the question of a God who rules and disposes over all things, and indeed, persons, according to *his* will. It raises directly the awful prospect of a God who elects some and rejects others; a God who, in Erasmus’ words, seemingly “created hell seething with eternal torments in order to punish his own misdeeds in his victims as though he took delight in human torments?[[35]](#footnote-35) Who, as Erasmus asks, could ever “…bring himself to love such a God with all his heart…?” [[36]](#footnote-36) — Luther was concerned about the very thing we have been saying all along! If, however, the argument we have been following to this point is at all clear, the answer should be immediately evident: *Nobody*! *Nobody* can *bring oneself* to love such a God with “all one’s heart.” Indeed, that is just Luther’s point: the folly that anyone could ever, anywhere bring *oneself* to love God with one’s whole heart.

But the point is pursued even farther than that: if one cannot “bring oneself” to love *such* a God, *still less* can one “bring oneself” to love God with one’s whole heart by positing free will and then going on to try one’s hand at “figurative interpretations” which *explain away* embarrassing passages. Nor, which amounts to the same thing, will a person “bring oneself” to love God with all one’s heart by attempting a reconstruction, a remodeling of God in metaphysical sense which supposedly makes God more amenable to human pet ideas. That, as we have tried to make clear, is a sham solution, a counsel of despair which only binds is to our moralistic projects and actually solidifies our resentment of God and out of frying pan into the fire. Our commitment will at best be only half-hearted and we will in the end try our utmost to get rid of even such a God, and thus be permanently torn between “flesh” and “spirit.” The history of modern theology bears eloquent witness to that fact. Thus, it was that Luther ridiculed Erasmus’ counsel to do one’s best and in the meanwhile not to despair of the “pardon of a God who is by nature most merciful.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Luther knew that such rhetoric, pleasing as it may sound, only obscures the real problem: the folly of “metaphysical solutions.”

Luther was supremely aware of all the difficulties a God of immutable necessity causes for humans and their “conscience.” And, it must be said, he was as concerned as the next to insist that such immutability and necessity in God does not mean “fate” or that we are somehow forced to do things “like a thief or footpad being dragged off against his will to punishment”.[[38]](#footnote-38) We do, after all in the debate, have to do with *God* and not an impersonal principle above or beyond him.[[39]](#footnote-39) But Luther’s conviction was that if we are ever to be cured of our antipathy to God this could only come through grasping— or better, being grasped by — what God actually wills in what he does concretely *for us* in history, in our very lives. The “problem” of God, that is, can only be “solved,” by what he actually does for us and to us in Jesus. “God was *in Christ* reconciling the world unto himself.” That is, if we are afraid of a God of “immutable necessity,” as we indubitably are, then we cannot assuage such fear by metaphysical speculation, by simply asserting that God “isn’t *really* like that.” Such an “opinion” does not *save*. We can be “saved” only be believing what the immutable God *actually* wills for us in history, what he *reveals* to us. If we are afraid that God is going to “force” us or in some way do us injustice or “violate our integrity,” such fears cannot be dissolved by a mere assertion of “free will,” but only by seeing the manner in which he *actually* does deal with us in the suffering, crucified Jesus. The answers to the “problem” of God are not given by metaphysical theories, but must be read off the historical event of the suffering savior. They can be grasped only by faith in the promise given in that event. The bound will can be set free only by being captured by a concrete, historical lover, not by another set of abstractions. The *metaphysics*, the *rhetoric* cannot draw “the arrow” from the “conscience.” Only Christ can do that. Only he can make us, once again, the lovers we were meant to be. We simply cannot do it by ourselves.

This brings us to the heart of the matter. Luther’s argument is that the human problem in the question of free will is *not* merely a logical one. The solution is not by “logic,” which only leads to trouble. The only thing that *saves*: “I love you.” Erasmus, we recall, insisted in essence that one must assert some power of free will in order to maintain the logic of morality and responsibility. Luther argues in reply that this is not merely a matter of logic and that Erasmus’ mistake is not merely one of logic. It is a question of the fundamental disaffection of the will, a matter of the heart and of love.[[40]](#footnote-40) As in the case of the playboy, the assertion of “freedom” is the mark of one’s disaffection and the insulation against being claimed whole-heartedly by love, the defense mechanism against the actual surprise of a concrete love.

Since, moreover, the problem is not a “logical” one, no amount of argument of the sort proposed by Erasmus will “solve” it. People cannot, finally, be “argued” into the kingdom. This, I take it, is what Luther meant when he insisted that human consciences cannot be *forced*.[[41]](#footnote-41) That would be like trying to argue the playboy bachelor into marriage without confronting him with an actual lover. A hopeless task! It is, finally, a question of *faith* against faith; faith in the free will of the self against faith in the concrete historical action of God in the suffering savior.

This means, in turn, a fundamental reorientation in the theological task. It is furthermore a reorientation that affects every aspect of Christian doctrine. It means a fundamental reorientation of the understanding of the function of theological assertions. For the attack upon the idea of free will does not mean merely a minor correction at one point, but a radical shift of focus and function in *all* doctrines.[[42]](#footnote-42) I shall be concerned to say more about this in the chapters that follow. For the present we shall look only at the manner in which Luther’s argument against free will affects the understanding of how God actually gets through to a person in Christ.

Since it is the assertion of free will that is *itself* the problem, theology and preaching cannot be based on the premise of an appeal to such “freedom.” Indeed, everything must be directed towards a massive *attack* on just such illusory freedom. Assertions about God’s immutability, election, and such must, therefore, be allowed to stand *just as they are* and to function as the threat *they indeed are* to a person’s supposed freedom. Nothing is to be gained by tampering with them. Indeed, all may be lost. When Erasmus asked what use there was in “publishing such things, when so many harmful results seem likely to follow”[[43]](#footnote-43) Luther replied simply that

…God has willed their publication, and that the reason of the Divine Will is not to be sought, but simply to be adored, and the glory given to God, who, since he ~~is~~ alone is just and wise, wrongs none and can do nothing foolish or inconsiderate — however much it may seem otherwise to us.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Such an answer, he feels, ought to satisfy those who fear God. But he goes on to add something more about the manner in which such statements can be conceived to *function* in preaching. There are, he says, two considerations. One has to do with “the humbling of our pride, and the comprehending of the grace of God,” while the second has to do with the nature of Christian faith itself.[[45]](#footnote-45)

For the first: God has surely promised His grace to the humbled: that is to those who mourn over and despair of themselves. But a man cannot be thoroughly humbled till he realizes that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, counsels, efforts, will and works, and depends absolutely on the will, counsel, pleasure and work of another — God alone….

So these truths are published for the sake of the elect that they may be humbled and brought down to nothing, and so saved. The rest of men resist this humiliation; indeed, they condemn the teaching of self-despair; they want a little something left they can do for themselves. Secretly they continue proud, and enemies of the grace of God.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Luther knew well, of course, just how offensive and hard to take such words are. But he also knew that no amount of theological or metaphysical manipulation could make them any less so or “save” one from their force.

In his own words:

Doubtless it gives the greatest possible offence to common sense or natural reason, that God, Who is proclaimed as being full of mercy and goodness, and so on, should of His own mere will abandon, harden and damn men, as though He delighted in the sins and great eternal torments of such poor wretches. It seems an iniquitous, cruel, intolerable thought to think of God; and it is this that has been a stumbling block to so many great men down the ages. And who would not stumble at it? *I stumbled at it myself more than once, down to the deepest pit of despair, so that I wished I had never been made a man. (That was before I knew how health-giving that despair was,* and how close *to grace*.) This is why so much toil and trouble has been devoted to clearing the goodness of God, and throwing the blame on man’s will. …But nothing has been achieved by [this]….The arrow of conviction has remained, fastened deep in the hearts of learned and unlearned alike….[[47]](#footnote-47)

Luther’s point is that if we are to be saved at all, then the defense mechanism that we use to protect ourselves from God must be struck down. We must be opened up, so to speak, to the very idea and reality of *God*. We must *suffer* this opening up, this “humbling” if we are to be awakened to what really is. Only then is the grace of what is actually given to us in time a possibility. Only then can God get through to us with a real gift, the *grace* of what is given *to* us in our actual history. Otherwise, like the playboy, we remain insulated against reality and isolated within our own self-made, and self-imposed world, a prisoner to our own ideals and internal lack of clarity. we may *think* to escape by refusing such “cruel, intolerable thoughts“ of God and taking refuge in various theological or metaphysical attempts to clear God’s name and at the same time establish our own freedom and responsibility. But we succeed thereby only in binding ourselves to our own ideals and making God into the rewarder and punisher at the end of the road. Such a God will in turn become — as the history of modern theology again amply demonstrates — even more intolerable and irksome and will have to be gotten rid of somehow. Meanwhile, there is always the undertone of “the arrow of conviction” that remains “fastened deep in the heart….”

One can allow the assertions about God’s immutability, necessity, election, etc., to stand just as they are, of course, only if one is grasped by the historical reality of what God *has done* in Jesus. What one gains, we might say, by allowing such assertions to “humble” and open one up is the historical treasure, the surprise of grace. But this means a Jesus who works in all his historical concreteness *directly* on the will, the heart and its affections, not a Jesus filtered through and given “meaning” by the theology of “free will” the moral-idealistic scheme. I shall try to deal with what this means more fully in later chapters. The point here to note is that since human beings are bound to themselves by their belief in their freedom, Jesus cannot be presented as merely appealing to such freedom. This would mean only that Jesus is assigned a “meaning” *within* the bound person’s own scheme of values. Jesus would then become merely a “help” or an “example” to the bound person’s self-appointed goal. But that only means that the historical treasure is lost behind the smokescreen of human “meanings.”

This brings us to Luther’s second reason why the assertions about God ought to be published: the nature of faith. Again, in his words:

…Faith’s object is things not seen. That there may be room for faith, therefore, all that is believed must be hidden. Yet it is not hidden more deeply than under a contrary appearance of sight, sense and experience. Thus when God quickens, He does so by killing; when He justifies, He does so by pronouncing guilty; when He carries up to heaven, He does so by bringing down to hell. As Scripture says in I Kings 2, The Lord killeth and maketh alive; he bringeth down to the grave and bringeth up.’ (I Sam. 26) (This is no place for a fuller account of these things; but those who have read my books are well acquainted with them.) Thus God conceals His eternal mercy and loving kindness beneath eternal wrath, His righteousness beneath unrighteousness. Now the highest degree of faith is to believe that He is merciful, though He saves so few and damns so many; to believe that He is just, though of his own will he makes us perforce proper subjects for damnation, and seems (in Erasmus’ words) ‘to delight in the torment of poor wretches and to be a fitter object for hate than for love.’ If I could by any means understand how this same God, who makes such a show of wrath and unrighteousness, can yet be merciful and just, there would be no need for faith. But as it is, the impossibility of understanding makes room for the exercise of faith when these things are preached and published; just as, when God kills, faith in life is exercised in death.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Again, a powerful and seemingly highly offensive statement! Again, many seemingly impossible, and reckless assertions which jar and shock us. We shall not stop to deal with them one by one since their significance, I hope, will become clear in the light of later chapters. For now, the reader need only be reminded, perhaps, that for the most part the “offensive assertions in the statement simply mirror what can be found in the Bible; “many are called, but few are chosen,” and so one. The basic point of the statement, however, should be clear in the context of what we have been saying so far. As people bound to our own freedom we cannot “see,” we cannot “understand” the things of God. We insulate ourselves from him. No purpose at all is achieved by explaining away, accommodating or removing the offensive statements. That only cements our isolation. He gets through to us, therefore, under the form of “opposites.” He has to *put to death* what we are to make us alive to what He really is. He has to inflict upon us the actual historical wound of “the other” to release us from the prison of self. This he does in a form just the opposite from what we with our “reason” and “freedom” would expect: the form of the despised powerless, suffering, dying savior. And only he who suffers that historical wound is raised to life. Faith in life is exercised in death!

This, of course, is the familiar theme of the theology of the cross. For Luther there is no way *around* the *historical* cross itself. There is no way to “understand” it and, thus, to take it *within* the theology of people bound to their own freedom. The statements about God’s immutability and election do indeed offend the bound self. But no metaphysics or theological manipulation can disarm the offense. There is no way to rhyme fallen humanity’s freedom and responsibility with God’s, no way for the “natural man” to “understand” its way into reconciliation with God. The only way this “Troy” can be taken is to be grasped by what such a God actually does will “for you.” And that way is the way of the cross, the way of suffering the wound inflicted by the historical savior. It is the way, therefore, of *faith* in what he alone has done *for us*, to us, in us. It is the way that leads *through* the cross, *through* death, to life. The only way one can be released from the bondage to one’s own freedom is by dying to it and everything it represents and being raised to life through the one who comes to save. There is no way *around*. There is only a way *through.*

When it is said here that one is *saved* through the suffering of the historical wound what is meant is that all attempts to bypass the event that Jesus was and is are excluded. One cannot bypass the historical event and disarm the offense of God by mounting into “heaven” somehow to discover directly what God has willed. One cannot, that is to say, look directly into “the book of life” to see if one’s name is there; one cannot, as Luther consistently maintains, peer into the secrets of the divine majesty. Nor can one, as we have repeatedly insisted, bypass the historical event by erasing or watering down the offensive statement about God and thus attributing to our freedom the ability, however minimal, to write our own names in “the book.” Nor can one — and this is the most subtle attempt of all — bypass the historical event by constructing a theology *about* the cross, that is, discerning a supposedly timeless “meaning” in terms of our understanding of what is necessary to “get to heaven” via our morals or laws or even “divine” laws — say, through a theology of “vicarious satisfaction” of the demands of law or something like that. That simply means that Jesus and the historical event is translated into a supposedly universal “meaning” and is communicated to us through such “meaning.” Which is to say that he is made available somehow to our “freedom” and comes to us only through the filter of the language of morality and responsibility. I should therefore “accept” Jesus because he somehow “pays” God for my shortcomings and somehow gives me mysterious power which I lack in exercising my supposed moral freedom. All this, I say, is to *bypass* the historical event itself. It is to abstract *from* the history so as to work in into my “understanding” of moral freedom, the attempt to make a way “around.” One is then *still* left wondering how all that fits with the fact of divine election and predestination. But more of this later.[[49]](#footnote-49)

It is only when all this is swept away, when all the defense mechanisms are beaten down that the historical event stands forth as the reconciliation it in fact is. *Then it appears that Jesus is the doing to us of what God has decided to do.* Jesus *is* the carrying out of what God has decided. He, one can say, *does* God to us. All the assertions about God are left standing just as they are and not altered on whit. Jesus is the one in whom they culminate and have their end and goal. All those assertions spell the end of our self-defense. Jesus is their end and goal.

He puts to death in order to raise to life. He is the one in whom all the fulness of the godhead dwells bodily (Colossians 1:19). The answer to what God might or might not have willed for us is found in him. The “problem” of God as “solved” by him. He is *for* us. He dies *for* us and puts to death the old half-hearted person. The question of whether God actually intends to push us around or “determine” us and do us injustice or whatever is answered not by our metaphysics but by what actually happens to us through the person Jesus. If we are afraid that God in all his awful majesty is going to do us harm, the thing to do is to look at Jesus. *He* is the one in whom God’s decision about us, God’s election, God’s predestination, is carried out. In Jesus God has found a way to be God *for* us; He has found a way to be God without taking back or altering one whit his Godness and still save us. Jesus, that is to say, *does to us* what God *is* in such a way as not to harm us but to save us. “God,” as St. John’s gospel put it, “sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be *saved*.”

That is the divine surprise, the unlooked for, unexpected surprise. God is God *for* us in the concrete historical person of Jesus. In Jesus, God establishes his Godness as one who is for us and who, thus, saves by reconciling us unto himself. In the person of Jesus, God enters into contention for us, he comes to claim our wills, our hearts, our passions, our affections and ultimately also our minds. He comes to make us whole.

Now of course it is easy enough to *say* all that, to *write* about it in a book like this as we have just done. And it is necessary to do that — to attempt the kind of analysis we have here attempted. That is the work of theology. But Luther knew, and we too should realize, I think, that *in the terms of this very analysis*, it cannot *finally* reach its goal. That is to say, the argument of this book as a piece of theology however understandable it may be — and I hope it is that — cannot finally make you, the reader, whole. For as we have developed it, everything depends on this Jesus getting through to you as God’s word to and for you. And this, I shall contend, is the function of the concrete and actual witness of his church and its deeds, its sacraments and its preaching. What it takes *finally*, is that God’s “I love you” be spoken to you in such a way that you hear it and believe. What it takes finally is that you be taken by the surprise of that word. To fall back on our analogy once again, only the “I love you” of the actual lover can batter down the defenses of hardened playboys and call them out of themselves to life. *Somebody* has to *say* it.

For it is, in the final analysis, a battle.[[50]](#footnote-50) We all live in our own individual ways in the house of “the strong man armed” against this invasion from without.[[51]](#footnote-51)And if occasionally the defenses are breached, we rebuild them daily. Only the “stronger one” can invade this house and dethrone the strong, armed one. And the strength of the “stronger one” is exactly that he is a concrete historical person on the cross who did his act of love for us and can speak his “I love you” to us. That, finally, is his only real advantage. His act, therefore, must be done again and his word spoken again in the concrete witness of the church is we are to be called to life. Only then can the “Troy” of the disaffected will be taken.

1. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Small Catechism: 500 Years of Reformation, Study Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016), 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Editor’s note: This falls right back into the dictum of Scholastic theology that Luther turned away from: *facete quod in te est* (do what is within you to do), but of course runs headlong into Paul’s argument in Romans 7 about the difference between wanting to do God’s will and actually being able to accomplish it. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Footnote is cut off at the bottom of 71. The end of the footnote as at the bottom of 70: of this chapter from Luther’s 1517 Disputation. Above, note 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Many interpreters, of whom Harry McSorley is perhaps most prominent today, argue that when Luther goes beyond scripture and appeals to pagan philosophers he is stepping beyond the boundaries of theological argument and introducing illegitimate necessitarian, not to say deterministic, factors into the argument (*Luther: R or W*, especially 329 ff). It is, according to this view, a kind of theological or perhaps even metaphysical “overkill.” I do not think this to be the case. Luther simply argues that there is a certain logic involved in the concept of God and that this is the same for the pagan, the peasant, and the Christian. Logic, after all is logic! And it strikes us all, no exceptions. McSorley argues (312) that the “logic” here is not conclusive. He says that whereas the major premise (that God foreknows all things) is biblical, the minor premise (whatever God foreknows must happen necessarily, otherwise God could be mistaken) is not. Without this minor premise, McSorley says, Luther can’t establish the conclusion that God’s foreknowledge implies necessity and thus “knocks free will flat and utterly shatters it” (BW, 80). McSorley, I think, does not understand Luther’s point. As I hope will become clearer as we go along, the attempt to avoid the logic and the conclusion is itself a mark of human bondage. Luther’s question, in effect, is: Why all the effort to worm out of the conclusion by such sophisticated logic which only results in a kind of double talk? Why should one fear this divine necessity? McSorley and those who argue with him fear of course, that there is no way to “justify” God’s ways and maintain human responsibility in the face of such “necessitarianism.” Luther, however, believed that God justified *himself* in his own way in Jesus and the Gospel and, thus, makes us responsible beings who *can* simply *praise* him as God. There is no need for scholastic logic to justify God! [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. BW, 80, 216 ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. BW, 82-83. “Why should these matters be thought so recondite for us Christians that it is irreligious, idle, and vain to study and know them, when they are on the lips of heathen poets and ordinary people so frequently?” The secret about God is out! Must Christians alone be protected?!! This is, I think, another reason why Luther appeals to the general knowledge of these things. Erasmus counselled keeping such questions from the “common herd.” Luther simply points out how useless such counsel is. The secret is out. The problem is already there. Avoiding it can only produce damaged and enslave conscience, ignorance of God and his relationship to his human creatures. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. BW, 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Editor’s note: *Conscience*, for Luther, was not as depicted in *Tom and Jerry* cartoons, an inner conversation between our inner angel and devil. It is, instead, the sense of relationship we have, first and foremost, with God, and then also with the world and with other people. When he speaks of a troubled conscience, he intends our realization that something has gone amiss. A troubled conscience, then, is intimately connected with the *Anfechtung* that arrives when the Law accuses us. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid,* 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid,* 221. See also 82, 85, 194, 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid*., 190-191. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See especially the BW section beginning at 102 (“Of the spontaneity of necessitated acts”). McSorley (*Luther: Right or Wrong*. 313-314) rightly senses this, I think, when he notes that in the decisive passage Luther does not say that free will is *eliminated* or *annihilated* by the “bombshell” of God’s foreknowledge, but rather “knocked flat” and “utterly shattered” (the Latin: *sternitur et conteritur penitus leberusm arbitrium*; McSorley’s translation: “thrown to the ground and trampled underfoot”). “Free will” that is, gets “the shock of its life” when confronted with the idea of God; it has “all the wind taken out of its sails,” it is completely humiliated, “kicked in the stomach,” etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Iwand, *Rechten Glauben*, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. BW, 162 (italics mine). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Ibid*. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See, for instance, 104. Reply to McSorley, 339. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. BW, 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. BW, 110, (italics mine). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book X. XXVII (38). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. It goes without saying that there is a lot more to love than this language indicates. To complete the picture, one would have to add the kind of suffering, one undergoes in exposing oneself to another and how this is coped with in growing together in the maturing relationship. For the moment, however, I want to focus on language that accompanies the immediate “surprise” of the “falling in love.” [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Editor’s note: Forde openly acknowledged his love of country music on this count and was not above quoting Nashville lyrics to make a point in classroom lectures. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. It may be, as Denis De Rougemont suggests that such “romantic love” as we picture here is a kind of modern “heresy.” At this point I do not want to enter into that debate. I merely refer to the phenomenon as an analogy which can open up for us the way in which the theological language used by Luther (and others, like Augustine, for instance) functions. After all, even “heresies” contain and illuminate truths! Such love may be indeed dangerous sometimes or even relatively impossible for mere erring mortals, but can the same be said bout God in his relationship to his human creatures? Denis De Rougement, *Love in the Western World* (New York: Pantheon, 1956), 316. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. In saying this, I do not want necessarily to denigrate the single state as such. The single person can certainly be as bound by love and dedication as any other. I use the “playboy” or “playmate” mentality only as a counter-pole to the analogy. Editor’s note: In the 1970s when Forde was writing, *Playboy* magazine and its publisher Hugh Hefner, along with the Playboy mansion, Playboy clubs, and Playboy “bunnies” (scantily clad women servers who word a bunny tail and bunny ears), were a well-known cultural phenomenon.] Because the cultural reference is so strong, rendering Forde’s playboy in any other way for readers fifty years later loses its force. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Lest I be misunderstood, I do not intend to defend the idea of “fate.” I use the word in the analogy only because it is a cliché that often appears in the language of love. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. B W, 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Ibid.,* 312. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Ibid.,* 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. BW, 313-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Trae. In Joh. 26,4. Quoted in Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Los Angeles: U. of Calf. Press, 1967). 374. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. BW, 83-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Luther frequently puts the assertion in present tense as, for instance, in his treatment of John 14 in his commentary on the gospel (LW 24). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. BW, 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Below, Ch III [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Below, Chapter II [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Above 37, note 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Loc. Cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Above 38 cf. BW, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Ibid*., 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Ibid*., 79ff, 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Cf. BW,. 132, 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. BW, 129. “Who can force men against their will to believe, or confess their error, or be silent?” Another interesting indication of how Luther’s argument from “bondage” is designed actually to defend people from force and coercion! [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Iwand, *Rechten Glauben,* 18-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. BW, 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *Ibid*., 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *Ibid.*. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *Ibid.,*100-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *Ibid.,* 217-218 (italics mine). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. BW, 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Below, chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. BW, 97, 205, 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *Ibid.,* 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)